

Guest Editorial

African Trade Unions: An Introduction

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This Special Issue of the *Global Labour Journal* comprises four peer-reviewed articles focusing on different aspects of the work of African trade unions in the context of changes in labour policies and practices, driven partly by neo-liberal ideologies, which have been affecting workers across the continent since the late 1970s. It further includes an interview piece with five African trade unionists on gender issues. Neo-liberal policies have increasingly been embedded in Africa, making the continent more open to international capital and market-driven export-oriented economic policies (Poku and Whitman, 2018). There have been many debates over the exact nature of neo-liberalism. The analyses in this Special Issue draw on Harrison's (2019: 277) definition of the concept: "a universal social project pursued in the name of free markets, and authoritarianism".

The idea for the Special Issue derives from two sources. The first was a conference in 2017 organised by the African Studies Center at the University of Porto (CEAUP) on "Trade Unions and Labour in Africa". Second, there was a panel at the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), which took place in Edinburgh in 2019, entitled "Innovation or Irrelevance? An Analysis of New Strategies being used by African Trade Unions to Defend the Interests of Labour".

African trade unionists and researchers from a number of countries presented at the conferences with two key points arising from subsequent discussions. First, reports of the death of African trade unions have been greatly exaggerated. Despite attempts by multinational companies, multilateral development agencies such as the World Bank, national governments and some researchers to marginalise their work and portray them as obsolete, trade unions in numerous countries and settings across the continent are continuing to play an active and influential role in defending the interests of workers. As Van der Walt (2019) points out, though they remain contested politically and have bureaucratic tendencies, trade unions are generally progressive movements. Second, sources of data on, and analysis of, the work of African trade unions are scattered and not widely known by officials and members of labour organisations.

There were two main outcomes from the discussions at the conferences. First, coordinated by Professor Maciel Santos at CEAUP, an initiative was started to create an online African Labour Observatory. The objective is to provide a simple, practical and well-publicised web platform to which trade unions and scholars continent-wide can upload materials and obtain quick access to data, news and publications on African labour issues. It is also envisaged that outlines of successful policies and practices by federations and/or individual unions can be uploaded to the platform, as guides for other organisations to draw on, thus enhancing solidarity. Second, a number of participants at the conferences developed their presentations into full research papers, highlighting various elements of trade union work in Africa. Other analysts researching the work of African trade unions joined the team later, resulting in the production of a number of articles, four of which are being published in this Special Issue. The articles have different areas of focus to show the difficult circumstances in which African trade unions work.

That many trade unions work in adverse circumstances can be seen at a broad level from the

number of African countries which are ranked in the worst three categories of the International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) 2021 Global Rights Index:

- 5+ No guarantee of rights due to the breakdown of the rule of law: Burundi, Central African Republic, Somalia, Libya, South Sudan, Sudan (6)
- 5 No guarantee of rights: Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Zimbabwe (5)
- 4 Systematic violation of rights: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Cote D'Ivoire, DR Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia (19)

The issues covered in the articles included in this Special Issue were raised at the Porto and Edinburgh conferences as being important aspects of the current work of African trade unions by practitioners and researchers. They include: the deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers, weak channels of communication within and between unions, the difficulties involved in incorporating workers in the informal sector into traditional trade union structures, environmental degradation, gender discrimination, youth unemployment, the anti-union stance of foreign and domestic investors and governments, low levels of social protection, the use of coercive forms of labour, and prejudice towards migrant workers.

These issues are captured broadly in the mission of the International Trade Union Confederation-Africa (ITUC-Africa), which has 17 million declared members and 101 affiliated trade unions centres, and aims to “realise a healthy and safe working environment and a decent life for all by fighting all forms of exploitation and discrimination, defending human and trade union rights, promoting social justice, peace, democracy and vigorously pursuing the preservation of the environment (ITUC, n.d.).

The purpose of this introduction is to provide a brief historical contextualisation of the work of African trade unions and then to highlight key issues they are currently facing. This provides the foundation for overviews of the articles which make up the Special Issue.

Contextualisation: Changing Roles of African Trade Unions

The history of African trade unions is rich and complex. Different types of organisations have operated across countries, and the relationships between bodies representing labour and agents of the state and capital have taken various forms, depending on context-specific political economy formations (Bellucci, 2019). Given that the focus of the Special Issue is on current concerns facing African trade unions, this overview identifies key issues at a broad level.

African trade unions during the colonial period

Formal labour organisations in Africa developed from the latter half of the nineteenth century in response to shifts towards a capitalist mode of production, largely induced by colonial authorities. White Europeans created the majority of trade unions before the 1930s, though some African labour organisations were established during this period (see, for example, Abdullah, 1998, on Sierra Leone). Orr (1966) documents the formation of eighteen trade unions between 1880 and 1930, eight of which were for African workers.

From the 1930s a growing number of trade unions were formed as a consequence of disturbances among workers reacting to alienation from traditional cultural practices, low wages and poor living conditions. A resultant rise in labour unrest showed the colonial authorities that “even tiny working classes could strike, and they were threatening the narrow channels of colonial

commerce” (Cooper, 1989: 746). The authorities resorted to legal-bureaucratic measures in response. New legislation was enacted in the colonies, primarily as a way to control labour organisations and to co-opt their senior officials, who could then be used to stifle unrest among ordinary members of their unions. The colonisers’ own national trade union structures and systems were commonly imposed on their colonies. Consequently, African trade unions had little choice but “to duplicate what pertained in their respective colonial metropolis” (Britwum and Dakhli, 2019: 505).

Despite these constraints, trade unions capable of organising actions on behalf of their members developed among groups of manual and semi-skilled workers in docks, railways, mines and plantations, particularly after the end of World War 2. A number of teachers, civil servants and clerical staff also became unionised in this period. Consequently, an alliance developed in trade unions between militant working-class groups and those whom the colonial regime needed as administrators and educators (Freund, 1988).

Both of these groups of workers took part in strikes and political demonstrations and formed effective alliances with nationalist groups working to oust colonial rulers (Geiss, 1965). Chhachhi (2014: 901) points out that many trade unions during this period moved “beyond workplace issues, asserting workers’ power and participation in national liberation movements and fighting for the expansion of political and social citizenship entitlements”. This scenario occurred in a considerable number of African countries (see, for example, McQuinn, 2012, on the case of Tanzania).

Governments sometimes used force against trade unionists, as well as taking legal-bureaucratic measures to suppress them. For example, Shivji (1990) documents a number of cases in Tanzania where violence against trade unionists was used by the Motorised Unit of the military during strikes in the 1950s. Despite the employment of such tactics by the authorities, sustained opposition to colonial rule was maintained by labour movements in many African countries. Trade unions thus played a “strategically effective role in the unravelling of the colonial state in Africa” (Freund, 1988: 91).

African trade unions in the post-independence period

The alliances between trade unions and nationalist political parties quickly deteriorated in the post-independence period. The alacrity with which political leaders used the machinery of state to browbeat, exile or co-opt effective officials caused bitterness among trade unions. For example, in Cote d’Ivoire, which achieved independence from France in 1960, the ruling party mixed co-option of trade union leaders with exile and imprisonment to corral the labour movement (Thomson, 2016; Rabinowitz, 2018). States were largely effective in subduing labour organisations through absorbing senior union officials “into positions of power by the party-state” (Beckman and Sachikonye, 2001: 13).

The imposition by governments of legislative constraints on trade unions was justified on the grounds that nation-building was the priority, given the exploitation and dislocation caused by colonialism. The contention that political competition would lead to factionalism on ethnic lines and harmful wrangling over policy directions was used to justify the creation of one-party states in many African countries (Young, 2017). Trade unions were exhorted by political leaders to subsume their pursuit of improved terms and conditions for members to the broader political economy goals of overcoming the malign legacies of colonial repression (Buhlungu, 2010). Trade unions which pressed insistently for increased benefits for members were portrayed by governments as arrogant representatives of a small labour aristocracy, based in the formal sector. Going beyond these government-imposed restrictions, Ananaba (1979: 6) points to “fragmentation,

maladministration, indiscipline, abuse of office and undemocratic procedures” as reasons for the failings of African trade unions in the post-independence period.

Trade unions in the neo-liberal period

State-led forms of economic development in Africa came under increasing pressure in the second half of the 1970s, in the context of high inflation levels, consumer shortages and sprawling public sector bureaucracies (Young, 2017). These economic problems opened the door to the imposition of neo-liberal policies by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), most virulently in the form of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). By the mid-1990s more than thirty African countries had implemented SAPs. Though policy packages varied, they typically included the core neo-liberal prescriptions of deregulation of labour markets, liberalisation of trade and financial markets, and privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

The deleterious effects of SAPs on labour in Africa have been well documented (Carmody, 1998; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1998, 2003; Meilink, 2003). As a result of SAPs, African workers were “confronted with retrenchments and job insecurity, wage restraints and the suspension of benefits, soaring consumer prices and user charges for public services, ‘flexible’ management practices and subcontracting, and an intensification of managerial efforts to increase labour productivity” (Konings, 2000: 311). Through the privatisation of SOEs, trade unions lost many members, whose contributions had provided much-needed finance.

However, these adverse impacts of the imposition of SAPs on workers also galvanised trade unions in a number of countries during the 1980s. Trade union leaders often had to distance themselves and their organisations from acquiescing to the policies of SAPs or risk losing all credibility with members. A growing number of labour leaders took an oppositional stance, as the negative effects of SAPs on workers deepened (see, for example, Ndiaye, 2010, on Senegal). Such opposition led to criticisms from the World Bank, which regarded trade unions as misguided supporters of *dirigisme*. In the World Bank’s 1995 *World Development Report* the opposition of trade unions to SAPs was cited as a “negative effect” of their work, which failed to take account of the “success of many of these initiatives since 1991” (World Bank, 1995: 81).

Trade unions in a number of countries used opposition to SAPs as the basis to widen their critiques of the prevailing order, calling for the re-establishment of freedom of association where it had been curtailed and an end to other authoritarian forms of control (Sidibe and Venturi, 2018). In this way, the labour movement became a “significant opponent of the one-party states that had come to characterize post-colonial Africa” (Webster, 2007: 1). Drawing on empirical studies of Ghana, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, Kraus (2007: 255) argues that trade unions were reinvigorated during the 1980s to the extent that they played a “muscular and seminal” role in the fight to displace authoritarian state control.

In the face of rising opposition to SAPs, the international financial institutions (IFIs) introduced Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in September 1999. PRSPs were initiated on the basis that nationally owned and participatory development plans should form the bedrock of all IFI concessional lending and debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, which had been introduced in 1996. By the mid-2000s, thirty-seven African countries had produced PRSPs, requiring “broad-based participation by civil society ... in all operational steps” (World Bank, n.d.).

This framework presented an opportunity for trade unions, as civil society organisations, to insert themselves into policy processes. Therefore, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) initially encouraged the involvement of labour organisations in the construction

of PRSPs (Schillinger, 2003). However, the ICFTU became increasingly concerned during the 2000s with the perceived failure of the IFIs to include any meaningful trade union input into PRSP processes. Disillusion with PRSPs reached the point where the ITUC¹ stated that they replicated “the privatisation and liberalization policies that have long been at the heart of the IMF and World Bank programmes” (ITUC, 2008: 3).

Additionally, during the 1990s, new legal-bureaucratic measures and institutions were introduced to regulate labour relations in a number of African countries, as part of the good governance agenda. Labour laws dating to the colonial era and/or the period of post-independence authoritarian rule were repealed in a number of cases. New legislation and institutions to regulate labour were introduced in line with the values of liberal democracy, which ostensibly provided a measure of protection for the rights of workers. However, it quickly became apparent that foreign direct investors and domestic entrepreneurs could often circumvent or ignore the new legislation and institutional arrangements, sometimes with the tacit approval of governments. This phenomenon is outlined in the article in this Special Issue by McQuinn and Sallah, focusing on the work of the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers’ Union (GTPCWU) in Ghana. Webster and Buhlungu (2004: 40) captured the essence of these changes in their analysis of the state of trade unionism in South Africa during the 1990s, arguing that “the transition is paradoxical for labour in that on the one hand, it strengthens the rights of labour, while it erodes them and bypasses the new institutions, on the other”.

Overall impact of changing labour relations

The overarching point arising from this contextualisation is that African trade unions have needed to adjust to systems of labour relations and organisational structures foisted on them by colonial powers and then independent governments, which have prioritised the interests of capital and capitalists over those of labour. A combination of legal-bureaucratic methods and extra-judicial force have been used to narrow the remit of trade unions and to control them as tightly as possible.

Despite the adverse structured settings in which African trade unions have been embedded during the different phases of their existence, agency has remained significant. The overview shows that trade union work in Africa always has been, and remains, inherently political. The ability and will of officials and individual members to motivate and organise trade unions is a significant factor to consider in assessing their successes and failures. As Freund (2019: 526) points out, “it is important to perceive the union as a field involving individuals ... [some of whom] have been at the heart and soul of ... militancy at key moments”.

Contemporary Issues for African Trade Unions

Having gone through a stark period of adjustment to the implanting of a neo-liberal political economy model, where does this leave African trade unions in the present day?

It is clear that the authoritarian neo-liberal model operating in many African countries does not intend to incorporate a role of any significance for trade unions. For example, as PRSPs have been largely left to wither on the vine in the latter half of the 2010s, the World Bank (2020) has prioritised Country Partnership Frameworks (CPFs) as national development instruments in Africa. According to the World Bank, CPFs should begin “from the member country’s own vision of its development goals ... laid out in a poverty focused national development strategy”. Between

¹ The ICFTU merged with the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) in 2006 to become the ITUC.

2015 and 2020, twenty-three African countries put CPFs in place. While all of them contain analyses of labour market issues, only one – Mauritania (IDA, IFC and MIGA, 2018) – contains a reference to a role for trade unions.

Furthermore, the majority of governments signed up in 2019 to the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AUDA-NEPAD, 2020). Trade unions were not included in discussions about the framing of this agreement, despite the fact that workers are one of the core groups that will be affected by its implementation. Moreover, there is no reference to a role for trade unions in the African Union Commission's flagship development plan, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (African Union Commission, 2015).

Additionally, rising levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) over the past decade in a number of African countries have excited an Afro-optimism literature (Robertson, 2012; Coulibaly, 2017; Leke, Chironga and Desvaux, 2018).² Publications taking an Afro-optimism line ignore the work of trade unions as representatives of workers, focusing largely on macro-economic indicators of levels of development. The Afro-optimism perspective has been countered robustly by analyses taking in different areas of focus (Taylor, 2014; Havnevik, 2015; McKenzie, 2016; Bond, 2017; Harrison, 2019; Ahere, 2021). The articles in this Special Issue add to these critiques from the perspective of trade union work.

Over the past fifteen years China has become Africa's largest trading partner, as well as an important and influential investor on the continent (Oqubay and Yinfu Lin, 2019). The need to be wary of generalising about China's relationship with Africa has been outlined (Brautigam, 2010; Alden and Large, 2019). However, it is hard to find cases in Africa where Chinese investors have engaged constructively with trade unions. A study in 2009 found "hostile attitudes by Chinese employers towards trade unions" to be a common trend (Yaw Baah and Jauch, 2009: 13). Mote (2018) reported that little had changed nine years later, following her experiences as part of an ITUC-Africa team which investigated the impact of FDI on development processes in Nigeria, Zambia and Ethiopia. Moreover, in Angola and Ethiopia, Oya and Schaefer (2019: 6) find that Chinese firms are "reluctant to engage with unions".

Given this widespread marginalisation of – and often hostility to – their role by external actors, it is important to assess whether trade unions have the strength to insert themselves meaningfully into labour policy processes in Africa. At the 4th Ordinary Congress of the Regional Organisation of the ITUC-Africa, held in Abuja in 2019, the pressing need for trade unions to "clearly articulate how they will facilitate the required structural transformation of Africa anchored on decent work" was outlined (Samuel-Olonjuwon, 2019: 11).

Articulating a vision and then acting on it, however, is easier said than done. Years of suppression under colonial and post-independence governments, outlined in the Contextualisation section above, as well as lack of access to finance, have created a situation wherein many trade unions are "bureaucratic, inefficient and struggle to respond to urgent issues" (Van der Walt, 2019: 27). There is a dearth of modern amenities at many trade unions, as the article by McQuinn and Cojocararu in this Special Issue on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by the labour movement in Cabo Verde highlights. Another issue for trade unions is how to move beyond a concentration on representing workers in the formal sector. The need for trade unions to enhance their legitimacy and power by representing workers from the informal sector has been recognised for some time. Jauch (2010: 184), for example, has outlined how trade unions in Namibia focus on organising among formal sector workers with permanent jobs and "thus represent only a section of the working class". There are increasing moves by national trade union

² Also referred to as "Africa rising" literature. See Frankema and Van Waijenburg (2018) for an overview.

centres in Africa to incorporate informal sector workers into their structures. However, this involves complex and, at times, fractious processes. Riisgaard examines these processes in this Special Issue, focusing on the cases of Tanzania and Kenya.³ The integration of informal sector workers into formal union structures is partly related to legitimacy issues. Guven and Karlen (2020) state that 80 per cent of all jobs in Africa are in the informal sector. Trade unions which focus only on representing formal sector workers, therefore, can be criticised for failing to engage with the majority of people in the labour force. Representation issues are thus of importance, and discussed further in the following section.

Who Do African Trade Unions Represent?

Africa's population of 1.3 billion is projected to almost double by 2030, which will put much pressure on individual governments to facilitate decent employment opportunities for working-age populations. The labour force in sub-Saharan African is 447.37 million (World Bank, 2022), which is 13 per cent of the global total (ILO, 2022).⁴ The sectoral composition of the workforce and the terms and conditions of employment differ considerably across countries. Notwithstanding these variations, Africa has higher shares, relative to other continents, of vulnerable employment (66 per cent) and informal work, which presents trade unions with challenges.⁵ Moreover, a substantive number of the "working poor" are employed in the formal sector, who endure arduous terms and conditions of employment (Gammarano, 2019).

Given these large numbers of workers engaged in vulnerable and/or informal work, trade unions need to be involved in providing protection for as many of them as possible if they are to be considered relevant actors in the sphere of labour relations. Reliable statistics, however, on membership of trade unions in Africa are lacking. Some trade union centres, as well as individual organisations in Africa, produce regularly updated membership figures. However, in a number of countries, unions do not produce reliable and up-to-date data on membership. The International Labour Organization (ILO, n.d.) produces trade union density figures for thirty-three African countries, but in many of these cases the statistics are outdated. For example, the figures for Nigeria and the Central African Republic are from 2008. Moreover, sources for the figures are not clearly provided. In a number of cases, the sources are stated as "various" and trade union membership numbers, which provide the basis for the density figures, are missing. Notwithstanding the lack of transparency about sources, fairly recent density figures provided by the ILO (n.d.) for Botswana (30 per cent in 2020), South Africa (29.1 per cent in 2019) and Mauritius (27.7 per cent in 2018) do provide support for the argument of Kraus (2007) and a number of other researchers on labour issues, that trade union membership in a number of countries in Africa is quantitatively significant.

Contributions of the Articles in this Special Issue

The articles in the Special Issue make a number of contributions to debates on the work of African

³ See also McQuinn (2017) on the integration of informal sector workers into Sierra Leonean trade unions.

⁴ The labour force is defined as those above 15 years of age and who fulfil the requirements for inclusion among the employed or the unemployed during a specified reference period.

⁵ Vulnerable employment is associated with high rates of precariousness, characterised as work which is often undertaken in dangerous conditions, based on temporary contracts, poorly remunerated and not inclusive of social benefits (ILRF, n.d.).

trade unions. First and foremost, they provide empirical insights into how trade unions in different countries are currently addressing important labour issues. The articles make further contributions, which are outlined under sub-headings in the following three paragraphs.

Conceptual frameworks

Researchers have produced a variety of conceptual frameworks over the past twenty years, which have “challenged the discourse of a general decline of organised labour, focusing instead on innovative organising strategies” (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018: 113). These conceptual frameworks have been used sparsely in examining the work of African trade unions. Some of them – the Power Resources Approach (PRA), the Coordination and Context-Appropriate Power Theory (CCAP), the 3+1 institutional model of social dialogue, and distributed discourse – are utilised in analysing the shifting position of African trade unions in this Special Issue.

Future directions for trade unions

A number of researchers have focused lately on future directions for trade unions. Visser (2019), for example, sets out four possible trajectories: increasing marginalisation as neo-liberal policies and practices endure; dualisation, entailing the development of a sharper distinction between unionised and non-unionised workplaces than is the case at present; the supplanting of traditional labour organisations by alternative types of social enterprise and representation; revitalisation and expansion, involving the creation of innovative ways to strengthen existing successful practices and draw in new members. The articles in this Special Issue provide pause for reflection on which of these pathways, if any, is most applicable to trade unions across Africa.

The need for further research on trade unions

Research and publications on African trade unions have increased since the 1970s, when Friedland (1974) identified only nineteen works of significance on the topic and Kraus (1976: 95) commented on the “sparseness of literature on African workers and trade unions”.

There is a body of insightful research on various aspects of trade unionism in a number of African countries, such as Senegal, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana. However, examinations of the work of trade unions in a number of other countries are sparse. Moreover, the work of labour organisations remains a topic outside much mainstream analysis of issues influencing development in Africa, as evidenced by the fact that there is only one reference to trade unions in the *Routledge Handbook of African Development* (Binns, Lynch and Nel, 2018). In this context, an aim of the Special Issue is to generate interest in undertaking further research on the work of African trade unions. The empirical examples in the articles and the interviews are from Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Madagascar and Zambia. Other team members are working on issues facing trade unions in Nigeria and South Africa. It is hoped that resources can be found to widen and deepen the research, taking in other African countries and issues facing trade unions, such as the position of workers in the rural sector.⁶

Additionally, it would be useful to provide more information on the work of trade union support organisations in Africa. For example, the Labour Research Service (n.d.), based in South

⁶ The work of trade unions in Northern Africa (as delineated by the African Union) is not included in this research. The African Union classifies the Northern Region as made up of the countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania and the Sahrawi Republic. Lack of resources precludes an analysis of the role of labour organisations in this region, where “the dynamics ... remain significantly different” to those in sub-Saharan Africa (Nugent, 2012: 490).

Africa, provides information for trade unions on a number of key issues, such as climate and the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement. However, some trade union officials interviewed for this research were unaware of these resources.

One of the tasks of the team involved in the production of this Special Issue is compiling a list of publications on the work of trade unions in every African country and creating a digital archive of documents and literature currently only available in hard copy form. This is an ongoing project, aimed at providing a resource for trade unionists and researchers. The project also aims to identify countries where the role of trade unions is markedly under-researched. Digital archiving is increasingly being used in Africa to enhance the institutional memory of trade unions and to strengthen the sense of collective identity among members. For example, the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam is conducting a digitisation project involving organisations including the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (IISH, 2018) and the Mineworkers' Union of Zambia (Money, 2021). Gathering such information is important, since research for this Special Issue reveals that trade unions would welcome greater knowledge of where they can get information on labour issues and support for their work.

Content of the Special Issue

The first article, by Samuel Andreas Admasie, examines contemporary trade unionism in Ethiopia in comparison with its historical iterations. Against the backdrop of a historic upsurge of the Ethiopian trade union movement, coupled with some momentous achievements registered in the past years, Admasie qualifies the general applicability of the notion of a global decline of trade unionism prevalent in the contemporary literature. He calls for caution against deducing trade union patterns in African economies from those that prevail in economies with different employment structures and trajectories. In the context of Ethiopia, he finds evidence that workers' and trade unions' willingness and capacity to engage in class contestation have been the decisive factors behind recent and historical advances, but warns that the contemporary situation for Ethiopian unions is at once pregnant with possibilities of further advances and risks of reversals.

The following article, by Mark McQuinn and F.M.K. Sallah, examines attempts by the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers' Union in Ghana to employ structural, institutional and conditional forms of power, as framed within Coordination and Context-Appropriate Power Theory, in defending the interests of its members. The research shows that the GTPCWU is embedded in a structured political economy setting which makes it hard for the organisation to deploy any of these three forms of power effectively. Moreover, the GTPCWU is facing difficulties representing members working in an industry based on use of fossil fuels, which is increasingly criticised for its negative environmental impacts. Nevertheless, the authors demonstrate that the union has undertaken successful actions in defence of the rights of members, demonstrating that it possesses a degree of structural power. The union has enjoyed little success in its attempts to utilise institutional power, as enforcement of labour legislation in Ghana is weak and recourse to legal processes expensive. Conditional power is also hard to exercise, since union members in the oil industry are widely perceived to be fortunate to have lucrative employment. Despite these structural constraints, agency is significant in assessing the work of the GTPCWU. The union has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase the membership and to enhance its institutional, technical and financial capacities.

The article by Lone Riisgaard investigates attempts by trade unions in Kenya and Tanzania to enlarge their constituency by including people working in the informal economy. This process

challenges established understandings of who a worker is, which in turn poses challenging questions about rights, representation and the distribution of power within the trade union movement. Hence, while there is a recognised need to constitute people working informally as workers and union members in order to increase the social base, and thereby increase political clout, these processes are juxtaposed with the urge to maintain traditional boundaries and protect established privileges and power structures.

The focus of the article by Mark McQuinn and Mihaela Cojocaru is the methods of communication used by trade unions in Cabo Verde. Distributed discourse is used as a conceptual framework to provide insights into ways in which the ability of trade unionists in Cabo Verde to participate in debates and actions is affected by the prevalence and control of digital technologies. The findings show that weak channels of communication are major problems for trade unions in Cabo Verde, which hinders their ability to defend the rights of members effectively. The increased use of ICTs in recent years has led to a more democratically distributed discourse within the trade union movement in localised settings. However, ICTs are not being utilised systematically to enhance the effectiveness of the work of unions or to democratise procedures within the labour movement.

In addition to the research papers in the Special Issue, interviews are included on gender issues with an ITUC-Africa official and women trade union officials representing workers in Madagascar, Cabo Verde, Gambia and Zambia. The interviews reveal the seriousness of a variety of problems facing women trade unionists continent-wide in the formal and informal sectors in Francophone, Lusophone and Anglophone countries. Successful policies and actions to improve the position of women trade unionists are also outlined by the interviewees.

Bhattacharya (2014: 960) points out that “labour’s fundamental struggle remains a struggle against capital”. At present, neo-liberal policies and practices are being cemented, which benefit the capitalist class and state officials. These policies are often portrayed in technical and apolitical terms along with assertions that they will benefit society as a whole. In reality, they are inherently political and profit capital at the expense of the majority of the African labour force. The articles in the Special Issue show different ways in which African trade unions are defending the interests of members and the wider workforce.

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