

The Growth of Trade Unions under British Colonialism -  
A Comparative Study

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Britain brought to its colonies a set of Western attitudes toward the appropriate role and status of trade unions. On September 17, 1930, Lord Passfield (formerly Sidney Webb), Secretary of State for the Colonies issued a directive, urging all colonial governments to take appropriate measures to encourage the existence of trade unions. Lord Passfield said: "I regard the formation of such associations in the Colonial Dependencies as a natural and legitimate consequence of social and industrial progress, but I recognize that there is a danger that, without sympathetic supervision and guidance, organizations of labourers without experience of combination for any social or economic progress, may fall under the domination of disaffected persons, by which their activities may be diverted to improper and mischievous ends. I accordingly feel that it is the duty of Colonial Governments to take such steps as may be possible to smooth the passage of such organizations, as they emerge, into constitutional channels. As a step in this direction it is, in my opinion, desirable that legislation on the lines of Section 2 and 3 of the Trade Union Act 1871 should be enacted in all Dependencies, where it does not already exist, declaring that trade unions are not criminal, or unlawful for civil purposes, and also providing for the compulsory registration of trade unions".(1) This directive was to remain standard British policy towards trade unions in the colonies and provided the "raison d'etre" which became known as the "British Model".

The most important operative component of this model was a notion of social pluralism, the concept that unions are to be received as private interest groups and that their appropriate role is to seek to maximize the social and economic advantages of their membership. British policy, from 1930 onwards, viewed colonial trade union development as part of an over all development of democratic institutions aimed at leading the colonies slowly towards "self-government" and economic viability. (Independence was not to become an issue until after World War II). The trade unions were to be the training ground for new concepts - tolerance, compromise and a breeding ground for workers' social education. The trade unions were to demonstrate the effectiveness of democratic institutions before self-government could be attained. They were to be the method of resolving worker-employer conflict in a civilized and orderly manner. Later on, as social and political development increased, other conflict resolving institutions would appear - parties, pressure groups, parliamentary democracy.

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Understood in this way, the British concept of trade unionism is essentially a political one: based on the liberal philosophy which recognizes individual rights in a pluralistic society. In industrial terms there are two fundamental propositions:

- 1) that a worker has the right to a say in the determination of his wages and conditions of employment;
- 2) that this right can be made effective only by combination.

Broadly speaking, it can be said that the "British Model" has been relevant only where these concepts are understood and accepted, as in the West Indies, Malta, India, Malaya, West Africa.(2).

### Development

Trade unions under colonial rule came into being as vehicles of protest against working conditions, and in this they were no different from unions in any part of the world. Generally, the employers involved were foreign and the working conditions were attributable not only to the disorders and uncertainty caused by the growth of money economies and commercial production but equally to outside interventions. The history of colonial trade unions to date is accordingly as much one of reaction to imperial rule as to working conditions.(3) These trade unions developed as a response to various stimulants: tribal associations, job contact, industrial conflicts, political campaigns, foreign labour movements, and labour administration.

"Before employed labour develops ... there is no breeding ground for trade unionism. But there have always been some social institutions: clan unions or tribal associations in West Africa which have performed some of the provident functions of the early British unions, Chinese welfare societies and secret societies in Malaya and the Far East, the Indian improvement societies amongst contract labourers in Malaya, the "protest" movements in the West Indies that emerged in societies like the Trinidad Workingmen's Association which developed both political and industrial functions".(4)

In Malta too, benefit societies preceded trade union organization and the former being Catholic fraternal organizations of mutual assistance, their existence was guaranteed by the support which the Church authorities gave them. With very few exceptions, attempts at setting up trade unions were met with Church hostility rather than Imperial sanction.(5)

However, in the tensions that occurred between workers and employers, such organizations as existed throughout the Empire were powerless to act since they had little authority to negotiate. Most types of trade union, therefore, came into being

out of a direct confrontation of workers and employers, or else out of collusion between workers and politicians. Colonial governments were to assist trade unions as they came into existence, Lord Passfield directed, but in nearly all of Britain's colonies, the first trade unions were either made up of European workers or were organized through the efforts of the latter. For example, in Nigeria, one of the first properly constituted trade unions was the Association of European Civil Servants in Nigeria.(6) In Malta, trade unionism made significant progress early in this century through the efforts of Matthew Giles, Henry Ear and Fr. Plater, all British citizens.(7)

In most colonies, government workers and transport workers led the way in union organization. Government employees were the first to organize successfully. Both in Malta and in Ghana, they had engaged in informal collective action and bargaining at the time of World War I.(8) In East Africa, things took longer to get moving. The main reason seems to be the dominant position of the settler communities whose influence over the colonial government was similar to that exercised by the settler communities of South Africa. In fact, a general strike organized in 1930 by the Young Kikuyu Association led to the massacre of some 150 people by the Colonial authorities under pressure from the white settler-employers.(9) It was not until 1937 that the first known trade union appeared in East Africa.(10)

Such strikes and many lesser ones throughout the Empire were organized by groups of workers without formal unions. More important, industrial agitation among colonial subjects was not only disapproved of, it was frequently identified with rebellion, even though no found method of negotiation existed. The Governor of Sierra Leone described the 1926 railway strike as a revolt against the Government by its own servants. In Nigeria, the African Civil Service Association did not only publicly disapprove of strike action but it even lacked the courage to make threats in furtherance of its demands.(11)

Trade unions in the colonies did not really flourish until World War II. There are two main reasons for this. First, after World War II, the British Government set out to encourage them as foundations for orderly industrial relations and second, irrespective of how hard it tried, the British Colonial administration could not keep pace, either with the economic upheaval following World War II or with the nascent nationalist movements' demands for self-determination.

### Legal Regulation

In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, industrial legislation appeared after trade unions had come into being. Though this is also partially true of some colonies, in the vast majority of them, Labour or Trade Union Ordinances formed the framework within which unions grew.

In Malta the first known trade union was born in 1885 while the first Trade Union Ordinance appeared in 1929. However, it was not until after the emergence of the General Workers' Union in 1943 that a Trades Disputes Ordinance (1945) appeared. (12) The GWU leadership at a general meeting in Msida (1943) pledged to avoid strikes for the duration of the war provided facilities for negotiation and arbitration were made available. (13) The interesting point here is that it was a trade union which agitated for the establishment of industrial relations machinery.

The typical colonial Trade Unions Ordinance defined a trade union as:

"any combination, either temporary or permanent, of X or more employees or of Y or more employers, the principal purposes of which are, under its constitution, the regulation of the relations between employees and employers, whether such combination would or would not, if this Ordinance had not been enacted, have been deemed to have been unlawful combination by reason of some one or more of its purpose being in restraint of trade." (14)

The Labour Department, in taking a direct role in the creation of trade unions was laying down their scope and field of action. Thus, the Colonial Government, while on the one hand encouraging trade unions, on the other they were making sure that they remain under their control. First, by its involvement in the determination of wages and conditions, the government could take the edge out of a dispute, and second, by laying down Trade Union Ordinances specifying the method and channels the unions had to use in any collective bargaining, they were laying down the rules by which the game could be played. For example, the Labour Department in both East and West Africa had the following responsibilities: to keep under constant review the wage rates and living and working conditions of the lower paid workers; to encourage the establishment of negotiating machinery; to supervise the machinery of workmen's compensation under the 1940 Ordinance; to review periodically labour legislation, and to ensure that obligations under the International Labour Convention were honoured. The Labour Officer's functions certainly included the encouragement of "responsible" trade unions, but the very word responsible begged the question of the wholesomeness of Government patronage in the Trade Union field.

Colonial government confusion towards trade unions in the colonies are best demonstrated by the Kenya case. Kenya's legislation in 1945, which protected the rights of workers to organize, was all dressed up with nowhere to go since, at the end of the war, an African trade union had not yet been formed. For the next two years the Labour Department behaved like a mother awaiting the birth of a child. Yet when an offspring appeared in 1947 the Labour Department regarded it as a monster. In that year, a dramatic strike in Mombasa involved 15,000 African workers, nearly the entire African work force in the area. The strike was led by Chage Kebachia who attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to found an African Workers' Federation during the unrest.

Although he apparently argued for a trade union divorced from politics, the colonial authorities had a deeply ingrained suspicion of the motives of centre controlled unions. In the end Chage Kebachia was deported.(15)

Two years later, the Government refused to give legal recognition to a newly formed East African Trade Union Congress (EATUC), on the grounds that it was unrepresentative of workers within a specific industrial area and the law did not in fact make allowance for such unions. Singh and Kubai, its organisers, were soon arrested as being officers of an illegal trade union. Along with these trade unionists, over three hundred workers were arrested and in Nairobi, the Government mounted a show of strength using armed police while the Army and RAF between them covered the city with armoured cars, trucks, bren-gun carriers and planes.(16)

In the view of the Labour Department the strike broke down due to the careful preliminary planning of those concerned with law and order. However, the industrial features of the 1950 strikes in Kenya were no different from those of similar strikes in other colonies. In some colonies, especially in Asia, the government, by identifying and persecuting trade union leaders as Communist, succeeded in delaying, and in certain cases aborted, the effective organization of trade unions by several years, and meanwhile helped to precipitate popular resistance. It is important to note here that the government had a dual role to play. It was the legislative authority from whose role flowed all labour legislation and it was a major, if not the major, employer. For this reason the Government, in the interests of its political and business strategy, and by adopting a paternalistic stance, took the initiative in the development of trade unions. However, it did not hesitate to revoke or undermine that same legislation which the government itself had promulgated, in an attempt to stifle industrial conflict.

In Malta, much of the labour legislation passed was the direct result of local political activity within the framework of self-government. In this sense, labour legislation in these Islands during the colonial period was designed and expanded according to the needs of internal industrial relations rather than to Colonial Government dictates. This does not mean that the British authorities did not attempt to mould the Maltese Trade Unions after the fashion of the British "Model".

"Malta rather than fitting the pattern of labour movements in developing nations comes closer to the Western European patterns, diverse as they may be, and particularly resembles the British movement in a number of ways."(17)

The concept of trade unionism came to the Maltese workers through the medium of British personnel, mainly at the Drydocks. It is significant to note that the first known trade union in 1885, set up by a Mr. Caruana took on a completely secular name - Ghaqda tal-Haddiema, and was later forced to add Kattolici (Catholic), having been accused by some priests and the Mizzi faction of

aiming at Protestantizing the Maltese. Under further pressure from the Bishop, the union accepted the services of a spiritual director appointed by the Curia.

"Among the unions organized during this period was the Imperial Government Workers Union, organized by Henry Ear, in July 1916. Composed of dockyard workers, it was kept alive and strengthened by English employees brought to the dockyards between 1915 and 1918."(18)

Four years later, another union was to be born out of the drydocks; this was Branch No. 3 of the Workers' Union in England. Other unions, such as the Malta Union of Teachers, at their birth became members of the British parent body.(19)

Thus the moulding of colonial trade unions on the British "Model" stemmed from two directions: legal regulation and connections with the British Trade Union movement. However, Colonial labour legislation had one important difference from similar legislation in the United Kingdom. While such legislation in the colonies protected trade unions from prosecutions for conspiracy, "no formal right to freedom of association was asserted."(20) The Colonial Government could declare overnight that a trade union had ceased to legally exist. Once this takes place, union leaders would be in danger of arrest and prosecution if they persist with their activities. The Colonial authorities, while expecting trade unions to play by the rules, they for their part employed dubious methods, as the Kenya case described above demonstrates. Further, while giving protection against prosecution for conspiracy in case of trade union disputes, most early Ordinances contained provisions based on the British Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act to prevent wilful damage of services essential to the life of the community, such as water supplies. After representations from colonial trade unions, the British Trades Union Congress would object to such ordinances, on the grounds that these Ordinances covered too many services and that in any case, protection of essential services should be a normal feature of industrial relations and not separated out into a separate ordinance with penalties.(21)

### Political Involvement

The nationalist unrest which became a common feature of the Empire during the post-war years, could not bypass existing or new native trade unions. Events were to ensure that the gospel of non-political unionism preached by the colonial authorities was to fall on stony ground. First, and negatively, there were few inducements to pure or economic unionism; the Unions were almost everywhere pathetically weak in relation to the employer, confronting a situation of plentiful labour supply with ill-equipped, fragmented and fundless organizations. Second, and more positively, there were good reasons for thinking in terms of political influence on government rather than economic pressuring of private employers: governments were employers and legislators;



they also framed the general economic policies which could be favourable to the workers; above all perhaps, they were, for political and other reasons, more sensitive than private employers. Third, although the unions might be weak for industrial conflict, they were still coherent armies in the context of political underdevelopment. For example, Nbrumah in Ghana quickly grasped the importance of the trade union movement in the ensuing confrontation with the Colonial Government and as we shall see, acted together on an industrial-political platform.

(22) Finally, union members would themselves be naturally reaching out towards radical political activity; uprooted from traditional security and coming to be organized groups at a time when some stage or degree of nationalist unrest was in progress, they could hardly avoid being deeply affected. Tom Mboya in his book "Freedom and After keeps returning to the role of the Kenya Federation of Labour, of which he was General Secretary, in the struggle for independence. He claims and perhaps with some justification that "the trade unions felt that the movement must identify itself with the nationalist cause. If it fails to do this, it runs the risk of being accused of becoming an imperialist agency. A number of trade unionists who were sensitive to this fact and concentrated only on industrial relations suffered this fate."(23) According to Mboya, therefore, the unions had to declare their allegiance to the nationalist struggle not simply by paying lip service to it but also by abetting it in some way. Thus in 1960 Tom Mboya was to proudly claim that it was the federation (KFL) that had fought the battle of African freedom.

(24)

In Ghana, in 1949, an affiliate of the Gold Coast TUC struck for redress of grievances against the Government as employer. This industrial action was launched at a time when the Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) was agitating for national self-determination and was itself planning to launch a political campaign. The Government in an effort to stem the tide, took repressive action against the members of the union. The CPP came out in support of the workers and their union while at the same time launching its programme of "positive action". The Gold Coast TUC, encouraged by this support, now not only demanded justice for its members but added to its demands the further claim that the no-politics clause for all Civil servants should be relaxed and that the country should be granted immediate dominion status. When the plan went into action, the police picked up both CPP and TUC leaders for inciting an illegal strike. The Gold Coast TUC was de facto suspended.(25) In Malta, prior to the complete cessation of hostilities between the Allies and the Axis powers, the trade unions found themselves, not unwillingly, involved in an important political event - the convening of a National Assembly whose sole purpose was the drafting of a new Constitution for responsible government.(26) It was in the interest of the trade union movement in Malta to ensure that the post-war Constitution should incorporate the political and economic aspirations of their members. Further, though this assembly was not convened in order to establish an anti-government platform, the forces which later sought to sever

all political links with Britain, emerged from it much stronger and unified.

"The Union, together with the Malta Labour Party, formed what was to become known as the Labour Front. This had been formed on the initiative of the Union's (GWU) General Secretary, Reggie Miller and the Leader and General Secretary of the Labour Party, Dr. Boffa and Dom Mintoff respectively. Their sole intention was to use the combined strength of the two organizations to achieve their political aims."(27)

Throughout the rest of the colonial period these two bodies endeavoured to work closely and during negotiations with the Colonial authorities their relationship, though not always co-ordinated, was particularly close. But such a relationship between a political party and a trade union could only exist, in a colonial setting, where the bulk of the Union's membership lay outside the Civil Service. Civil Service Unions and Associations, whatever their sympathies at that point in time, were at a disadvantage. The no-politics clause for Civil Servants made industrial action, when permitted, hazardous. Other public employees' unions also faced similar disadvantages. The GWU for its part was strong in the Admiralty and Services sector, where trade union militancy had always been strong, and the private sector and thus could exert pressure in pursuit of economic-political goals. However, the problem that all unions in Malta faced was the fact that the Colonial Government was by far the largest employer and, therefore, any industrial action resorted to could be termed political. Further, during periods of self-government (1947 - 1958 and 1962 - 64), Maltese Governments have on various occasions involved the Unions on their behalf in disputes with the colonial authorities, knowing full well that the support of the unions was an imperative component for successful Government-to-Government negotiations.(28) But while unions in Malta have been vitally interested in politics, the Colonial Government never took the decisive step of suppressing them. Perhaps one of the reasons for this was their organization.

Where a movement is built on a dominant centre, Governments dare not leave it entirely free unless it voluntarily observes its obligations to its members and to the community. (In reality, the only union in Malta built in this fashion is the GWU). The Colonial Governments suppressed general labour unions in Kenya, Ghana, Malaya and Singapore (in these cases, so-called federations, but functioning more as general labour unions). In Tanganyika and Sarawak the law provided that a general union would be illegal unless its constitution provided for the representation of particular interests amongst the general body of members.(29)

Colonial governments realized that movements constructed from the top downwards may exist to carry out policies which have no relevance to or support from rank and file trade union members. On the other hand, they could carry out policies articulating the



political aspirations of their membership. In both cases, the effectiveness of these policies reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the trade union centre in relation to its membership. The greater their strength, the greater the threat to the ability of the Colonial Government of maintaining control over its colonies.

Contrary to these examples, the General Workers' Union was, since its inception, organized in sections through which particular interests could be represented, although the union as a whole has at all times been capable of bringing the whole island to a halt. Other unions, though members of a confederation, the Confederation of Maltese Trade Unions, throughout the colonial periods remained loosely committed and for various reasons never featured prominently in the post-war colonial conflict.

Broadly speaking, Colonial trade unions appeared on the scene at a time when a general desire for independence was shaking the Empire and therefore they could not escape the involvement such an event demanded. One could say that British influence has been used to encourage non-political trade unionism. It is true that no attempt was made to make support for political party a legal offence but labour officers and government officials not only condemned political action as a dangerous form of trade union activity, but on occasions took harsh measures against trade unions suspected of political intrigue. However, "the tradition of heavy emphasis on political action that was created during the struggle for national independence persisted after political independence was achieved, because traditions tend to outlive the conditions that created them and because in most cases, the political and economic conditions of the new nations operated in the same direction."(30)

Independence brought new roles and new conflicts and where trade unionism has survived, this was generally reflected too in other modern institutions, of which trade unions are but one. However, the financial and organizational weaknesses experienced by colonial trade unions ensured that many of them could not really play a positive role in either the pre- or post-independence period and were eventually eliminated from the industrial scene.

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Notes

1. Ananabe (1969), pp. 21 - 22.
2. Nicholson (1968), pp. 13 - 14.
3. Berger and Ellist (1965).
4. Nicholson (1969), p. 12.
5. Dobie (1967), pp. 80 - 81.
6. Ananabe (1969), Chapter 1.
7. Dobie (1967), p. 81.
8. Koziara (1975), pp. 22, and 23.  
See Austin (1970) for a detailed discussion of trade union development in Ghana.
9. Amsden (1969).
10. Orr (1966), pp. 66 and 67.
11. Ananabe (1969), p. 15.
12. Koziara (1975), p. 27.
13. Koziara (1975), p. 26.
14. Nicholson (1968), p. 15.
15. Amsden (1969), p. 38.
16. Ibid., p. 42.
17. Koziara (1975).
18. Dobie (1967), p. 81.
19. Koziara (1975), p. 102.
20. Nicholson (1968), p. 55.
21. Ibid., p. 16.
22. Austin (1970), pp. 87 - 89.
23. Mboya (1968), p. 51.
24. Ibid., p. 72.

25. Austin (1970), p. 87 - 92.
26. Dobie (1967), pp. 125 - 127.
27. Pirotta (1979), p. 304.
28. Koziara (1975), p. 29.
29. Nicholson (1968), p. 22.
30. Sturnthal (1972), p. 139.



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