

From Solidarity Struggles to Trade Opportunities: The Evolution of African Trade Unions and their Role in Shaping Fair Trade for Development

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African trade unions have evolved from an early focus on working conditions and workplace issues to addressing colonial racism and oppression and then joining forces with anti-colonial and national liberation struggles. They have pursued the democratization of their polities and are now actively engaged in addressing political-economic policy issues, including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This journey has also marked the changing structures and features of trade unions in Africa, enabling them to grow and adapt to the evolving needs of the workplace and the ongoing challenges facing African people in their pursuit of development and progress.

Early union formation and solidarity struggles

The earliest trade unions in Africa were formed among wage earners during the first half of the 20th century, under colonial rule. They initially covered railway workers, miners, and port workers; later extending to clerical and commercial workers, teachers, and others.¹ In an exceptional case in Nigeria, however, the first trade union was the Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union (later renamed the Nigeria Civil Service Union), which was formed in 1912.² Between 1919 and 1930, demonstrations and strikes by workers were recorded in some British colonies, including Kenya, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Ghana, Uganda, and Nigeria.³

The earliest trade union struggles were pitched against poor working conditions and against colonial racist discrimination. The rising tempo of the anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s into the early 1960s drew unions into becoming allies with nationalist parties at the forefront of the independence movement. The result was that fairly early in their evolution, African trade unions began to pay attention to issues beyond the workplace and the world of work.

By the time of independence from colonial rule, unions had won the hearts and minds of the masses and indigenous politicians who assumed the reins of government. The nationalist parties that led the anti-colonial struggle and became ruling parties in the post-colonial state had witnessed the mobilizing power of unions and had become wary of their potential influence. They therefore took steps to bring the unions under government and state control. Labour laws with clauses for “closed shop” that guaranteed automatic union membership were passed, and union check-off dues collection was instituted to assure financing for unions. In French-speaking countries, unions were provided with direct state funding through an annual contribution from the government budget. Ultimately, laws were passed to establish national trade union federations or confederations, comprising the sole national centres, thereby imposing trade union unity at the national level. In the process, many unions lost their autonomy

¹ See Peter Blay Arthiabah and Harry Tham Mbiah. *Half A Century of Toil, Trouble and Progress: The History of The Trades Union Congress of Ghana, 1945-1995*.

² John E. Odah, Onah L. Iduh, Salisu Muhammad, Benson Upah, Asuzu Echezona. *Nigeria Labour Congress Contemporary History of Working Class Struggles (1978 -2018)*. P.5

³ Arthiabah and Mbiah. *Op cit*.

and became appendages of governments. This essentially undermined the legitimacy of unions and their ability to serve the genuine interests of workers against the post-colonial state and capital.⁴

Structural Adjustment and impact on workers and trade unions

By the end of the second decade after independence, towards the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, many African countries had encountered political and economic crises resulting from debt, unequal terms of international trade, foreign exchange deficits, and weakened currencies.

Their situation led them to seek the support of the international financial institutions, namely, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In the process, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that were imposed mandated the privatization of state-owned enterprises, massive public sector lay-offs, trade liberalization, wage freezes, and currency devaluation. Unions faced a significant decline in membership as formal sector jobs disappeared. Traditional union power was compromised as collective bargaining became ineffective against the IMF diktat. This is widely acknowledged to have contributed to the growth of the informal economy, particularly with an ever-expanding labour force, raising doubts about the relevance of unions. Unions suffered heavy losses in membership and were weakened as a result.

The widespread criticism of SAPs across Africa led to the development of the **African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation (AAF-SAP)**⁵ by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in 1989. The AAF-SAP advocated for a more holistic, human-centred approach to economic adjustment, integrating short-term stabilization with long-term development goals.

Democratic Transition and Trade Union Responses to Structural Adjustment and Globalisation

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the fall of communist governments across Eastern Europe, and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union by the end of 1991 provided impetus to the wave of democratization that was already sweeping across Africa. Already in February 1990, *the African Charter on Popular Participation in Development and Transformation* had been adopted in Arusha, Tanzania. It emphasized the critical role of popular participation (including workers' participation) in addressing Africa's social and economic crisis of the 1980s.⁶ From the early 1990s, unions across Africa were actively involved in the struggles for democratization, seeking to replace one-party political rule or military dictatorships. Notable examples were:

⁴ Kwasi Adu-Amankwah and Kwabena Nyarko Otoo. Unity and revitalization of trade unions in Africa in Trade Union Revitalization: Organizing new forms of work including platform workers. International Journal of Labour Research. Volume 11, Issues 1-2 (2022).

⁵ AAF-SAP was prepared by the UNECA and adopted by the African Ministers of Economic Planning and Development and Finance in April, 1989, and subsequently adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Council of Ministers in July, 1989.

⁶ The key objectives of the charter included empowering people and their organizations, including trade unions, to participate in development policies and programs. The charter was endorsed by African governments, non-governmental organizations, and United Nations agencies.

Zambia - where the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in 1991, under the leadership of Frederick Chiluba, championed the formation of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) that ended the political monopoly of President Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) in 1991;

Mali – where, in 1991, the Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali (UNTM) was intensely involved in the political coalition that led to the end of the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré.

Zimbabwe – where in 1999, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), under the leadership of its Secretary General, Morgan Tsvangirai, sponsored the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) with a coalition of civil society groups to challenge the political hegemony of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) led by President Robert Mugabe.

Throughout the 1990s, unions in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Tunisia, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, and other countries were involved in various ways and to varying degrees in championing democratization. Among unions themselves, the wave of democratization facilitated the rebirth of more independent unions and union pluralism in several countries.

Democratization also created the political space and environment for unions to move beyond collective bargaining to strengthen their intervention in national socio-economic policies. With the support of the international trade union movement, unions across Africa have critiqued the negative impacts of Structural Adjustment Programmes, particularly regarding job losses, the decline in public services, and the widening of inequalities. The relentless critique of SAPs by trade unions and other civil society organizations led to the Structural Adjustment Participatory Initiative (SAPRI) in 1997 as a global civil society-led effort to assess the impacts of SAPs.⁷ Out of the eight countries in which case studies were conducted as part of this initiative, four were from Africa: Ghana, Mali, Zimbabwe, and Uganda.

Trade unions in Africa have also paid serious attention to building their capacity, enabling them to intervene meaningfully in policy. *The African Workers' Participation Development Programme (APADEP)* was designed and implemented in the early 1990s to enhance the policy intervention capacity of African trade unions significantly. The programme was introduced by the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) in collaboration with the Federation of Netherlands Trade Unions (FNV) and the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) based in the Hague, the Netherlands. APADEP promoted union education that focused on empowering leaders at the local and workplace level. It combined socio-economic analysis with participatory research methods, enabling workers to understand and express their own realities and challenges, particularly in the context of SAPs. APADEP was implemented in several countries, including Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana, Tanzania, Togo, Guinea-Conakry, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cape Verde, leading to cooperation between unions and universities (or other research institutions) in those countries. The research and education conducted by APADEP provided a solid evidence base for national trade unions to critique SAPs and neoliberal policies and to advocate for alternatives that

⁷ The World Bank under James Wolfensohn initially supported SAPRI but later distanced itself from the findings. SAPRI highlighted the need for transparent and inclusive economic policy making and demonstrated the power of civil society in holding international financial institutions accountable, albeit in a limited manner.

prioritized workers' rights and social justice.⁸ It also created the conditions for later cooperation and networking among union-related research institutions of different African countries.⁹

In the 2000s, trade unions expressed concern about the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that emerged from the Cotonou Agreement of 2000, which was signed between the European Union (EU) and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group of countries. The Cotonou Agreement replaced the Lomé Convention, which had been in effect from 1975 to 2000, and provided non-reciprocal trade preferences from the EU to ACP countries. African trade unions collaborated with other civil society organizations within the framework of the Africa Trade Network (ATN). They were particularly concerned that the EPAs would expose their countries' economies to unfair competition from heavily subsidized EU industries, leading to job losses, especially in manufacturing and agriculture. African trade union concerns and the support of social partners prompted the Bureau of Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to convene an *African Regional Conference on the Social Dimensions of Economic Partnership Agreements between the European Union and African Countries*.¹⁰ The conference aimed to provide technical support to trade union organizations in Africa, ensuring that strong social and development dimensions were integrated into the agreements signed within the framework of the EPAs.

African trade unions and the AfCFTA

Following the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement by the African Union (AU) in March 2018, African trade unions began to enhance their capacity for engagement around the AfCFTA at the national, regional, and continental levels. With the support of the Finnish Solidarity Support Organization, SASK, and the central trade union of Finland, SAK, the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) launched a significant project for developing and strengthening the capacity of African trade unions to effectively engage and influence trade and investment policies, strategies and actions in favour of workers in the context of the AfCFTA.¹¹ The push for the inclusion of labour rights in the related protocols of the AfCFTA, which are yet to be negotiated, is a critical component of what African trade unions are demanding. Unions are also strongly advocating for representation on the National Implementation Committees (NICs) of the AfCFTA in their respective countries. The Labour Research Service (LRS), based in South Africa, and the Third World Network-Africa (TWN-A), headquartered in

⁸ See *Trade Unions and Sustainable Development in Africa*. Edited by Gerard Kester and Ousmane Oumarou Sidibe. Ashgate. 1997

⁹ In time, the African Labour Research Network (ALRN) and the African Labour Educators' Network (ALEN) all developed from the foundations laid by APADEP.

¹⁰ International Labour Organization. Bureau of Workers' Activities. *Social Dimensions of Economic Partnership Agreements between European Union and African Countries. Regional Conference*. Kampala, Uganda. 19-21 December, 2007. The conference brought together more than 100 delegates from 40 African countries and representatives from various regional and international organizations.

¹¹ After some initial consultations and preparation in 2018 the project was launched towards the end of 2019 to commence in 2020.

Ghana, have provided critical expert support for this project. A trade union guide¹² that has been developed based on AfCFTA guidelines, African trade unions are guided in their engagement during the ongoing negotiation of a range of protocols.

Recognizing that the increased movement of goods and services under AfCFTA is likely to be accompanied by a corresponding increase in the movement of workers across borders, ITUC-Africa has also championed the African Trade Union Migration Network (ATUMNET) to build capacity in fair recruitment and the protection of migrant workers.

Conclusion: Towards a People-Centred AfCFTA

The historical evolution of African trade unions has left them with the challenge of combining adequate protection of workers' rights and solidarity struggles with meaningful advocacy on policy issues, including trade and integration at the continental level.

Unions have become conscious of their structural weakness in limiting organizing to the formal sector, which accounts for only up to twenty percent of the labour force. Many unions in Africa are now committed to organizing in the informal economy and/or building alliances with existing organizations there. At the continental level, ITUC-Africa works closely with StreetNet, an international union network of street vendors, and the International Domestic Workers Alliance (IDWA). But beyond the confines of trade union organization, unions are also building and strengthening alliances with other civil society organizations and non-state actors. At the continental level, ITUC-Africa collaborates closely with TWN-A, LRS, ATN, and other organizations to enhance advocacy and intervention on the AfCFTA, aiming to achieve meaningful outcomes for workers.

The historical involvement of trade unions in the anti-colonial struggle and their longstanding promotion of human and trade union rights around the continent provide unions with a natural claim to the pan-African ideal. This justifies trade union advocacy for an AfCFTA that is not simply market-driven, but people-driven, and contributes to genuine integration in Africa. The formal recognition by the AU's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of organized labour as a key stakeholder with full rights of participation in its deliberations is a welcome development that must be fully utilized.

The union fragmentation that occurred as a byproduct of union autonomy and independence following democratization, particularly in the 1990s, imposes a significant constraint on union effectiveness. At the national level, multiple trade union centres often hinder the ability of unions to defend workers in the workplace and to raise a strong, united voice on policy issues. At the continental level, the existence of two main centres, namely OATUU and ITUC-Africa, undermines the wholesome coordination of trade union action across Africa's borders and the united voice and representation of African workers before the AU and global institutions. The ability of African trade unions to overcome historic divisions among them will be crucial for

¹² Trade Unions and Trade. A Guide to the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). First Edition April 2021. SASK, ITUC-AFRICA, LRS.

enhancing their capacity to help shape the AfCFTA into a tool for advancing Africa's integration and transformation in a manner that benefits the majority of African people.

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