

COMMUNITY UNIONISM AND CHANGING ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN NEW HUMAN RIGHTS ERA

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally Trade Unions focused on protecting the employment/labour rights of its membership. As primarily members-based organizations, they are characterized by literature and case law alike as engaging quid pro quo in collective bargaining. While trade unions can also engage in other activities, the *raison d'être* of their activity is in providing a sense of job (or employment) security and negotiating wages, fringe benefits, delayed compensation plans, and pension guarantees. (Mundlak, 2012) According to Webb and Webb's definition, a trade union is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving their conditions for employment and it implies that trade unions are bread-and-butter organizations, safeguarding their members' wages and working conditions, but having none or little function beyond this. (Thomassen, 2015)

However, within the last few decades there has been a significant change in the role of trade unions in response to popular political and cultural perceptions of Trade Unions being corrupt or self-serving organizations that work in the interest of their own members rather than for the greater good. (K.Kolben, 2009-2010) This negative perception of unions has compelled the labor movement to attempt to redefine itself within a framework that has obtained widespread intellectual, cultural, moral, and political support: human rights. (K.Kolben, 2009-2010) According to Howard Gospel, three different ideal types of unions emerged in this context: (1). the market-orientated unions where unions are essentially economic actors pursuing economic goals. (...) (2). the class-orientated unions which are deemed vehicles of class struggle (...) (3). Society-orientated unions which may be seen essentially as social actors or social partners, engaged in social dialogue and operation in a social democratic context. (K.Kolben, 2009-2010)

These new roles are termed Community Unionism (Wills, 2001) (Jane, 2015), The Union Learning Representative (ULR) role (Moore, 2010), Social movement unionism (Witharana, 2015) and Democratic role (Thomassen, 2015) depending on the context in which a union might operate. Their roles were re-couched in Human Rights terms with trade unions advocating the adoption of human rights analyses and arguments in their work, and human rights organizations including workers' rights in their mandates. (Compa, 2008)

This changing role of the trade unions has supported trade unions to bring new workers into trade unions, also to increase the public profile of the labour movement, and they have moved the focus of trade unionism beyond the workplace. Anyhow this new paradigm-shift poses significant challenges to prevailing concentrations of power in the trade union movement and it has opened a heated academic debate over the theme.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of primary as well as secondary qualitative research method was used. The research began by planning a comprehensive domestic and international literature review.

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Three Trade Unions were selected from United Kingdom as a case study. The Case study involved a series of interviews with trade union leaders and in depth analyses of the media releases. Based on this review and the data obtained through the case study method, the research identified the changed role of Trade Unions and analyzed the impact of these changes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a trade union organization as: “An organization of employees usually associated beyond the confines of one enterprise, established for protecting or improving through collective action, the economic and social status of its members.” ((CSTS), 2015). Some authors discuss about the traditional role of trade unions as 1. Protecting the interests of the whole country, but at the same time safe guarding the legitimate rights and interests of the workers; 2. Helping their members participate in the management of their own work units; 3. Mobilizing the labour force to raise productivity and the economy’s performance; 4. Educating the workers to be better members of society (Daniel Z.Ding, 2002)

The labour movement is in desperate crisis and in countries such as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, the USA, New Zealand and the UK. There is a strong impetus propelling the search for new methods of securing union growth and renewal. Some unions are developing new models of organizing which look beyond the workplace to forge links and develop shared agendas with the wider community. (Wills, 2001)

Among several changing roles the „community unionism“ has become a more popular topic among the academic and trade union specialists. Community unionism is about finding common cause between unions and those groups cemented around affiliations of religion, race, gender, disability and sexuality, with those providing a particular community service and with those fighting for a particular political cause. (Wills, 2001) In other words “it means making the union into a vehicle through which its members can not only address their bargaining demands but actively lead the fight for everything that affects working people in their communities and the country. Movement unionism includes the shape of bargaining demands, the scope of union activities, the approach to issues of change, and above all, that sense of commitment to a larger movement that might suffer defeats, but can’t be destroyed”.(Fairbrother, 2008)

As it has been noted by a number of writers, trade unions“ organizing in the community is not new .The history of trade union formation in the UK is inextricably linked to the places and spaces in which people lived and worked. (Jane, 2015) And its rather than being based *in* communities, or acting *for* communities, it make the argument that unions are well placed to develop reciprocal community unionism in which unions work *with* communities for social change. (Simms, 2004)

According to the Wills (2001) by forging common-cause alliances with community groups and political campaigns, trade unions aim to do (at least) four things. Firstly, by increasing the scale and thus the influence and power of organizing activity, community-union initiatives are able to tackle questions of economic justice that stretch beyond any particular workplace; Secondly, by organizing with community groups, trade unions are able to reach non-union workers who have been traditionally marginalized from trade unions; Thirdly, as increasing numbers of workers are concentrated in low paid, contingent, manufacturing and service employment, often in small workplaces, it has often proved very difficult to reach them

through traditional union organizing strategies which focus on workplaces and employers; And finally, the community might also prove invaluable in defending traditional workplace trade union organization.

Social movement unionism has become part of the lexicon about trade unionism over the last two decades. Social movement unionism has four key aspects to it 1. Locally focused and based, often referred to as rank and file mobilization, or variants thereof

2. Experimenting with collective actions, that go beyond the strike, or workplace limited activities 3. Building alliances, coalition building, and extending into the community and beyond 4. Embracing emancipatory politics, framing demands politically, and formulating (Fairbrother, 2008)

As Holgate (2015) mentioned, this approach is largely motivated by three things: the success of the broad-based community organization, London Citizens and its high profile campaign for a living wage (Wills, 2004, 2009a); local and national politicians noticing how this organization is able to mobilize local people around community activity; and third, unions and political parties waking up to the potential for growth within their own organizations.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This changing role of Trade Unions as community unions has become success stories in several trade unions such as the case of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Union Council (BWTUC). Also with Unite's new „community membership“ and the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA).

This new role has brought new workers into trade unions, they have increased the public profile of the labour movement, and they have moved the focus of trade unionism beyond the workplace. As we have seen, this poses significant challenges to prevailing concentrations of power in the trade union movement. Re-inventing community unionism is still in its early stages and there is a lot of work to be done convincing those with power that it represents one part of the future of trade unionism in the UK. (Wills, 2001)

So this new mechanism can be used as a good role model for Sri Lankan trade unionism to overcome several barriers which have been experiencing for the last decades. This will build up a link between the community and the trade unions and it will give a chance to play an active role for the trade unions beyond their workplace.

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