

Trade unionism and changing world of work in Africa

International conference, 9-10 March 2023, Condorcet Campus (Aubervilliers, France)

Call for papers

As opposed to what is frequently claimed in political and academic debates, wage labour and trade unionism in Africa are not outdated or doomed (Copans, 2014). Although labour unions, since the 1980s, have been severely affected by structural adjustment programmes, wage labour in its various manifestations is persistent, and a myriad of active labour unions exist. Manifold mobilizations, such as strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins), on the continent bear witness to this. Labour unions engage in political struggles, in particular against authoritarianism; they fight against multinationals and local entrepreneurs or against macro-economic reforms pushed by donors; they ally with NGOs and associations to raise social claims. Labour unions are key actors to African societies, their political and economic dynamics, intervening way beyond wage workers' interests

The diversity of trade union histories of African countries can hardly be depicted in all its details; yet we can sketch out some broad outlines (see Belluci, Eckert, 2019; Bourel, Vadot, 2022). The scene of African trade unions was gradually set up after World War II. At that time, the first generation of wage labourers constituted a tiny minority in public administrations and in the sectors established by colonial capitalism (notably in mining, see for example, Larmer, 2017). These workers and labour unions played an important role in the struggles for decolonization (Cooper, 1996).

After the formal independencies, the relationship between African state authorities and labour unions turned ambivalent. Trade unionists often joined the new governments, sometimes taking part in the repression of their former comrades. In many contexts, labour unions were called upon to "participate responsibly" in the construction of the new nation states; a guiding principle to many African trade union confederations at that time, many of them being forcefully unified. At a time when the state was playing a central role in development policies, employees, who were mostly employed in the public sector (public administration, state-owned enterprises), were seen as the "dominant class". This view has been the subject to controversy, with some considering trade unionists a "labour aristocracy" (Freund, 1985; Waterman, 1975). If a large part of the political and economic elites emanated from the wage-earners, the latter are far from being a homogeneous group. Moreover, during the same period, others describe an ongoing process of proletarianization (Gutkind, 1974), in anticipation of the advent of an African working class.

When structural adjustment programmes were implemented, characterized by privatizations, wage cuts and layoffs, some employees and their unions opposed these reforms. This period was marked by public employment becoming more and more precarious, while private sector employment was growing only minimally. Alongside these changes, many trade unions became involved in the struggle against single-party regimes, paving the way for political liberalization in the 1990s. National trade union systems mostly became pluralistic. On an organizational level, the fragmentation the workforce led to fractionalisation and competition among workers and favoured differentiation and an increase in numbers of unions. At the same time, the proliferation of so-called civil society organizations begun, sometimes to the disadvantage of the trade unions.

The trade unions are, at the same time, buffeted by the socio-economic upheavals that took and take place on the continent, they take actively part in them and try to adapt to them. Thereby, trade unions have expanded their scope to other sectors than public service and wage workers in private companies, organizing freelancers, employers, traders, the so-called informal sector, and peasants (Roy, 2010).

This very quick overview leads us to some cross-cutting questions that will unite the participants of this conference, following a certain revival of interest (Belluci, Eckert, 2019; Bourel, Vadot, 2022) in topics that may have once seemed out of fashion (Copans, 2014). These questions, which arise at different periods of time, and also at various scales, are broken down into several areas:

1) Trade unionism and wage earners: What are the places of wage earners, without essentializing and homogenizing them, in the worlds of work and more generally in society? Historically dominated by the public sector, how do increasing numbers of private sector workers affect the representation of the working classes? In which way have the evolution of the wage-earning sector and trade unionism interacted historically on the continent?

2) How do trade unions deal with precarious and unstable forms of work (seasonal and casual work, temporary and subcontracted work, freelance and informal work)? The growing recourse to outsourcing and subcontracting reinforces this tendency to resort to precarious work, making it possible to have workers who are not formally employed by the company. When the work relationship tends to be reduced to an increasingly individual relationship, what implications does this have for trade unions?

3) Trade unionism beyond the wage-earning sector: the extension of trade unionism beyond the wage-earning sector raises questions about the flexibility of this mode of organization and its appropriation by other forms of work (e.g. in transport, Cissokho, 2015; Rizzo, 2017). How do unions of domestic workers, motorcycle cab drivers, and small traders position themselves in and in relation to trade unions, and how do they deal with public authorities and/or employers?

4) Trade unionism and ideologies: what ideologies do trade unions and unionists adhere to, and how do ideologies affect their involvement in politics or their relation to social movements? On the trade union level, how have doctrines (revolutionary, reformist, participation, co-management, and others; Blum, 2013), evolved as historical upheavals have occurred? What effects have these ideological developments had on inter-union relations, and in their relationship to the state and employers - whether nationally, continentally and internationally?

5) Who are the unionized workers? Shifting the focus to the people who make the union organizations work on a daily basis (identities, trajectories, training, careers) remains essential to understand the changes in the worlds of work and professional organizations. For example, what effects do the feminization of some sectors have on trade unions, particularly in terms of representativeness? How are power relations (gender, age, class, race) shaped in labour conflicts and within union organizations?

6) How are union organizations managed on a daily basis? How are negotiations with the state and/or employers conducted? What are the relationships between trade unions, political parties and "civil society" organizations? Which modes of action have evolved (latent or open conflict such as strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, or even advocacy, recourse to the courts), and how, in various political and social contexts?

Proposals from all human and social sciences, as well as transdisciplinary and activist contributions, are welcome in French or in English (the conference will be bilingual, with translation). Please submit proposals of max. 700 words (excluding bibliography) outlining the subject and argument, and the material in case of an empirical analysis.

Please send your proposals before 1 November 2022 to syndiquaf@gmail.com.

This conference is funded by the French National Research Agency and organized by the "Syndicalisme au Quotidien en Afrique" (SyndiQuAf) team: Sylvie Ayimpam (Institut des Mondes Africains, IMAF), Françoise Blum (Centre d'Histoire Sociale des Mondes Contemporains), Emmanuelle Bouilly (Université de Lille), Sidy Cissokho (Centre Lillois d'Etudes et de Recherche Sociologiques et Economiques), Bettina Engels (Otto Suhr Institute of Political Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin), Ophélie Rillon (IMAF), Alexis Roy (project coordinator, IMAF), Guillaume Vadot (IMAF), Elena Vezzadini (co-coordinator, IMAF).

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