

# UNION COMMITMENT AS A PREDICTOR OF MEMBER PARTICIPATION IN UNION ACTIVITIES

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*This study examined the relationship between union commitment and union participation. It also attempted to determine the most important dimension of union commitment in explaining union participation. Data were gathered through a survey of transportation union members in Malaysia. Correlation and regression analyses were used to examine the relationship. Findings showed that dimensions of union commitment, namely membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, belief in unionism, and pride and confidence to union, were correlated with union participation. However, the regression result indicated that only union loyalty was found to be the most significant factor that explained union participation. Implications of the findings are also discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Like many other countries in East Asia, Malaysia practices a tripartite industrial relation system. The involvement of three parties, namely government, employer, and trade union in many employment aspects have been affecting not only matters of quality of work life (QWL), but also national human and social development. In Malaysia, there are two congresses that represent all trade unions in this country, i.e. Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and Congress of Unions and Employees of Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS). MTUC is the alliance of trade unions for the private sector while CUEPACS for private sector. Understanding of their participation and intervention is helpful to people interested in understanding Malaysia's human and social development.

According to MTUC, the total number of trade unions and their memberships has been on the increase over the years. This has affected the bargaining power of trade unions. As noted by Freeman and Medoff (1984), union's ability in influencing the workplace is reflected in their bargaining power, stemming from their ability to disrupt the supply of labour in pursuance of their member's interests.

There have been some differences in Malaysia's industrial relations from those in other countries (Jomo & Todd, 1994; Suan, 2003), such as differences with respect to various restrictions to join and form unions, strict legislation on industrial actions, freedom of speech, minimum wage implementation, and managerial prerogatives. In consequences to these, both psychology and industrial relation researchers must play their role in order to paint a clearer picture of Malaysia's industrial relations.

Legally speaking, in Malaysia, employees have the right to form and join trade unions (see Section 4 of the Industrial Relations Act 1967). To the extent that union members recognise potential costs as reasons for retaining membership, we could expect them to develop commitment to the union. The issue of union commitment is beginning to receive much attention among industrial-organisational psychology and industrial relation scholars who strive to understand human behaviour as it relates to the workplace. For many academics and researchers, the level of worker commitment to the union is believed to be fundamental to perceived strength, internal governance, and effectiveness, and effectiveness of the union (Fullagar, Gordon, Gallagher, & Clark 1995).

According to Jomo and Todd (1994), Malaysian unions have generally failed to develop sufficient bargaining power to be able to obtain substantial improvements for their members to counter government restrictions on labour movements. Moreover, Malaysia's industrial relations have been characterised by extensive state control guaranteeing a high level of managerial prerogative within the workplace, minimal reported conflict, and very little bargaining power for labour (Jomo & Todd, 1994). As a result of various restrictions towards labour activities, this research is carried out to further determine the factors that influence union strength.

Hence, the objective of this study is to find out the relationship between union commitment and union participation among Malaysian trade unionists.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Organisational Commitment**

Commitment is a key ingredient in human resource management (HRM), and it can be defined as the relative strength of an individual's identification with involvement in an organisation (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). According to Spector (2000), despite several different definitions of commitment, they generally agree that it reflects attachment of the individual to the organisation. Review of the relevant literature suggested that studies of organisational commitment are generally based on the work of Mowday et al. (1979), who

define commitment in terms of three related factors: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation's goals and values, (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation, and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation.

### **Union Commitment**

A major contribution towards the conceptualisation of union commitment is made by Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson and Spiller (1980), who defined union commitment as the extent to which an individual has a desire to retain membership in, exert effort for, and identify with the objectives of his or her union. On that basis, Gordon et al. (1980) categorised union commitment into four dimensions, namely, union loyalty, willingness to work for the union, responsibility to the union, and belief in unionism. Union loyalty denotes a sense of pride in the unions and reflects the exchange of relationship with the union. The union members, in exchange for the gratification of the various needs and gratification, and the provision of benefits, develop attitudes of loyalty to the union. Responsibility to the union refers to the degree of willingness to fulfill the day-to-day obligations and duties of a member in order to protect the interests of the union. Willingness to work for the union reflects the willingness of a member to expend extra energy in the service of the union. Belief in unionism is related to belief in the values and goals of unions which supports the concept of ideological conformity.

Peat (2001) has considered union commitment to be both a process and a relation of employees in three ways:

- (1) it is a collective commitment, a way of thinking that develops through the individuals in the group interacting with each other and opposing groups in situations that are peculiar to workers as employees;
- (2) it is a commitment that has its main point of reference in the situation and objective interests of workers as a group in capitalist society and not the stated subjective interests of individual workers; and
- (3) it is fundamentally a process, a movement from wherever a group commitment is, to the level of commitment appropriate to its situation.

### **Union Participation**

Kelly and Kelly (1994) defined union participation as the behavioural involvement of members in the operation and activities of the union, including participation in administrative and democratic structures, day-to-day discussion of union affairs with fellow members, reading union literature, and taking part in union campaigns and industrial actions. Furthermore, Kelly and Kelly (1994)

found two dimensions of union participation, which are easy participation and difficult participation. Easy participation refers to activities that require only limited effort such as discussing union affairs with colleagues, reading union journal or magazine, and voting in elections. Difficult participation, on the other hand, includes more demanding activities such as speaking at union meetings, being a union delegate at a national union meeting, and standing as an elected union official.

### **Relationship between Union Commitment and Union Participation**

Participation in union activities has consistently been posited as the main consequence of union commitment (Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Tan & Aryee, 2002). Heshizer and Lund (1997) examined union commitment and union participation of 199 union officers and activists. They divided union commitment into two, namely, normative commitment (ideologically based or moral attachment to the union) and instrumental commitment (calculative/reward based and cost-benefit based attachment). They found that union members with high levels of normative commitment were more involved in the union and were more willing to engage in union activities requiring personal sacrifice and time than were members with high instrumental levels of union commitment. It can be concluded from this that members would tend to participate in union activities because they are more ideologically and morally attached to the union than because of the benefits the union can offer.

Redman and Snape (2004) examined union commitment as one of the antecedents of member's intent to participate in UK fire service unionists. Participation in union activities was differentiated into three categories:

- (a) rank-and-file activities – union low-key activity;
- (b) militant activities – taking part in industrial actions, attending union rally and helping in union campaigns; and
- (c) standing for union offices, which concerns with standing for union office and union delegates.

The result of this study showed that affective commitment has a positive impact on all three dimensions of union participation. Affective commitment refers to the extent union members develop psychological ties to the union, based on perceived costs or internalised feelings of obligation to the union.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this study, union commitment is the independent variable while union participation is the dependent variable.

To meet the research objective, a survey was employed in which questionnaires were distributed to trade unions members of two trade unions in transportation, namely, in providing bus services. For the first union, a sample of 52 members was drawn from 60 union members, and for the second union a sample, of 165 members was drawn from 280 members (Sekaran, 2000). The sample size, therefore, consisted of 214 union members, and they were all given a questionnaire each to complete. Of 214 respondents, only 107 responded while 11 failed to completely respond, providing a valid response rate of 48%.

To measure union commitment, an instrument developed by Gordon et al. (1980) was used. It contains 30 questions that measured four subsystems, which include union loyalty, responsibility to the union, willingness to work for the union, and belief in unionism. The dependent variable was measured using an instrument developed by Kelly and Kelly (1994). There were 10 items to measure member's participation in union activities.

Data collected were then analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 12. Since this research intended to examine the relationship between union commitment and union participation, a number of relevant analyses were utilised, such as descriptive analysis, factor analysis, reliability test, correlations, and regression analysis.

### **Factor Analysis Result**

As depicted in Table 1.1, new dimensions of union commitment were identified after factor analysis. They were labeled membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, belief in unionism, and pride and confidence in union. As shown, the Varimax rotation of 30 items has produced five dimensions that account for 73.9% of the total variance. The total variance of the new dimensions (membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, belief in unionism, and pride and confidence in union) were 17%, 16.4%, 15.2%, 12.3%, and 12.3%, respectively.

The results of the Principle Component Analysis for union participation variable are presented in Table 1.2. As shown, the Varimax rotation of 10 items has produced three factors that account for 74% of the total variance. A factor loading of at least 0.6 was used. The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (*KMO*) value is 0.84, which showed the adequacy of samples. No item was deleted in this variable. These three new dimensions were labelled as rank-and-file and union office, normal participation, and radical participation. The total variances of these three new dimensions were 28%, 23.3%, and 23.7%, respectively.

**Table 1.1: Varimax Rotated Factor of Union Commitment (n = 107)**

Items and Factor Description	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
<b>Membership and Efforts towards Union</b>					
The membership wants has importance to the union	.684				
Members responsibility to see that other members <i>live up to</i> all the terms of the Articles of Agreement	.729				
Prepared to take the time and risk of filing grievance.	.749				
Willing to put in a great deal of effort	.806				
<b>Union Loyalty</b>					
A sense of pride being a part of the union		.736			
Plan to be a member of the union the rest of the time		.792			
The unions problems		.767			
Members of the union are expected to have a strong personal commitment to the union		.693			
<b>Responsibility to the Union</b>					
The union member must <i>live up to</i> all terms of the Articles of Agreement			.700		
Responsibility to see to it that management <i>live up to</i> all the terms of the Articles of Agreement			.786		
<i>Keep ears open</i> for information that might be useful to the union			.848		
Members duty to support or help another worker to use the grievance procedure			.705		
<b>Belief in Unionism</b>					
Loyalty to the union, not to the work				.836	
It does not matter if I do not belong to a union				.844	
Can work in a unionised company as long as the type of work is similar				.739	

(continued Table 1.1)

**Pride and Confidence in Union**

Loyalty toward the union	.722
Confidence and trust in most members of my union	.829
Tell friends the union is a great organisation to be a member of	.770

Eigen Value	7.0	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.3
Variance (100%)	38.9	10.1	9.6	8.2	7.1
Cumulative Variance	38.9	49	58.6	66.8	73.9
Kaiser-Mayer Olkin (KMO)	0.83				

**Table 1.2: Varimax Rotated Factor of Union Participation (n = 107)**

Items and Factor Description	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
<b>Rank-and- file and Union Office</b>			
Discuss union affairs with colleagues	.81		
Read a union journal or magazine	.78		
Be a union delegate at a national union meeting or conference	.72		
Stand as an elected union official (if the opportunity arises)	.62		
<b>Normal Participation</b>			
Speak at union meetings		.71	
Attend union meetings		.84	
Vote in union elections (if they take place)		.84	
<b>Militant Participation</b>			
Attend a union rally or demonstration (if one is held)			.74
Take part in industrial action, e.g. strikes (if any action takes place)			.86
Help with union campaigns or elections			.60
Eigen Value	5.0	1.4	1.0
Variance (100%)	28	23.3	23.7
Cumulative Variance	50.1	63.9	74
Kaiser-Mayer Olkin (KMO)	.84		

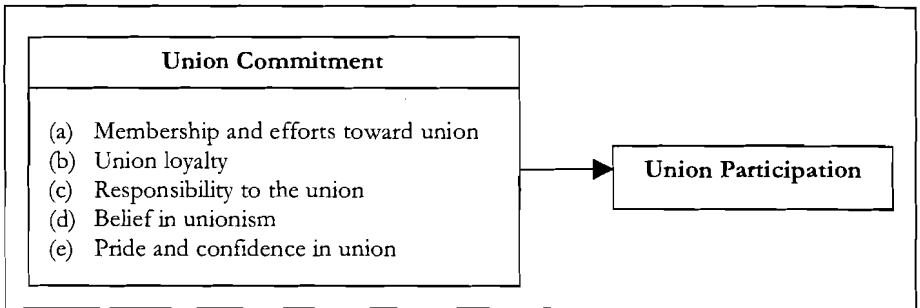
**Reliability Result**

All the dimensions of union commitment and union participation have acceptable reliability values. The reliability results are as follows: membership

and efforts towards union (0.84), union loyalty (0.85), responsibility to the union (0.85), belief in unionism (0.81), pride and confidence to union (0.80), and union participation (0.89).

### Research Framework

The independent variable is union commitment that consists of four dimensions, namely, membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to work for the union, belief in unionism, and confidence in union. The dependent variable is union participation. Relationships of the variables for this study are depicted in the Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1.1: Research framework of union participation**

## FINDINGS

### Respondent Demographics

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the frequency distribution and percentages of respondents, which are indicated in Table 1.3. Respondents were mostly male (89.8%). More than a third of the respondents (38.0%) were between 35-44 years old and 30.6% were between 45-54 years old. Furthermore, almost half possessed SRP/PMR, while a third of them possessed the SPM certificate (29.6%). With respect to length of service, almost a third of the respondents (27.6%) worked in their respective organisation for less than five years. As indicated in the table, only 35.7% of the respondents have become union members for less than five years.

### Correlations between Union Commitment and Union Participation

Table 1.4 shows that all four dimensions of union commitment, namely, membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union,



belief in unionism, and pride and confidence in union have significant and positive correlations with union participation. This supports the hypothesis that union commitment affects union participation.

As indicated in Table 1.5, the *R* square value of .621 indicates that 62.1% of the variance in union participation was significantly explained by the four dimensions of union commitment, i.e. membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, belief in unionism, and pride and confidence in union. However, out of these four, only three dimensions of union commitment were significant predictors of union participation, i.e. membership and efforts towards union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, and belief in unionism. The strongest predictor with a beta value of .395 is union loyalty.

**Table 1.3: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 107)**

Demographic Profile		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	88	89.8
	Female	10	10.2
Age Group	Less than 24	11	11.2
	25-34 years	17	17.3
	35-44 years	38	38.8
	45-54 years	30	30.6
	55-64 years	1	1
	Over than 65	1	1
Highest Education	Primary school	15	15.3
	SRP/PMR	44	44.9
	SPM	29	29.6
	STPM	1	1
	Diploma/Degree	6	6.1
	Others	3	3.1
Job Tenure	Less than 5	27	27.6
	6-10 years	20	20.4
	11-15 years	26	26.5
	16-20 years	25	25.5
Union Tenure	Less than 5	35	35.7
	6-10 years	23	23.5
	11-15 years	22	22.4
	16-20 years	18	18.4

**Table 1.4: Correlation Coefficients between Dimensions of Union Commitment and Union Participation (n=107)**

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
Membership and efforts toward union (a)	-	.535**	.486**	.332**	.467**	.603**
Union loyalty (b)		-	.518**	.450**	.443**	.702**
Responsibility to the union (c)			-	.334**	.404**	.555**
Belief in unionism (d)				-	.259**	.518**
Pride and confidence in union (e)					-	.410**
Union participation (f)						-

\*\* p < 0.05

**Table 1.5: Multiple Regression Analysis of Union Commitment Dimensions on Union Participation**

Variable Entered	Union Participation				
	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.149	.308		.484	.630
Membership	.246	.083	.244*	2.964	.004
Loyalty	.361	.079	.395*	4.578	.000
Responsibility	.146	.072	.163*	2.040	.044
Belief	.166	.059	.204*	2.806	.006
Confidence	.003	.075	.003	.034	.973

Dependent Variable: Union Participation

R Square: 0.621

F: 30.173

R: 0.788

\*p < 0.05

## DISCUSSION

The results indicate that there are positive and significant correlations between all dimensions of union commitment (namely, membership and efforts toward union, union loyalty, responsibility to the union, belief in unionism, and pride and confidence to union) with union participation. This means that there is tendency for members to participate in union activities when they are committed to their union. Additionally, the regression analysis revealed four dimensions of union commitment significant in explaining union participation. The most

significant dimension was union loyalty, followed by belief in unionism, efforts toward union, and responsibility to the union.

Support for the relationship between union commitment and union participation is in agreement with Heshizer and Lund (1997), where it was found that ideological and moral attachment to the union is more important in influencing union participation than benefits based attachment. The present study's findings were also in line with Redman and Snape (2004) who found a positive association between affective commitment, which refers to psychological ties with the union and union participation. Furthermore, the findings of this study are also parallel to those of Kelloway and Barling (1993), who found significant correlations between union loyalty, willingness to work for the union and responsibility to the union with union participation.

The present study also revealed that union loyalty, which is reflected in member's sense of pride to the union, intent to continue union membership, sense of caring about union problems, and personal commitment to the union, is an important predictor of union participation. Therefore, it can be concluded that members who have favourable perceptions towards the union would participate actively in union activities.

Besides union loyalty, belief in unionism, membership towards union, and responsibility to the union are also important for union participation. Based on these results, it can be suggested that those who believe the importance of the union and the role it plays in workplace relations will have more tendency to participate in union activities. On the other hand, members who do not understand or are not clear about the role of the union will not be interested to participate in union activities. In addition to belief in unionism, membership and efforts towards union were also important for union participation. Factors underlying this dimension were related to membership willingness to participate by agreeing with the management, by being willing to file grievance and by putting in the extra effort for the union. All these behaviours reflect the member's willingness to ensure a good union-management relation. Therefore, members who know the importance of these dimensions will be willing to put the extra effort for the union to work effectively, and for management to *live up* to all terms in their agreement with union.

With respect to responsibility to the union, members who feel that they are responsible would engage in activities to make the union more effective in dealing with, management, by, for example, keeping their ears open for information that might be useful to the union, and supporting other workers in grievance procedures. Such behaviours are pertinent as loyal members to protect the interest of the union so that the union can work effectively on their behalf. This is in line with Tetrick (1995) who noted that responsibilities to the union were strongly related to union participation.

In sum, members who have high commitment will participate in union activities because they are loyal, responsible, and they believe in union activities. When employees perceive that their union is committed to improve conditions in the workplace, members will be committed with the union and therefore participate.

## CONCLUSION

This study has met the objective as outlined earlier and it was found that union loyalty, ownership, responsibility and beliefs, are important dimensions of union commitment that is explained by union participation.

By uncovering the influence of union commitment on union participation by members, it is hoped that the present study would be beneficial to the academic and industrial relations community in a way that it is able to furnish information with regards to what makes members willing to participate in union activities within the context of Malaysian industrial relations.

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