

Membership Recruitment and Restructuring of the Trade Unions for Effective Functioning of Public Sector Unions

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Abstract: The phenomenon of increased union numbers as an answer to the call by workers who felt otherwise under-represented, and to get recognition, have put forward alternative agendas to the larger unions. Some new unions, it is argued, give a voice to workers in a specific sector or region where established unions have little presence. Others seem to have sprung up in the cracks caused by the fragmentation of the industrial structure in an organisation. Some would postulate it is caused by greedy trade union leaders who want to remain in leadership and with an intention to appropriate union resources to themselves. The failure of many unions to respond to changes in employment patterns has further diminished their power. Few unions manage to appeal to younger workers and/ or contract or part-time employees.

Keywords: Membership, restructuring, recruitment, public sector, trade unions.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with declining membership figures, some unions have attempted to join forces with others who are ordinarily their competitors in an attempt to be more effective. Others yet have tried to modernize [1]. In Britain, for example, UNISON, the second-largest union, now allows people to join online and has created an app which is popular with younger people. It has also changed the way it markets itself to potential members: highlighting services such as free legal advice rather than just its ability to strike. Instead of relying on “stewards” to recruit new members, it advertises in newspapers and on the television. (The Economist, September 29, 2015) But the pace of change in trade unions has often been slow. Several high-profile unions are still run by leaders who prefer staging industrial action as a means of recruiting new members. In the UK unions also face the challenge of recruiting younger workers: two out of five union members are aged over 50 [2].

Changing Job Patterns

“Cuts to the public-sector workforce have meant the loss of many good quality jobs, and recent growth in private sector employment has been characterized by a large proportion of insecure jobs”

[2]. This observation could be true to Zimbabwe’s civil service that has failed to employ new workers since 2014 and those in employ had no salary.

Membership Composition

It would seem trade union membership is increasingly being feminised as more and more women become members of the trade union members. According to Daniel Tomlinson, in [3] women in the UK were more likely to be members of a union: about 26% of female employees were union members in 2016 compared with 21% of male employees. But while male membership levels declined by 2.8% in 2016 – the biggest fall in male membership since 2010 – female membership fell by 5.4%, the biggest annual fall in female membership levels since records began [3].

Apathy towards trade unions

The women factor is seen as contributing to the apathy towards trade unionism. The increasing proportion of working women in the work force in almost all sectors of industry seems to be the source of apathy towards trade union activities. Their dual responsibilities at office and at home hardly allows them any leisure time to indulge in it [4].

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Shifts in the balance of power

There is complete role reversal between management and unions in terms of power balance. Militant trade unionism is no more a force, management places tough counter demands on unions during collective bargaining processes. The collective bargaining processes render unions some weak as it appeals to them to avoid agitation and militancy. As unions demand decent pay and perks, management also counter demands and negotiate for higher productivity, right to retain and redeploy manpower, induct new technology and if need be rationalize/reduce the work force. Simultaneously, employers too are busy organizing themselves. The new-found unity among employers has emboldened them and they have started tough counter-bargaining during bipartite negotiation and collective bargaining. This introduces a paradigm shift in the union-management power equation with the power balance tilting in favour of management [5].

While the union membership is in a downward trend and despite the minuscule percentage, organized labour often holds industry and the nation to ransom, in utter disregard of the fact that its actions introduce economic push factors which not only create roadblocks in the way of a healthy economy but sometimes push both workers and economy to extinction or collapse [4].

Labour legislation

The moot problem in Zimbabwe is that the unorganized labour has protection under Zimbabwean laws and this labour constitute the majority of the labour force. Meaning a few volunteers work hard to benefit the majority who are fence sitting. Moreover, the laws do not promote agency fees from non-members as they represent them by proxy at the negotiating table. The same laws are generous when it comes to registration and recognition of new entrants into the trade union fraternity. Such a law serves more as an impediment in the way of rapid trade union growth [6].

Legal and institutional reforms including employment and industrial relations reforms, seem to have contributed significantly to the waning of trade union power. The introduction of union pluralism by these legal reforms that were introduced alongside Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 90s, promoted proliferation of unions in the country. In addition, legal reforms promoting freedom of association has, instead of strengthening trade union, contributed to disunity of trade unions. These developments have diluted the strength and relevance of trade unions. According to the ILO [7], one of the major weaknesses of the African trade union movement is the lack of union unity. In most cases, the relationship among these unions is characterized by competition and acrimony. These excessive forms of proliferation are rarely inspired by the true principles of freedom of association and trade union pluralism. The indiscriminate formation of unrepresentative and

ineffective unions has become the source of division, confusion and abuse on the trade union scene in Africa [7]. The public service sector has had its share of union splinterism.

Economic factors

Another notable trend is general apathy among the working class towards unionism is improved workers' income. With increase in earning and consequent overall standard of living, the working class has become the middle class. The leaders have understood that prolonged strikes are against their interests as workers would not like a climb-down from the new-found avatar of middle-class socialite [8]. This is because unions basically existed to extract a better bargain for their members. Because unions primarily existed for collective bargaining and as result when they improve the wages an average worker becomes better, loss of interest in unions sets in. Unlike in the past, the modern trade union has experienced implementation of various economic recovery and structural adjustment programmes, right from the 1980s and into 1990s almost across Africa, these have had effects, significantly eroding the power and relevance of trade unions. For example, of in the decade 1960s to 1970s – the labour movement in Zimbabwe wielded significant power, because the political economy of the period provided “unquestionable justification” for the struggles against neo-liberal policies or projects in the country.

Technological Changes

Technology change brings about a shift in the composition of labour force. This has further reduced the role of trade unions, which in turn may lead to depoliticization of unions. As more and more unions get depoliticized, the management and workers become true “partners in progress.” With this new-found co-operation from workers, progressive management have become pro-active in anticipating and fulfilling workers' needs. Workers have woken up to the fact that cooperation and consensus ensures that their organisation remains competitive and viable otherwise their growth and aspirations would flow out of their organisations' fortunes [1].

The depoliticisation of unions is another strong trend emerging these days. Unions have realized the futility of political affiliations and are now insulating themselves against political influence. Depoliticisation of unions is a sign that unions are increasingly becoming matured, responsive and realistic in their thinking and action. Gone are the days of violent intermittent strikes, accompanied by looting and destruction of property. This development is also coupled to the reconciliation of unions to economic reforms. Unions no longer oppose economic reforms for the sake of but challenge the effects and impact of reforms.

The foregoing paragraphs reveal that unions are now at the cross-roads. Union membership is at best stagnating and at worst declining, public sympathy is luke-warm. There is also the emerging challenge of workers, who are young and well-educated. Unions must come out with innovative ideas to regain their lost ground. To avoid self-decline, unions need to search deeper about their niche and how to serve their members. Daniel Tomlinson, a researcher at the Resolution Trust, quipped unions must evolve or face becoming “a 20th-century aberration”.

CONCLUSION

Trade unions derive their strength from numbers. The more the members join a trade union, the more credible in the eyes of the employer the union becomes. Unions in general and trade unions in the public sector in particular should prioritise recruitment of new members particularly the young ones. Another dimension of recruitment is restructuring. All the strata of a union should be revitalised so that recruited members are constantly up dated about developments taking place within the union so that they do not leave the union. Newly recruited members should be retained and an effective structure helps in this regard.

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