Labour, Trade Unionism and Collective Action in Africa

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Contrary to a currently widespread belief, wage labour and trade unionism in Africa are not disappearing. Although they were misused by the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and the deregulation of domestic economies, the number of employees is still increasing (it stood at 92 million, or approximately 23% of the working population in 2021, according to the International Labour Organization) and the unions that represent them remain active, as witnessed by the constant mobilisations in workplaces on the continent (strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, etc.). However, wage-earning as a situation of subordination and social protection is still a minority position in Africa and is dependent on certain sectors and national histories. In fact, it appears that one out of every two workers in urban areas in Africa runs their own production unit, while the so-called informal sector employs an average of 70% of all persons in work, according to figures published by the ILO in 2022. The same is true of trade unionism, which is a specialised activity that represents the interests of male and female workers, but with the exception of certain sectors or historical periods is often low in membership numbers, although (reliable) statistics are also scarce. What forms does trade unionism take in Africa in this exceptional context? How can it shed light on major contemporary issues surrounding the profiles of the defence, representation and collective action of workers around the world? The objective of this collection is to bring together articles around the three following axes.

Axis 1 – Opting for the "trade union" format

The birth of trade unions in Africa is linked to colonisation. They were brought in by metropolitan centres to represent European workers who had settled on the continent but were quickly taken over by African workers, all the more easily when they relied on a pre-existing network of associations or friendships. The colonial administrations gradually opened trade union rights up to the "natives". The spread of these organisational arrangements on the continent subsequently took the form of "workers' universities" led by Western unions or "technical seminars" organised by the ILO. These "imported" origins invite us to ask questions about the paths trade union organisations follow, how workers, trade unionists and their supporters choose to create or not to create a union and the meaning they attach to the label.

We will focus on the reasons and processes that lead certain actors to decide to organise in order to represent their interests, whether or not they say they are a "union". For example, some sector organisations claim to be affiliated with trade unions while at the same time
maintaining an ambiguous relationship with them, as is the case in the transport, trade and domestic work sectors. Other workers, on the other hand, prefer the status of associations, NGOs or cooperatives. The existence of these alternative forms of organisation is linked to the particular contexts in which they operate, where trade union practices are sometimes marked by repression, clientelism, a high degree of extroversion associated with the engineering of international aid or the loss of attractiveness of trade unions, whom some consider to be outdated and pointless.

Why do workers choose to form a union rather than some other form of collective action? What does creating a trade union mean in contexts dominated by the informal sector, in which other types of social organisation are promoted by states and international bodies? How are the formats and lawful boundaries of trade unions defined in environments that can sometimes be authoritarian? What alliances with other organisations does this attempt to arrive at a definition permit or prohibit? In a context of activist competition among different possible types of organisation (mutual aid associations, economic interest groups, religious associations, NGOs, etc.), how do trade unions manage to recruit workers? Is the informal sector a new recruitment pool in this respect? Is the existence of alternative forms of representation evidence of a "global time" of informalisation or a renewal of trade unionism? These questions will provide an opportunity to think about the informal sector and the international level more systematically than the political sociology of trade unionism does.

**Axis 2 – Joining a union and being a trade unionist**

The second line of thought concerns the ordinary work of the people who keep unions alive. Here, we will look at the practices, the practical operating conditions and the professional identities of union representatives.

While trade union activism is ageing and generally speaking eroding in most countries where it has a longer history, these are aspects that are little known in Africa. Studies in France show, for example, that elected union staff members are over forty years of age on average, are more often male and come from the stabilised working classes. In the attempt to transform trade unionists into "social partners", the various reforms of representation have also made working in unions considerably more bureaucratic.

What is the profile of trade unionists in Africa, and how is trade union work expressed? How do workers organise in the workplace, defend their colleagues and legitimise their role as union representatives? How can a trade union be sustained and shoulder responsibility as a representative in situations where there is a lack of financial and human resources and its independence of action and representation is sometimes limited by the political powers? What happens in cases where a state is dependent on international aid and the number of employees who can make a contribution is smaller? This practical question leads to another: what are the conditions for union involvement and how can it be maintained? In situations in which permanent positions are rare, how are the forms of trade union professionalisation and activist careers characterised?

Along the same lines, investigating union representation also means studying the professional identities around which workers mobilise. As diverse as they may be, what African contexts have in common is that they have experienced a relative level of industrialisation compared with Europe and North America. A working-class identity, which has long been
dominant in the European trade union culture, now seems to be almost absent from the discourse around trade unions in Africa. What professional affiliations are mobilised to promote union membership and maintain union representation? In what ways does the informalisation or extraversion of African economies affect these dynamics? How, for example, are the "precarious worker", "informal worker" and "migrant worker" categories promoted or rejected? More generally, in whose name is mobilisation taking place? What views of what is just or unjust do workers' mobilisations convey? These questions will offer an opportunity to revisit the sociology of activist engagement and the moral and political economy from a trade union standpoint.

**Axis 3 – The multiple spaces of confrontation and union regulation**

Finally, the third line of reflection focuses on the mobilisations and repertoires of action of trade union organisations both inside and outside the workplace. At a time when the political sociology of trade unionism is indiscriminately questioning the weakening of trade union representativeness, a revival of protests as a mode of action and the emergence of fragmented and depoliticised bargaining practices, a detour through the realities of trade unionism in Africa might prove to be heuristic. African studies have long made it possible to analyse the conditions for the success of resistance and contestation outside established spaces, and more recently have called into question the "mobilisation-protest" pairing. What forms do labour disputes take in Africa?

Disputes will be studied in the professional workplace and public spaces, both of which are very much jointly controlled by the business and political ruling classes in many African countries. What are the decisive factors in the use of a particular mode of action by trade unions? Some works cite the uses of the law in the context of labour disputes, while others emphasise the use of expertise and advocacy, or even a religious register. Has the importance of strikes, picketing, occupying buildings and street demonstrations been downgraded, and more generally, is there a repertoire of collective action that is specific to African trade unions?

These protest practices (or lack thereof) do not just take place in the streets or in the workplace. They also operate within the well-defined framework of industrial relations, shaped by the imperative of the "social dialogue". This carries with it a set of requirements relating to the role trade union organisations and their representatives must play. What is the place of legal regimes when it comes to shaping this work of activism and representation? In African contexts, these rules are promoted by the ILO as part of the march towards "decent work". So far, however, very few studies have asked how the methods of regulation function in practical terms and the role played by trade unions in this process. Proposals that also look at what is at stake outside these official arenas of protest or negotiation are welcome. Detours such as these are important for the purposes of understanding the role of occasionally unexpected actors (including religious actors, among others) or of understanding how, in addition to being entrepreneurs of mobilisation, trade union organisations can also be representatives of governments.

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