

Wogu Ananaba. The Trade Union Movement in Africa: Promise and Performance

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The author divides the history of trade union movement in Africa into three main periods. The first period covers the era before the end of the Second World War, the second deals with the era between 1945 and 1960, and the third covers what has been happening since 1961. Ananaba's main concern is the third period with the aim of providing a bird's-eye view of what African trade unions have been doing in the pursuit of the principal objective of protecting and improving the economic and social interests of their members since independence.

The statement of the problem is to be found in the introduction of the book. With a concise background information on the tactics of colonial domination which gave vent to the nature and trade union organisations (in both French and British settings) the author demonstrates the reinforcing relationships between the level of industrial activity, the emergency of a working class and the development of the trade union movement in Africa. In this context Ananaba places the trade union movement within a social political and economic framework which is, in turn, profoundly conditioned by colonial and post-independence administrative controls.

It is very interesting to note the historical origins of the trade union movement in Africa. In all cases the legal right for workers to organize themselves to cater for their interests was created by the colonial administration in an effort to regulate the very same right to organize. For instance when in 1930 Lord Passfield, the then British Secretary for the Colonies, urged, through his famous circular letter, colonial governments to take the necessary steps to enact a law authorizing the organisation of trade unions, the intent was more to create control mechanisms than anything else. As Ananaba points out: "The circular was not necessarily inspired by a desire to improve the lot of colonial workers, but by an anxiety that the bitter conflicts which had occurred in the East Indies should not spread to other areas". Control consisting of compulsory registration of trade unions to be carefully guided and supervised.

During the struggle for political independence the trade union movement became the only platform for the colonial peoples in Africa to speak out on basic issues involving not only workers' interests but more importantly human rights. The implication of this trend of development was the attempt to render, through administrative control, the trade unions non-political. The attempt was of course futile. This became a crucial basis for the future relationships which emerged between the trade union movement and the nationalist leaders.

As an activist trade unionist who has been involved at the national, regional and international levels of trade union activities Wogu Ananaba can rightly lament: "Bona fide trade union organisations have ceased to exist in many countries, and have been replaced by outfits created or sponsored by governments, politicians or military leaders. Trade unionists have been arrested and jailed without trial; some have been detained for months or years, and some have been shot in cold blood. There are probably more African trade unionists in jail or in detention, killed or driven into exile by independent African countries than was the case during the whole period of colonial rule" (p. 6).

These are disturbing statements which are however objective reflection of the African situation. The author has a strong point. It is in the explanations advanced by the author that the weaknesses of the analysis become glaring. In as much as one cannot be complacent with the unsatisfactory role played by post-colonial governments, it will be also begging the question to argue that failure to accept and implement the so-called "Westminster-style democracy" has been the root cause of most of Africa's problems. This argument is particularly not illuminating, and indeed distorts or conceals important aspects of the relationship between trade unions and the state apparatuses in Africa. The author fails to point to the existence of contractory processes and forces as well as the sources and consequences of conflict in the neo-colonial society.

In the context of capitalism with its expanding and colusive stances between capital and the state, trade union activity can rightly be viewed as a medium of control by the working class over their position and conditions in the production process. The implication here is that the state cannot be viewed as a 'neutral' element in the conflict between management and workers. Wogu Ananaba fails to bring this important aspect into his analysis.

In spite of this flaw the volume under review is an important contribution to our understanding of Labour movement in Africa. The book is analytically structured into two parts. Part one is an informative survey of the general trade union situation on regional basis (north, south, east, west and central). The author offers case studies on Lesotho and Liberia as well as examines such continental trade union organisations as the African Regional Organisation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), All-African Trade Union Federation (AATUF), African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC), and Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). Part two deals with what trade unions in Africa have been doing in the different areas of trade union work, factors affecting and influencing their activities and prospects and problems of trade union movements.

Ananaba has written a very basic and useful text which makes very pleasant reading. This book has a bright prospect of becoming indispensable to every serious student of Trade Union History in Africa.

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