

Selected Perceptions of Anglophone Teachers Trade Union Members

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative case study is to explore CATTU members' perception about the services rendered by their union. To achieve this, we used the case study research design to interview union members in the city of Buea and Douala. Our data collection method was face to face and telephone interviews for a sampling population of twenty union members. The result of the study revealed that industrial unions like CATTU in Cameroon though in existence, are not really effective on the field. Their role can be said to be weak in the field of labor relations. This can be partly explained by the fact their autonomy as a bargaining institution is very limited. This limitation can be explained by the fact they find themselves stuck in between a laissez faire economy where those who own the means of production determine everything and the post-colonial State which both narrow down their range of action. By so doing, they are limited them to the role of mediation- a mediation done within the framework of the government that perceives their actions as subversive and doing everything to control them.

Keywords: Perceptions, Industrial Trade Unions, labor relations, qualitative case study.

Introduction

Trade or labour unions can be described as organized groupings of wage and salary earners with the purpose of bringing to bear the economic, social and political interests of their members on labour relations and the political system. As a new type of organization, trade unions emerged during the industrialization in Europe in the second half of the 19th century. From trade organizations of highly qualified skilled workers, they later developed into more comprehensive organizations of the rapidly growing industrial proletariat, mainly in the big industries. In Cameroon, trade unions history followed the same development path. The two main trade unions were CDCWU in West Cameroon and the one in East Cameroon led by Ruben Um Nyobe which later became a political party: Union des

Populations Du Cameroun UPC. This is a political party which is going to play a foremost role in the liberation of Cameroon. After the independence of Cameroon, other central movements emerged, like the Cameroon National Union (CNU) and, later, the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC).

Historical Context Leading to the Creation of Trade Unions

Trade Unions during Colonial Time

The emergence of trade unions in Africa is closely linked to the advent of colonialism in Africa. Trade unions in Africa developed their working framework based on the model of their respective colonial masters. French trade unions in the colonies were communist-orientated and were controlled by the CGT while British ones were aligned along craft, industrial and staff-associated.

The split between trade unions in Africa and their metropole started when these trade unions started seeking for self-determination and emancipation from their colonial headquarters. This pattern of interaction intensified itself when trade unions in Africa joined the fight for the national liberation of their respective countries. They were part of the political actors who accelerated the speed of national liberation by joining political strikes and national protests. In some cases, their leaders found themselves leading political parties as in South Africa.

Trade Unions after Independence

After the achievement of national independence, African Trade unions started losing ground. This is because the one-party system, which was the dominant paradigm of the time, completely uprooted trade unions by emphasizing one man dimensional society to speak as Marcus Garvey. This one-dimensional man society left no room for expression or manifestation of divergent opinions. Most sub-Saharan African countries forced trade unions to surrender themselves to the state. Some trade union official's saw themselves given government positions in order for them redefine the role of trade unions.

However, some federations such as ZaCTU in Zambia, GTUC in Ghana or NLC in Nigeria resisted the absorption process of these one-party systems.

Trade Union as Actors for Political Change

The advent of democracy in Africa led to the deconstruction of the relationship between governments and trade unions. The poor model of governance made trade unions to declare their independence from the one-party system state and they later participated in the promotion and development of new model of society by advocating for a multi-party state. In sub-Saharan African countries, the advent of

democracy led to the emergence of independent trade unions which separated themselves from their federations and started competing with them. That was the case of Mali, Niger, and Cote d'Ivoire.

South Africa can be cited as a vivid example of how trade unions played the role of political actors in the political transformation of the country. COSATU with more than 2 million members, was the central pillar of the opposition and fight against the Apartheid regime. It actively participated in the ousting of this regime. COSATU later joined the ANC and formed the alliance for the negotiations on the new political leadership.

Trade Unions and the Economic Context

As indicated above, trade union's influence in Africa to secure more and better wages and working conditions for their members has been gradually be deconstructed. The rise of unemployment has led to the development of the informal sector and therefore to a decrease in trade union membership. The social economic environment emerged as a result of the structural adjustment program, forcing African states to disengage itself from many vital sectors and reducing their staff. This led to massive unemployment and the creation of the workers in the informal sector who do not see the reason why they should adhere to such movements (Guseh, 2001).

Trade Unions and Labour Relations

The influence of trade unions in Africa has been difficult to perceive. Apart from participating in the improvement of wage, their influence has been very limited in the fields of labour relations. The advent of the modern state has further weakened the influence of trade unions in the achievement of labor relation goals. Even the right to strike or protest only virtually exists. This is because it has been subordinated to state approval. Liberalism has further weakened and excluded trade unions. How? Governments in Africa, in order to attract investment and also due to the economic predicaments have been forced to suspend, cancel some workers' rights. The massive army of unemployment finally destroyed the small spirit of trade unionism which was still existing. This is because paralyzed by the fear of losing their jobs, workers seem not to adhere to any trade unions. Workers' rights are constantly violated and people instead of looking for their trade unions refer to the state as a referee because they are afraid to be perceived by the management of subversive.

The Problem

Kraus (2007) has pointed out: 'The existing literature on trade unions in Africa tends to focus on the causes of democratization in Africa and assessments of democratic life under the new regimes and to entirely ignore the significance and the historical perspective leading to the creation of trade unions

and other collective actors. ... Scholars have tended to focus on their statistical studies of election outcomes, levels of political liberties, and whether voting was “free and fair” as the key determinants of the state of democracy in Africa – that is, the procedural elements of democracy. Obviously, these are crucial, but... the measure of democracy includes the relative responsiveness of governments to claims upon public resources and access to rule-making institutions by various groups, interest, and collective actors in society. ... The real significance of trade unions is that the factors leading to their creation is partly linked to the democratic life in Africa, is that, they are virtually the only group representing the popular classes that has continuing organizational influence at the national level and poses challenging question about rights of the mass’ access to public resources.

This is to say one of the main factors which led to the emergence of trade unions in Africa was the collective actions they took in Africa for the liberation of African countries. Most political parties or leaders of political movements in sub-Saharan Africa were trade unionists who decided to advance workers’ rights and therefore that of the population too. Their emergence in Africa took this path because during colonial and post-independence times, African countries did not have political parties and when they had, all of them were under the banner of the one-party system where dissented voices could not be heard. Trade Unions were the only main social institutions through which the population could identify themselves and which could carry their voices to be heard.

This is the case of the Teachers’ Trade Unions comprising of the Cameroon Teachers Trade Union, CATTU, the Presbyterian Education Authority Teachers’ Trade Union, PEATTU, the Baptist Teachers’ Trade Union, BATTUC, the Catholic Education Writer Trade Union, CEWOTU and the Teachers Association of Cameroon, TAC, all of which have been trying to organize and control labour relations to defend teachers’ interests. For this study, our focus is on CATTU, the Cameroon Teachers Trade Union. The study intends to determine the effectiveness of this trade union in defending teachers’ corporate interests.

For this study, two assumptions were made. The first is that CATTU, that is, Cameroon Teachers Trade Union, is fully functional and provides the needed services to their members. That is, members of this trade union are satisfied with the services provided by their union. The second assumption is that CATTU is able to organize and control industrial relations in Cameroon. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), industrial relations denotes such matters as freedom of association and the right to organize, right of collective bargaining, of collective agreements, or conciliation and arbitration proceedings, and the machinery for cooperation between the authorities and occupational organizations at various levels of the economy.

Methodology

This section gives details about the data collection procedure and the approach informing it. The case study methodology was used as research design which is one of the designs belonging to the qualitative approach.

The qualitative approach is selected because it responds to the exploratory nature of the study. A single case study was adopted. According to Yin (2014), case study is research design done in order to arrive at a thick description of phenomenon and how people relate to a given phenomenon. In order to do that, I used a purposive and snowball sampling technique as it enabled me to reach data saturation as described by Creswell (2014).

Yin (2014) posited that the case study design is relevant when a researcher is studying phenomena, having an effect or influence on people in the case studied, and ensures that the topic of the study is based on current and relevant issues. As described by Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, and Robertson (2013), a case study is a research design used to study an organizational setting within a time period using data collection techniques that incorporate multiple sources of data. The single case study approach is important to my research because of my focus is on one labour union. My case study design was consistent with similar research papers about labour unions conducted by Nana (2017) who used a multiple case study.

Fifteen (15) informants were interviewed for this study. The selection criteria was based on the fact that they should be members of a trade union. In this case all of them were members of CATTU. The second criteria was that they should have been a member of the union for at least a year. This information was verified through the participant I used as snow ball. Out of the 15 participants 5 were women and the other 10 men. Each of them has averagely 10 years of teaching experience. Initially, 25 participants were selected for my study but only 15 of them made themselves available. The third criterion was payment of membership fees. All the respondents up to recently have been paying their membership.

Colaizzi 1978 phenomenological qualitative data analysis was used gather and interpret data. In-depth Interviews were used to collect data. This method of analysis makes it possible to make connections between statements of various interviewees centered around the topics in the interview guide, as well as identify emerging unanticipated themes (Guest et al., 2012). The primary focus in this article is on teachers as members of the CATTU trade union. So interviewing them was the only way to understand and determine if their trade union was effective.

Findings and Analysis

I proceeded by transcribing the data. Once this step done, I grouped the data into themes. From this step, main themes started to be visible. They include themes like counselling, absence of union culture, mediation, lack of financial autonomy, payment of wages.

Research Question

The central research question was: “What are the services CATTU provides to their members in Cameroon?” Five main themes emerged from this question namely: counselling, payment of wages, lack of financial autonomy, ineffectiveness of Trade Union, Amicale of Teachers, and mediation.

Emergent theme one: Counselling

When asked to list some of the services provided by their trade unions, all respondents said that counselling was one of the first functions their trade union performs. The trade union has representatives in each school and the later were in charge in recruiting members and later giving them directions about the trade union and why it was important to join the membership.

One respondent said “ As soon as I was posted after graduation, one of my colleagues who is among the leaders of CATTU in my region brought me closer to himself in order to create some awareness about the existence and importance of adhering to the trade union, especially as a young staff just coming into the profession. He reminded me of all the trade union and the government are working on, to make sure that there is an amelioration in the working conditions and remuneration of teachers. This, he intended, should serve as an encouragement for me to carry out my professional duties to the fullest of my ability and capacity””

Emergent Theme Two: Payment of Wages

Once recruited as government teachers, they approach you and invite to be a member and give you the reason why you should join the union. Having done this, the only time they could hear about their trade union was in relation to the payment of their increment. For them, this was the central area where they felt the impact of their trade union.

One respondent said: “In my ten years of teaching, apart from paying my union dues, I did not have any real relationship with the leaders of the trade union nor the ability to take part in meetings. Documents to help clarify how the union works are practically unavailable. However, when it came to salary increment discussions and negotiations with the government, it gave a tiny glimpse of fact that they were actually doing some work, even though underground.”

Emergent Theme Three: Lack of financial autonomy

The second aspect of the main research question was to know if their trade union was financially self-sufficient. Respondents said very few teachers regularly pay their membership fees. This is as the result of a main factor that is a decline in membership. As time goes, teachers develop a lack of interest in trade union activities and therefore do not see why they should join. Two respondents added that in 7 years of teaching, they did not feel the impact of their trade unions though they have paying membership fees. It is the reason why they stopped renewing their membership. This could also be explained by the fact that respondent said the present the nature of the state does not promote the culture of trade unionism. Instead they think that their colleagues are afraid for their careers and do not want to be seen by the state as subversive.

Emergent theme Four: Ineffectiveness of the Trade Union

When asked about how active their trade union is, some of the participants, mostly females ones said after the payment of their membership during their appointment in their respective schools, they had never heard again about their trade union. As far as they are concerned, they said to have never been involved in any activities of their trade union. They came to realize that their trade union was irrelevant and inexistent. For them their various amicales (meeting for teachers in each school), have more impact in their socio professional lives.

“The meeting where I have felt a sense of belonging is the staff meeting of the various schools I have worked in. But even though these meetings or “amicales” assist teachers in their rapport with members of the administration, financially, and in periods of mourning or celebration, its impact ended only at the level of the school. Its impact couldn’t be felt anywhere else”

Emergent theme Four: Amicale of Teachers

In terms of the financial autonomy of trade unions, participants were all categorical: their trade unions did not have financial autonomy. They instead revealed that there was a socio professional organization within their respective schools which has been financially assisting them during all these years. This organization has been operating like a bank for teachers of each school where they could obtain loans for very reasonable interest rates. This organization according to all participants have helped some of them to build their houses, to prepare for the back-to-school period of relatives. In times of crisis, these organizations has helped to relocate from dangerous zones as in the south and north west of Cameroon by granting loans for urgent transportation and relocation of families to safer locations.

Some of them said this organization has gone beyond its scope that is, its financial attributes, to solve issues partaking to school administration when conflicts arise between school administrators and teachers. It has been the forum where all they could meet and debate on issues affecting their performance in school, some inappropriate behaviours of their colleagues, a forum where they could amicably debate on issues affecting their jobs.

Emergent theme Six: Mediation

To the research question on how their trade union was controlling labour relations, three of the participants said their trade union approach of controlling labour relations that is relations between the teacher and the government, they said the trade union was doing it through mediation. That is in time of crisis or in order to prevent crisis their representatives were mediating between both parties. They cited the instance of February 28, 2018 the trade unions from both the Anglophone and Francophone sub-sections of education had a meeting chaired by the Minister of Higher Education, a representative of the Prime Minister, The Minister of Employment and Vocational training, the Ministry of Basic Education, The Minister of Secondary Education, The Minister of Public Service and Administrative Reforms, among others. The meeting was about resolving issues which include the following:

1. The information on the immediate grievances of indignant teachers.
2. the integration of part time or contract teachers and secondary school teachers with regard to the level of progress of the contractualization and integration of teachers.
3. Payment of teachers advanced salaries and an advancement of lump sums of salaries.
4. Payment of dues owed examiners and markers of official examinations.
5. Transfer of teachers to North West and South West regions.

This meeting was called, according to the participants, as a result of their trade union negotiations with government authorities on how to tackle teacher's issues. They have been calling the government's attention on these issues and needed the government to come out with concrete solutions. This meeting according to the respondents yielded positive results though partially because the government took series of measures to make sure that some of these issues were addressed. The other two participants had a different point of view on that because they have been having issues. In fact their salaries were cut for no reason for a period of six and nine months without any reason. The reason being advanced was that they have been absent for a year without any justification. After getting to the human resource department of their ministry, they discovered no report had been written against them. Unfortunately,

they could not get any help from their trade union who could do nothing about it. Only their immediate bosses had to write to the Ministry clearing their name of any wrongful accusations of absence. However, due to procedures for reinstatement, they had to live for more than 8 months without salaries. For them they did benefit from any assistance from their trade union and have since stopped paying their membership dues.

Conclusion

The political economy of African countries is greatly affecting the development of trade unions in Africa. The laissez faire economy has tremendously affected the labour relations and the pattern of development of industrial trade unions in Cameroon. This is because the paternalistic approach of post-colonial states had made in such way that people are afraid of belonging to trade unions. This approach has participated in destroying the union culture that was observed before the independence. Consequently membership in industrial unions has declined, leaving them just with few members. This state of affairs had equally narrowed down the scope of trade unions, whose actions are limited by, and controlled by the government. Industrial trade unions had accepted that their members should work within average working conditions and just focus their battle on either the benefits their members seem to be entitled or just the promises made by government to better off the situation. In this context, trade unions need to reinvent an action plan which will permit their members to be feel concerned by their offers.

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