

Between Opposition and Participation. Trade Unions and Reforms in Africa

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Aims:

This issue of *Revue Tiers-monde* aims to question the role of trade unions in the economic and political changes that Africa has experienced over the last two decades. During this period, unions have been involved in, and/or affected by, processes of political liberalisation, public reforms, privatisations, and the coming of new investors. How unions dealt with these changes offers a unique standpoint for analyzing emerging power relationships in both the economic and political arenas. The purpose of the issue is to study how trade unions participate to the making of contemporary African societies. To do so, it proposes to focus on their ambivalent relationships with companies and states, and, more generally, the dynamics – between opposition, adaptation, and cooperation – characterizing the field of labour politics.

Most recent studies about trade unionism in Africa come back on the role of trade unions in the processes of political liberalisation that several African countries have experienced in the 1990s. For that reason these studies generally deal with African countries such as South Africa, Ghana, or Zambia, where trade unions played a decisive role in the demise of authoritarian regimes, and discuss the relationship between trade unions and political parties. In contrast, this issue is interested in the dynamics of trade unionism in the era that followed this political moment – when unions were faced to new challenges, with the institutional and economic reforms of the late 1990s and 2000s. From a theoretical point of view, its aim is to break the normative, teleological, approach underlying much work about trade unionism, which often tends to conflate it with a democratic movement *a priori*, to understand better the relations of mutual dependence existing between trade unions, companies, and political parties.

Finally, this issue aims to bring together contributions covering various sectors and countries in Africa so as to offer in a francophone scientific journal an overview of the diversity of trade unions' practices and discourses on the continent.

Context:

In a context characterized by the breakdown of authoritarian regimes and the support of IFIs to so-called civil society organizations, the majority of African countries have allowed the creation of new trade unions to represent workers interests in the 1990s. The one-union organizations of the past have given place to a more or less large number of trade unions, depending on the sector and the country. A fierce competition generally exists between these unions, even though their ideological orientations are often hard to identify and distinguish. In some countries, trade unions were weakened by the growing importance of NGOs and the partition of main union federations. Nevertheless, as the Tunisian Revolution in 2011 and the Malian political crisis in 2012 show, trade unions keep an important mobilizing power. This is a power that governments and companies

take into account and try to control. Examples include mobilizations against the high cost of living, participation to large political coalitions, struggles against the privatization of public companies, and long term strikes in both the public and private sectors. Trade unions offer a unique standpoint for studying the interplay between economic, political, and social dynamics in Africa.

The political activism of trade unions is more obvious in some countries than in others, and often contrasts with their inability to significantly influence economic and social policies. From the 1980s onwards, most African states have been forced by IFIs to reduce their administrative staff, privatize state-owned companies, and take measures to attract private investors. These policies strongly impacted sectors – such as the railway, education, or mining sectors – that were once the main bastions of trade unionism. Large numbers of workers were made redundant. Private companies that replaced former state-owned companies often have recourse to various forms of precarious work on which trade unions have little control. More generally, although the influx of new foreign investors has allowed some African countries to show high rates of economic growth, it has not much benefited to the state and the population. Where this ‘growth without development’ pattern occurred, it has given rise to protest movements in which trade unions, together with their foreign partners, have sometimes played a prominent role. The actions and discourses of unions on such issues show well how coalitions and cleavages crisscross local, national, and global arenas.

Attempts at identifying general trends about trade unionism in Africa should not obscure its complexity and diversity. Unions are sometimes a mean of control and domination, sometimes a mean of resistance and change. These organizations also participate to various arenas, or fields, at different political levels. Hence their economic, political, and social role cannot be studied separately. African trade unions also have various areas of intervention and modes of action, depending – for instance – on the weight of the public sector, the freedom of speech, or the presence of foreign companies. This is this complexity and diversity of trade unionism that this issue aims to investigate further, with respect to the changes that African countries have experienced since the 1990s.

Themes:

This issue welcomes article proposals dealing with trade unionism in Africa from any discipline in the social sciences. Proposals may offer case studies based on empirical research and/or theoretical analysis on – for instance – action repertoires, mobilisation practices, ideologies, problems of participation and representation, and so on. Possible areas of investigation include:

1) Trade unions and social movements

The analysis deals with the practices and discourses of unions in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes; their alliances and rivalries with NGOs, advocacy networks, and political parties; and their involvement in larger social movements. How do claims emerge? What are the relationships of trade unions with foreign partners, international federations, the ILO? How discourses move and change from one political arena to another or from the local to the national and the international levels? What are the

consequences of large-scale mobilisations on the organisation of unions at the national and local levels?

2) Trade unionism in everyday life

This second area of investigation aims to study the dynamics of trade unionism in a given country, in order to document its diversity and complexity on the African continent. Attention is drawn, for example, on how trade unions face public reforms or the restructuring of state-owned companies, and/or succeed in being represented in private companies or joint ventures. The paper may also focus on the profile of union leaders, their career, their strategies, the risks and rewards associated with their job. More detailed analysis is needed on the relationships between workers, union representatives, union leaders and employers, as well as on the work of trade unionists in everyday life. What is their relationship with the law and justice courts? How are their actions financed? How do trade unions participate in the reproduction, or the questioning, of social inequalities in the workplace (gender, generation, education, etc.). Other issues related to this theme include the transmission, circulation, and change of union organisational models (trade union, social-democrat, etc.) and ideologies (marxism, anarchism, etc.).

3) Trade unions in the political arena

Even though some trade unions claim to have no political identity, this position is often hard to sustain, especially in periods of electoral campaign and/or political crisis. Events in Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2008 are cases in point. Moreover, mobilisations on economic issues generally give place to political claims, as in Burkina Faso in 2013, where action against the high cost of living was mingled to opposition to a project of institutional reform aiming at re-conducting B. Compaoré to power. The purpose here is to question the various forms of union participation to political life, by examining their relationships to the government and opposition parties. It is also, from a more historical perspective, to understand better how unions faced decentralisation reforms and the multiplication of power structures. More fundamentally, contributors are invited to identify the expectations of union representatives towards the state, and analyse how they take part to political debates and factional struggles within the state.

4) Involvement in economic policy orientation and the delivery of social services

This last area of investigation aims to reflect on the economic and social role of trade unions. Trade unions are liable to influence economic policy orientation. How are their choices made, and their claims articulated, in this domain? How do unions participate to consultative bodies, to co-management bodies, and, more generally, to the design, negotiation, and implementation of labour laws, collective agreements, social rights? Independently of influencing policies and management practices, trade unions are also liable to provide various economic and social services to members (central purchasing opportunities, housing cooperatives, insurance services, etc.). The delivery of such services is generally associated with the professionalization of and bureaucratisation of union organisations. It often conflicts, however, with the more militant expectations of

workers. Hence the question is: How the delivery of economic and social services lead to redefine the relationships of trade unions with companies, state authorities, and workers?

Article proposals (4, 000 characters, including spaces) should be sent to Clea Chakraverty (tiermond@univ-paris1.fr) and to the editors of the issue, Benjamin Rubbers (brubbers@ulg.ac.be) and Alexis Roy (royalexi@gmail.com) before December 1st 2014. When article proposals are accepted, the deadline for submitting articles in full length (47, 000 characters, including spaces, or 7, 000 words) is the 9th of March 2015. Proposals and articles can be written in French or English.

References:

This list of references, given as an indication, is limited to recent books and articles on trade unions in Africa.

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