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# **The story of the “6% t-shirt”: the hundred day struggle of the Federation of University Teachers’ Associations, Sri Lanka**

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Much has been written, mainly in mainstream media, about the hundred day struggle launched in 2012 by the Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA) of Sri Lanka. This includes details of the main events of the struggle, unraveling the logic behind the main demand of the struggle – an allocation of six percent of GDP for education and the political significance of the struggle. This paper attempts to investigate how it was possible for the FUTA, a loose umbrella organization that represented over forty sister unions of university academics from the Sri Lankan state university system, to launch and sustain a struggle against the then powerful Mahinda Rajapakse government and to transform itself during that time to a social movement. The paper identifies certain key features of the struggle ranging from the nature of the leadership and the membership, the choice of slogans, structures of the organisation to the nature of the responses of the government, which created this unique space for a trade union struggle to evolve into a social movement. In doing so the paper positions the FUTA struggle in the larger socio-political landscape that extended well beyond the space occupied by the traditional trade unionism of the island.

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The orange and black t-shirts with “Save Education” and “6%” printed on its back in black or orange became a sign of pride in Sri Lanka in the year 2012. It was seen regularly from July to September 2012 in newspapers, newscasts, websites and blogs in media not controlled by the government. The “6% t-shirt”, that represented the demand to allocate 6% of GDP for education became a sign of sustained resistance, a collective effort to fight to protect education as a long cherished public good. It was also a symbol of a dream for a better society at a time when the former Sri Lankan government seemed to be governing with no significant challenge to its power either from opposition political parties or civil society except for a few isolated protests from groups affected directly by certain policy initiatives. The t-shirt was the public symbol of the hundred day strike launched in 2012 by the Federation of University Teachers’ Associations, Sri Lanka and the symbol for the four thousand university teachers’ community thereafter.

The FUTA launched its trade union action on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2012<sup>1</sup> demanding an increase of the allocation of funding for education up to 6 percent of GDP<sup>2</sup>, an end

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<sup>1</sup> The immediate history of the FUTA struggle that was initiated on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 as a continuous strike of the academic staff of fourteen state universities can be traced back to the year 2011. The trade union action launched in 2011 was temporarily suspended based on the promises made by the government which, however, were not fulfilled by June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the struggle the allocation was 1.9% and this too was on a downward trend (FUTA

to politicisation of the state university system and an enhancement of pay and benefits of university teachers<sup>3</sup>. While involved in a continuous strike and parallel engaging in a series of rounds of negotiations with different groups of representatives of the government, initially with teams led by the Minister of Higher Education, then with the Secretary to the President and lastly with the powerful Minister of Economic Development who was also the brother of President Manida Rajapakse, the FUTA launched its island-wide public campaign under the umbrella slogan "Save State Education". Trademark silent marches and public rallies were held in the capital Colombo and in other main cities in the island including Jaffna, in the war-affected northern most part of the country. A "Ten Million Signature" campaign took the message of the crisis in education to cities and to suburbs. The FUTA representatives participated in

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Media Statement on the continuous trade union action to be launched on 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2012)

<sup>3</sup> The FUTA Media Statement on the continuous trade union action to be launched and issued on 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012 listed two sets of demands, one asking for an assurance to safeguard and uplift state education and the other insisting that all outstanding measures with regard to recruitment and retention of high quality academics be met. The first set included demands to allocate 6% of GDP for education in the next two years, to reveal the government policy on state funded education, to suspend all reforms initiated until proper consultations are made with the university community and the public and to refrain from politicization of universities and related institutions. In the second set were the demands to establish a Sri Lankan University Academic Service and to increase the basic salary of university teachers by 20%. The FUTA Media Release in response to the UGC and Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors (CVCD) issued on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012 clarified the status of salaries of university teachers stating that the basic salaries had not been increased for sixteen years.

television and radio discussions on the status of education and the trade union struggle that was launched by then. Articles and cartoons<sup>4</sup> on the crisis of education and the struggle by the FUTA appeared in print media on a daily basis. The FUTA maintained a continuous dialogue with university students, education sector trade unions, trade unions representing other sectors, organisations of professionals, religious leaders, political parties of the opposition, and members of the government who were sympathetic to the cause of free education. The FUTA addressed opposition parliamentarians at a meeting organised by the leader of opposition at the parliament itself. Media conferences were held on a regular basis. Conventions under the theme “Saving State Education” were held with the involvement of trade unions, artists and religious communities. Representatives of the FUTA addressed heads of UN and diplomatic missions. Newspapers carried articles written by academics on the issue of education on a regular basis. FUTA members ran several websites and blogs engaging especially with the young generation by providing regular updates on the trade union action. "FUTA Citizen Channel", the publicity arm of the FUTA, posted video clips of various events during the hundred day struggle and produced documentaries which were released

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<sup>4</sup> In an article on "FUTA Struggle: 100 Day Through the Vision of Cartoonists", a good collection of cartoons was published by The Colombo Telegraph on the 6th October 2012. Viewed at <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/trade-union-struggle-nearing-100-days-through-the-vision-of-cartoonists/> on 12th October 2015.

through social media<sup>5</sup>. The culmination of the hundred day struggle was the "Long March" (a five-day relay walk). It started on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 from the southern city of Galle and reached the capital, Colombo on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The one hundred and thirty kilometer walk by the Sri Lankan academics were joined by university students, other trade unions, civil society organisations, religious organisations, political parties and the general public and ended up as a massive procession by the time it reached Colombo. Several days after the completing of the Long Walk, based on several written assurances from the side of the government, the executive committee of the FUTA at a meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2012 decided to suspend its strike action as of 12th October, 2012<sup>6</sup>. The impact of the hundred day trade union action was long felt. The social capital generated by the struggle elevated the leadership of the FUTA to the level of being important opinion makers when it comes to issues of national importance.

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<sup>5</sup> All documentaries of FUTA Citizen Channel can be viewed at

<https://www.youtube.com/user/FUTASRILANKA>

<sup>6</sup> According to the FUTA Press Statement issued on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2012 regarding the suspension of strike action “the government response to the hundred day FUTA trade union action has been in the form of a cabinet note, letter issued by the Secretary to the Treasury and a joint statement regarding the agreement reached by the two parties”. However, it went on to state that the “FUTA takes enormous pride in that it was able to sustain the trade union action for so long despite severe hardship faced by its membership through an unwavering commitment to a higher cause”. It further stated that the FUTA were “equally proud” that the FUTA were able to build such a broad platform in support of FUTA’s campaign. “We stand tall as we were able to as a trade union, to go beyond narrow professional interests and campaign on issues of social importance”, it continued, further.

Most of the leaders of the hundred day struggle who came together under the name “University Teachers for Social Justice” played a prominent role in mobilizing the civil society leadership in particular and the public in general for a change of regime at the presidential election held on the 8<sup>th</sup> January 2015. Allocation of 6% of GDP for education was one of the important promises of the manifesto of the opposition candidate who won the elections. The interim government in its interim budget made a commitment to fund an equivalent of 6% of GDP for education. The new national government that was formed in September 2015 incorporated an allocation of 6% of GDP into its action plan. The t-shirt remains the most famous signifier of the community of Sri Lankan academics up to date.

#### *Aim of the paper*

Much has been written about the hundred day struggle conducted by the FUTA. The legitimacy or the non-legitimacy of the FUTA demands attracted the attention of Sri Lankan intellectuals who commented on the hundred day struggle. The political significance of the FUTA struggle was the focus of several discussions held in the public media<sup>7</sup> as well as in a few academic

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<sup>7</sup> Newspapers in all mediums Sinhala, Tamil and English allocated space for this debate. The English daily, "The Island" took a special interest in this debate. Almost all private radio and television channels allocated air time to debate the FUTA struggle. Given below is a sample of numerous articles published: "The morning after the FUTA strike: the politics of a broader agenda in 2012" by Andi Schubert, The Island 29th April 2012; "Can university teachers bend the Sri Lankan state?" by Ahilan Kadirgamer, Ceylon Today 8th July 2012; "Crisis in the education sector" by Jayantha Danapala and Savithri Goonasekere on behalf of Friday Forum, Colombotelegraph 7th August 2012;

articles<sup>8</sup> written about it. What is missing however is a discussion on the nature of the FUTA trade union action that transformed a strike by mainly middle class union members to a movement that ignited public interest and support in quick time. How was it possible for the FUTA to conduct its five day Long March that attracted thousands of people? What made the demand for 6% of the GDP for education a key promise in the election manifesto of the newly elected president in 2015 and then the action plan of the national government? What is the secret of the success of the FUTA struggle at a time other opposition groups and dissenters were not so successful or failed? This paper attempts to address two specific questions: what is the socio-political space in which the FUTA struggle can be located so as to meaningfully address the above questions, and what made the FUTA led struggle evolve within one hundred days to become a social movement attracting mass scale public interest and support?

#### *Positioning the FUTA in socio-political space*

The only scholarly intervention that has been published so far has discussed the FUTA trade union action within the space of civil society. In a discussion on

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"Demands of university dons: who's gone cuckoo?" by Amal Kumarage Colombotelegraph 9th August 2012; "Education policy and FUTA's mandate: some thoughts" by Jayadeva Uyangoda, The Island 19th August 2012; "From chalkboards to picket lines: the journey of a trade union" by Shamala Kumar, The Island 2nd September 2012; "FUTA strike action and trade unionism of Jaffna University" by Ahilan Kadirgamer, DBSJEYARAJ.COM 15th September 2012; "FUTA march and Pakistan's miracle" by Priyan Dias, The Island 29th September 2012.

<sup>8</sup> H. Amarasuriya (2015)

competing civil society spaces in post-war Sri Lanka. Amarasuriya identifies the FUTA action as one of the most sustained and significant civil protests in Sri Lanka during recent times (2015).

What is meant by civil society has changed over time and the origin of the concept can be traced back to the times of Greek city state. Its meaning has further changed during the age of enlightenment, during the times of classical modernity and now in the post-modern era. Within this changing history, civil society is seen at times simply as the public sphere outside the state or as a network of human relationships separate from the state. Lately after further evolution civil society has been defined as a space between the individual, state and the market, playing a crucial role in cultivating citizenship (Laine, 2014). Here, civil society is not understood simply as a social space demarcated by certain boundaries (e.g. family, the state and the market) but as a social space that is assigned a particular social role (e.g. cultivating citizenship, generating and maintaining values in society). Along with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and with the hegemony of neoliberal economic orthodoxy the notion of civil society took a new turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With the view of the state more as a problem than a solution, the notion of civil society was rediscovered with a new life during this time to replace the state and to play the roles of service provision and social care. NGOs, organizations dependent on external funding, were seen as the vehicles of democratisation and good governance that were considered as essential components of this economic order

(Hulme and Edwards, 1995). "Rise and rise of the NGOs" as phrased by Hulme and Edwards brought NGOs to the forefront and established themselves as the main actors in civil society action. The term civil society earned a new meaning as more or less equivalent to NGOs. This global dominance of NGOs as the main actor in civil society marginalised others who can be positioned also outside the social space of family, the state and the market such as trade unions, farmers and fishermen's associations, vernacular, ethnic, religious and caste associations, within the discourse on civil society (Wickramasinghe 2005). Sri Lanka saw two important trends in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. On the one hand there was a mass scale inflow of funding for NGOs. Gramscian influence in left politics, on the other hand, introduced a new space, 'civil society', for political activism. This is the moment at which the concept and the term civil society which is a constructed and evolved in the West has started appearing frequently in Sri Lankan public discussions<sup>9</sup> (Uyangoda 2011). So what about Sri Lankan civil society before the late 1980s and early 1990s? Was there

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<sup>9</sup> Public intellectuals such as Sunil Wijesiriwardena, Jayadeva Uyangoda, Sunanda Deshapriya, etc. played a prominent role in the late 1980s and early 1990s in constructing the public discourse on civil society in Sri Lanka. Quarterly magazines *Mawatha* and *Pravada* and alternative weekly tabloids *Yukthiaya* and *Ravaya* provided forums for the debates on the importance of strengthening and empowering Sri Lankan civil society which was proposed as an alternative agenda to the traditional left political agenda of capturing state power. Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri who was the president of the FUTA during the hundred day struggle in an article to *Pravada* under the title "An Introduction to New Left Politics" suggested civil society space as the new ground for left politics (*Pravada* February-April Issue - 1995).

one? Wanigaratne is of the opinion that the responses by the general public to felt needs of the society have been a part and parcel of Sri Lankan culture from ancient times far before the invasion of colonials (1997). This activism according to him was conducted by collectives at grassroot level associated with spheres such as religion, irrigation, agriculture, artisan production and welfare. Invasion of colonials, however, seems to have caused a drastic transformation of activity in the public sphere leading to the disappearance of the previous set of actors and the emergence of new set of actors. On the one hand was the emergence of activism of Christian missionary groups and on the other the activism of their Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim counterparts. Along with this, there emerged the formation of movements such as the Buddhist revival movement, temperance movement, labour movement, etc (Wickremasinghe 2001; Wanigaratne, 1997). Amarasuriya identifies the post-war Sri Lanka after the LTTE was defeated in 2009 as the newest era of civil society where the dominance of NGOs is on the decline and Sinhala nationalist and social justice based movements are on the rise (2015). This includes ultra Sinhala nationalist groups that do not tolerate communities of other ethnicities and religions.

The category civil society loses its use value, however, if it could include extremely diverse actors, diverse in time (from ancient times to date) and in space (from emancipatory movements to racist movements) who have not developed a commonly shared consciousness of civil society-ness among its membership over time and space and who do not share a

common mission. This seems the case for civil society in Sri Lanka. How far can a farmer collective that existed during the pre-colonial times and operated based on voluntary labour be related to an NGO network of the present times that is funded entirely by funding from the West? This diversity of forces and organisations has made Bastian conclude that "there is nothing positive in civil society per se" (1999). Amarasuriya's discussion on civil society spaces in post-war Sri Lanka indicates this same tension when the action of players with democratic practices such as the National Movement for Just Society is discussed along with the activities of Bodu Bala Sena, the ultra nationalist chauvinist movement of Buddhists that advocated violence against other religions. The simplistic spatial definition of civil society allows both groups to occupy the same space. This becomes possible if civil society is treated merely as the space - between the family, the state and the market - while not paying adequate attention to the emancipatory role civil society is expected to play as in the case of Gramscian and liberal notions of civil society where civil society is considered a focus of social transformation (Bastian 1999). Therefore Sri Lankan civil society can be considered as a mere collection of diverse actors operating in a loosely defined space with no generically evolved common meaning. With regard to the second specific question I'm trying to address in this paper of how the FUTA action converted to a social movement, the category of civil society, therefore, seems to be of little help. Let alone being a tool that is capable of analysing how the FUTA struggle became a social movement, the

concept of civil society itself seems to lack rigour. If positioning the FUTA action in the civil society space is of little use the other avenue available is to treat it within the space of trade unionism itself.

Compared to the concept of civil society the concept of trade union seems more authentic and grounded with a long history of Sri Lankan trade unionism that goes back to the early twentieth century. The socio-economic transformation from a feudal society to a capitalist society led to the emergence of trade unions during the nineteenth century with the introduction of the plantation economy (Jayawardena 1972). Sri Lanka witnessed her first strike by printers in 1893. The first union, Employers' Federation Ceylon, was established in 1928. The first Trade Union Ordinance was introduced by the colonial government in 1935. Biyanwila views the history of trade unions in Sri Lanka as three interrelated and overlapping phases, Firstly, 1893-1930, the time period that relates to the emergence of trade unions, followed by 1930-1977, the time span that highlights the rise of the labour movement and its influence on post-independence state formation and thirdly, the current phase beginning in 1977, the period that illustrates the down turn of the trade union power in the socio-economic sphere (2011). As an entry to this discussion one can ask why Amarasuriya (2015) left out trade union struggles other than the FUTA struggle that were fought to win benefits for the individual membership in her list of post war civil society protests if trade union activism can be included within the space of civil society. One important reason for the inclusion of the FUTA struggle could be the nature of the FUTA

action that went beyond the traditional type of trade unionism that under normal circumstances confines its focus to the interests of its membership. While the struggle led by the FUTA exhibited a component of altruism expected in civil society activism, other trade union struggles that fought for higher pay or benefits for its membership, did not.

Did the FUTA violate the basic principles of self focus? Trade unions are considered as contradictory organisations in classical Marxism. They unite workers within the occupation in which the union is formed but reinforce occupational divisions and competitive sectionalism with others (McIlroy 2014). The reverse can also be asked. How was it possible for the FUTA, a trade union of university teachers, to form alliances with other unions both in the education and other sectors, civil society organisations and mobilise masses for a common struggle? A possible explanation to this can be found in the discourse of social movement unionism that emerged during the last few decades (Fairbrother 2008). By moving away from the traditional mode of trade unionism, social movement unionism incorporates characteristics of both a trade union as well as a social movement. Increasingly unions around the developed and the developing world have become interested in models centred on activism (Parker 2011). Social movement unionism emerged as an alternative to the other two union models - business unionism and the political unionism. While business unions are treated as the modern version of the working class union of the previous era that operate by having economic instrumentalism (rational calculations



based on costs and benefits) and compromise (between demands and offers) as main guidelines, political unions are considered as the trade union arms of political parties that are guided within a framework of political party agendas. In contrast social movement unions use strategies that indicates similarities with social movements by relying heavily on the trade union- community partnership (Fairbrother 2008). This new approach to trade unionism emerged recently as a response to the weakening of strength experienced globally by the trade union movement especially in the era of neoliberal economic orthodoxy. Southall identifies four concerns that have led trade unions in the periphery to move in a direction of social movement unionism: increasing pressure on trade unions' defensive potential; labour force disparity between the North and the South; increasing authoritarian state forms under export oriented industrialization strategies; and new challenges to traditional labour solidarity by feminisation and casualisation of labour (1988).

What marks trade unions as social movement unions? The literature on social movement unionism provides a list of strategies used by trade unions in this transformation. Articulating worker interests beyond the workplace and transcending workplace towards a social movement is done by building and strengthening long term alliances with the community and domestic actors in general (Lambert, 2002; Biyanwila, 2003). Achieving independence and autonomy of the trade union from political party politics and strengthening participatory democracy within the movement are considered

strategies of importance (Moody, 1997; Parker 2011). Conducting emancipatory politics and framing demands politically and forming transformative visions are other strategies (Fairbrother, 2008). Biyanwila (2011) lists more strategies. By taking the example of a trade union in a free trade zone in Sri Lanka, Biyanwila identifies the experience of the leadership outside the labour movement and the diversification of action beyond strikes as two more important strategies in the process of transformation towards social movement unionism.

The application of the list of strategies described above would help us to place a trade union theoretically within the category of social movement unions. However, it does not mean that the union automatically becomes a social movement. Application of strategies would only qualify a trade union to become a social movement. For example the Free Trade Zone Workers Union, the Sri Lankan case study for social movement unionism in Biyanwila's discussion on "the labour movement in the global south" is not a social movement that has mobilized public (2011). So what makes a social movement union, a real social movement? What is the moment that lights the spark? The theoretical discourse on social movement trade unionism seems to be relatively silent on this aspect. Given below is a discussion on my personal experience with the FUTA trade union action in search of a "moment" that sparked a social movement out of a normal strike action limited to a workplace.

### **Behind the scenes: Hundred days of trade union action**

It was in April 2012 I attended for the first time a FUTA executive committee meeting at the Faculty Club of the University of Colombo, generally a place for socializing over a beer but occasionally a place for formal meetings and press conferences. I became an office bearer of the teachers' trade union of my own university just a few days before and hence became eligible to attend the 'exco', the shorthand term used to refer to the FUTA Executive Committee meetings. The setting was informal but the mood was passionate and hot. It was the date on which a unanimous decision was taken to launch a continuous strike, just three months before the hundred day struggle actually started. On that day there were around sixty sister union leaders in attendance representing all fifteen state universities.

#### *Leadership*

The vast majority of the FUTA leadership represented a generation of academics from middleclass backgrounds who had accumulated their social capital thanks to the free education policy of the island that was introduced way back in 1943. The educational policy climate had changed considerably and the notion that free education was under threat was gaining hold within society. In terms of seniority all of the FUTA activists were positioned between middle level academics and senior professors. The leadership of the FUTA struggle spread beyond the official executive committee from day one and had many leaders who were characteristically strong opinion-holders and fighters with

diverse skills. Some of them held official titles in the FUTA and some others didn't. The vast social space occupied by the FUTA struggle as discussed above made it possible for many leaders to emerge by defining and creating new roles as long as these roles fell within the broader mandate of the Save State Education campaign, the umbrella theme. The FUTA leadership consisted of those who were known to the public and also unknown to the public and who worked behind the scenes<sup>10</sup>. Among the core leadership were those who were visionaries, strategists, and networkers who were instrumental in building alliances with others, public orators and those with excellent organizing, writing and creative skills. The leadership style of the then President of the FUTA, Nirmal Dewasiri, was significantly instrumental in the emergence of this diverse group of FUTA leaders and letting them, as individual leaders in their own way, to operate as a single unit as a result of the respect he commanded among this diverse crew. The respect for him was a result especially of his long term political life initially in student politics during his early career and his more recent involvement in alternative radical politics, his ability to conceptualise the struggle and most importantly due to his personal integrity that didn't leave any space for the government to ever succeed in co-opting him to their side.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> When the government media took the FUTA leadership to task it went after the leaders who were known to the public and even targeted publicly known personalities of FUTA who did not play such a prominent leadership role during the hundred days.

<sup>11</sup> The FUTA history is replete with examples where previous high office bearers were absorbed into government ranks. The role of an office bearer

### *Decision-making and communication*

The process of decision-making of the FUTA can be considered an extreme model of democratic decision-making. The main body that took decisions within the FUTA is the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee consists of office bearers as well as representatives of over forty sister unions amounting to the participation of over a hundred members at a time of full attendance. The tradition of the FUTA is to request the approval of all its sister unions when it comes to important decisions which requires sister unions to convene Special General Meetings to discuss and endorse (or not) the recommendations of the executive committee. This long and formal decision-making process which can be considered a model has its costs when involved with an intensive struggle based not only on material benefits but also on certain ideological and political positions. FUTA was also confronting a mighty government that was not used to tolerating dissent in any form. One of the major achievements of the FUTA during the

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of the FUTA was in question during the hundred days and was it was rumored among the leadership that he was won over by the government and was used as an informant. Negotiations was another space the leadership could fall prey to the government and be neutralized. The negotiators of the trade union could change what Bourdieu call as their habitus and risk becoming peers not of their community they represent but of the powerful members of the government with whom they sit as 'equals' and with whom they make contacts. It is the author's observation that this could have happened during the series of negotiations the FUTA held with extremely shrewd bureaucrats and politicians of the caliber of the Secretary to the President and the Minister of Economic Development had not at least some of the leaders of the FUTA who sat for negotiations enough experience in dealing with such situations.

hundred day struggle was to strike a balance between this painfully long, formal decision-making structure with a parallel and a flexible decision making model needed for day-to day decisions in for its activism. The FUTA executive committee formed a parallel decision making body, an Action Committee, to design and implement actions by allowing activists to play a frontline role in the FUTA struggle<sup>12</sup>. Participation in the Action Committee was open to any member and this group played an important role in planning actions and organising major events such as public rallies and the Long March. However, another informal structure which played a crucial role and facilitated decision making was the meeting of a core group of leaders on a regular basis to debate strategy. These meetings with occasional heated arguments usually over food and drinks at different private locations helped to build strong bonds among the leadership, provided the space to discuss issues freely without being worried about being bugged by the intelligence services of the government and helped to reach clarity in planning future moves.

Linked with decision making was the process of communication. Information flow downwards and upwards ensured better decisions. The FUTA maintained continuous communication with three important groups: the membership, other trade unions and students without which the struggle could have fallen apart. It achieved the objectives of constantly

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<sup>12</sup> The day to day leadership of the hundred day struggle as discussed in the previous paragraph consisted of the most active membership of the formal decision-making structures as well as of the Action Committee.

feeding correct and up to date information on the status of the struggle, discussing issues and challenges collectively, generating trust among each other and building up a sense of common ownership to the struggle. The FUTA updated its membership on an hourly and a daily basis through emails and Facebook sites and blogs maintained by groups dedicated especially for the task. The membership of each sister union met on a daily basis or at least a few times per week during the entire span of one hundred days. The creation of its own channels of communication helped the FUTA to keep the membership intact in an environment where the government media machine worked around the clock to disrupt the struggle with misinformation. The representatives of FUTA made it a habit to meet the leadership of other trade unions to provide updates and to receive opinion and advice<sup>13</sup>. The veteran trade union leadership of Sri Lanka which saw the FUTA as a newcomer to the dangerous territory of trade unionism watched closely the evolution of the hundred day struggle which turned out to be an inspiration to the entire trade union movement of the country. How long could the FUTA hold on without giving up and when should the struggle be wrapped up on a note of victory were the special concerns of the leadership of the Sri Lankan trade union

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<sup>13</sup> While working closely with the education sector trade unions the FUTA met regularly with three networks of trade unions: The alliance of unions convened by Saman Ratnapriya, President of Government Nursing Officers Union; Alliance of trade unions attached to the left political party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna convened by Lal Kantha, Chairperson of the National Trade Union Centre; and the group of unions convened by the late Bala Thampoe, General Secretary of Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union.

movement. The FUTA took extra efforts to maintain regular communication with the university students' movement. While sister unions of the FUTA maintained communication with the student union leadership of individual universities as much as possible, the FUTA maintained a continuous dialogue with the leadership of the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF), the most powerful umbrella organisation of student unions of individual universities. The IUSF while extending its support to the FUTA trade union action preferred to maintain a distant relationship to the hundred day struggle of their teachers presumably for two reasons. On the one hand the IUSF had an ideological issue with the FUTA slogan, Save State Education, and on the other hand the IUSF was uneasy to see the FUTA involved in radical action to save education which had historically been the battleground slogan of the students' movement. The regular meetings held between the FUTA and the IUSF helped in achieving a better understanding on the ideological positions taken by both sides as well as building trust between the two groups to a certain extent. The IUSF conducted a special campaign in parallel to the hundred days under the title Save Free Education<sup>14</sup>. In addition to the regular

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<sup>14</sup> The IUSF conducted a five day relay march from the city of Kandy in the hill country to capital Colombo to overlap with the FUTA long March held from the 24th to the 28th September 2012. The march covered exactly the same distance of 130 kilometers and met the FUTA Long March reaching Colombo from Galle at the Hyde Park where the FUTA held its public meeting. The IUSF, however, refused to take part and address the Hyde Park meeting as a joint event on the grounds that they were opposed to the United National Party, the right wing main opposition party's participation in the FUTA Long March. Two

communication maintained with its own members, trade union leadership and the student leadership the FUTA also maintained communication with the religious leadership, leadership of civil society organisations and the leadership of organisations of farmer and fisher communities in certain regions of the island who displayed special interest in the FUTA struggle.

### *Debates*

Debates played an important role if not in sorting out ideological differences within the FUTA and among partners of the social movement to save education, but also in clarifying why certain positions were taken by each other and in generating mutual respect. The hundred day struggle included many debates within; among the leadership, at the executive committee, and with the membership at sister union level as well as with others who worked with the FUTA during the hundred days. The degree of involvement allowed for political parties in the struggle was one such debate argued at all levels. Political parties were allowed limited participation. After a lengthy debate among members, speakers at FUTA public rallies were chosen carefully to maintain the image of the one hundred day struggle exclusively as a trade union activity<sup>15</sup>. When should

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student leaders, Janaka Ekanayaka and Sisitha Priyankara, who participated the IUSF march from Kandy to Colombo died under suspicious circumstances on the third night in a road accident which the IUSF believed was an assassination carried out by the government.

<sup>15</sup> The Leadership of the Opposition political parties sat in the audience at the Hyde Park Rally held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2012 addressed mainly by the trade unions of the education sector. The FUTA Action Committee conveyed strict guidelines to political parties who participated in the Long

the trade union action be stopped was another issue that underwent vigorous debate. At a historical meeting of the executive committee of the FUTA held on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012 the FUTA leadership debated fiercely for seven hours to decide whether the strike action should be called off or not based on what the government had offered at the last round of negotiations<sup>16</sup>.

One of the most interesting debates during this time was one the FUTA had with the IUSF. The debate was about the FUTA main slogan itself, Save State Education. IUSF with a strong stand against the privatization of education and private universities was not in favour of the slogan. The IUSF argued that the slogan by identifying state education as a special category also accepts indirectly the existence of private education. The IUSF accused the FUTA of being indifferent to the issue of private education and for not challenging private education more directly. Therefore the IUSF was of the opinion that the struggle should be to save free education which would communicate the dual objective of saving state education in parallel to challenging private

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March. Political parties were advised to not to use the occasion to promote their party images and were provided with banners designed by the FUTA with the slogan, Save State Education.

<sup>16</sup> The executive committee took two votes at the end of the seven hour debate. Of the 39 sister unions which attended the meeting, 29 voted in favour of suspending the trade union action while 10 voted against the suspension and said they wanted to continue. The second vote which was whether to hold a joint press conference with the representatives of the government to declare the suspension of the strike was defeated with 10 voting in favour of a joint conference and 20, against (Minutes of the FUTA Executive Committee Meeting held on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012 at the Open University, Colombo)

education. The FUTA didn't take a hard stand on the issue and the response was multifaceted. For the FUTA the choice of save state education was strategic. It served the purpose of keeping the membership of the FUTA, who are of diverse political orientations, united. One thing on which the entire membership agreed was with the day to day experience of fighting threats against the state university system in which they serve<sup>17</sup>. At the same time the FUTA also argued that the slogan of Save State Education should be read along with another important slogan of the FUTA struggle, Stop Commodification of Education, and also with stands taken by the FUTA in the past in relation to issues on education

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<sup>17</sup> These threats were multifaceted and were documented in numerous communications of the FUTA published in the last few years. Funding cuts resulted in lower salaries and making it difficult to recruit and retain the best academics. Lack of resources tended universities to offer more and more fee levying programmes to earn funding for individual survival. Political appointments to all levels of university administration has resulted in the violation of university autonomy ensured by the University Act. Political influences impacted recruitment of both academic and non-academic staff as well as the admission of students. Decisions taken on academic matters at academic forums were undermined. The university councils, the highest decision making body on administrative matters, were filled with political appointments who used political lenses in decision making. Students were denied rights and the students councils, which is a legal requirement ensured the University Act, were suspended. Military that played an increasing role in civilian affairs after the conclusion of the war, encroached universities too. Amidst protests by the academics the government brought a security arm linked to military in to the university premises which required a payment of two times the payment for the existing security service. The controversial 'Leadership Programme' that was conducted mainly by military personnel and in military camps was introduced to new entrants to the university.

privatisation<sup>18</sup>. In the meantime the FUTA also took the position that the meaning of slogans are not fixed but shaped by the discourse within which the term is used. FUTA argued that the discourse on education the FUTA was in the process of constructing highlighted already the inability of the market to be responsible for education. Education according to FUTA has a civilizational and humanizing role which the market is not at all interested in and incapable of fulfilling<sup>19</sup>.

### *Slogans*

The trump card of the FUTA hundred day struggle was the demand to allocate 6% of GDP for education. In comparison to the other two demands on benefits to the membership and good governance within the state university system, the slogan 6% didn't receive the attention of the membership as well as the leadership during the initial stage of action. The dedication of a small group of the FUTA activists who worked on the 6% slogan however, made it the frontline slogan in quick time. It was the slogan around which hundred day struggle evolved to become a social movement. It attracted the public at large to join the FUTA led struggle to Save State Education. Members of the public who were also parents of children receiving primary, secondary or tertiary education in the island were already feeling the pressure of funding cuts by the

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<sup>18</sup> The FUTA maintains a stand against the recently established Private Medical College in Malabe, Colombo and has expressed strong views against the practice of private tuition culture which has become a mega business.

<sup>19</sup> The disagreement, however, remained unresolved and continued even after the hundred day struggle.

government in the education sector. While it was claimed that Sri Lanka still provided education free of charge it was also evident that parents of students were spending a significant percentage of their income for the education of their children. This included costs such as, fees to enter a student to a better school, fees to maintain school infrastructure, fees for school security, transport fees and private tuition which has become an integral part of the education system. The demand to meet the UNESCO benchmark of 6% of GDP for education provided international legitimacy to the cause and hence became more appealing. The FUTA came up with a strong argument to defend the demand and conducted awareness programmes islandwide to spread the message. 6% became the highlight in FUTA's propaganda material. The political opposition groups to the Rajapakse government which seemed to be incapable of locating a battle site on their own, soon joined in<sup>20</sup>. The slogan, 6% of GDP for education, served the FUTA in several other ways. On the one hand it helped the Sri Lankan academic community who had been blamed previously for living in ivory towers to gain respect within the Sri Lankan society by engaging in issues of public importance<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand the

6% slogan served another important purpose. In addition to the FUTA demand for more financial benefits for academics which anyway was a common cause for the academic community, the demand for 6% of GDP for Education too united all academics irrespective of their political and ideological differences. The secret of this uniting power was the abstract nature of the demand, itself. The demand was so abstract that it even attracted members who were involved with various initiatives of privatising education. The abstract nature of the demand allowed contradictions to remain invisible without troubling the consciousness of those who walked proudly in FUTA processions wearing the 6% t-shirt while at the same time engaging in assignments that involved charging money from students. The 6% slogan created a romantic notion of a struggle that provided the entire membership of the FUTA a high moral ground and a sense of pride, inviting them to make sacrifices and still stay together till the struggle reached a reasonable conclusion in one hundred days.

### *Resources*

The FUTA was nearly self-sufficient in its funding. Planning actions were not constrained by the lack of availability of funding. Only on a few occasions during

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<sup>20</sup> Allocating 6% of GDP became one of the main promises of the manifesto of the Opposition Presidential candidate and was included in the hundred day budget presented by the interim government after the elections of January 2015.

<sup>21</sup> The promotional scheme of Sri Lankan academics recognises national contributions of academics by providing a special scheme of marks under "Institutional, National and International Development" (University Grants Commission Circular 916). The notion of national contribution, however, was poorly defined with a heavy bias on appointments to various positions in the

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government. In a highly politicised context where the appointments to important positions that carry higher marks are made based on political party and societal affiliations the section on national development in the scheme of promotion in fact could encourage more harm than good. For example the scheme of marks leads to the ironic situation where some of the Vice Chancellors of Sri Lankan universities who were under heavy criticism for damaging the Sri Lankan state university system by the FUTA score high in national development.

the history of the one hundred day struggle did the FUTA accept donations<sup>22</sup>. They were symbolic in nature and were tokens of public appreciation for the struggle led by the FUTA. One of the main strengths of the FUTA struggle that provided autonomy for the FUTA to decide its own cause was its independence with regard to funds. The trade union action was financed by the FUTA funds collected as membership fees from the sister unions, special funds established during the action<sup>23</sup> directly from the individual members, direct donations from sister unions and contributions from individual members as it was the case with printing of the 6% t-shirt. The awareness among the membership that the FUTA ran the entire campaign with its own funding also provided a moral high ground for the members to withstand the allegations by the government and communicated by the state media that the Tamil Diaspora funded

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<sup>22</sup> The Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union led by Bala Thampoe donated Rs. 500,000 when the FUTA ran into the third month of its continuous strike. A farmers' collective from the North Central Province made a symbolic donation of rice, grain, coconut and dry fish at the Hyde Park Rally held on the 28th of September 2012. The third occasion the FUTA received support from the public was during the Long March where organisers of opposition political parties, trade unions and civil society organisations provided meals, refreshments and accommodation to the masses who participated in the five day March. Villagers who were living along the coastal stretch from Galle to Colombo organised themselves spontaneously to offer according to their ability water, king coconut, sweets and homemade sandwiches to the marching crowds. Almost at the end of the one hundred day strike the FUTA opened a bank account for the public to donate money to keep options open to prepare for a longer battle. FUTA's inclination to rely on her own funding, however, resulted in taking this decision at the level of the executive committee, difficult.

<sup>23</sup> The legal fund to facilitate legal cases related to the trade union action was one such example.

the struggle. However, finances became an issue when the continuous strike stepped into the third month. Till then the membership had their own individual arrangements. Members either used their savings or borrowed money from their contacts to compensate for lack of salaries during the strike. By the third month the FUTA requested individual sister unions to create separate funds at university level to help members who were finding it difficult to survive without salaries. Sister unions collected funds from their own members who could contribute<sup>24</sup> and provided loans to members who requested financial assistance.

A unique advantage the FUTA has over any other trade union or a civil society organisation is the availability of diverse resources within its own fold. This diversity of resources came in the form of disciplinary expertise as well as special skills of members. These resources played an important role in leading the hundred day struggle in a direction of a social movement to save education. Visual and performing arts experts designed platforms and performed at the FUTA public events<sup>25</sup>. Legal academics of FUTA

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<sup>24</sup> Stories of some of the members who withdrew their entire savings or even borrowed money from other sources to strengthen welfare funds established by sister unions were in circulation during the time of these one hundred days.

<sup>25</sup> The sister union of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts took care of all visual and performing aspects at public events. Lawyers who represented sister unions of the Peradeniya University and the Open University coordinated the FUTA legal front, advised the FUTA on legality of issues and coordinated legal work against the court cases filed against the FUTA trade union action. M. A. Sumantiran (and opposition member of Parliament), one of the top lawyers in the island appeared on behalf of the FUTA free of charge in these cases.



coordinated the FUTA legal battles in cases filed against FUTA through government sponsorship and raised awareness among the membership on the provisions available in the University Act and also on concepts of academic freedom and the autonomy of higher education institutions. Experts in website management handled the FUTA websites and blogs. Language expertise to work in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English were available within the FUTA itself. The FUTA had its own team of photographers and documentary film makers to take the message to the public. Public orators were found within its own ranks. These skills that were available at hand made the lives of the leadership easy and made the FUTA a self sufficient unit that could mobilise for action within short notice. Another advantage available to FUTA was its extended networks of contacts. Graduates produced by the Sri Lankan university system and personally known to the membership of the FUTA were spread across the island occupying positions in almost every institution and hence, making it easy to access information in quick time.

*Allegations, conspiracies and threats by government*

If the slogan 6% united the social movement that was built during the one hundred days the arrogant response from the government to threaten the leadership and to discredit and weaken the FUTA trade union action too united the FUTA leadership as well as the membership. Allegations and threats by the government

boomeranged and galvanised in general the unity of the membership and the will to sustain the struggle till a respectable solution was met. It also helped attract the sympathy of professionals and the leadership of society towards the FUTA cause. Immediately before the launch of the strike action an anonymous caller threatened to kidnap the only daughter of the President of the FUTA. These threats to him and his family continued during the struggle. After deciding that the safest counter response would be to expose the threats, the FUTA went public with the news, both locally and internationally. The Government used state media to character assassinate the public faces of FUTA leadership, especially its president and media spokespersons. Allegations were made that the said leaders in particular and the FUTA in general had received huge sums of money from the LTTE sympathetic Tamil diaspora to destabilise the country which had been 'saved' from these forces by the ruling regime<sup>26</sup>. At one of the many rounds of negotiations held between the government and the FUTA in search of a settlement, the Minister of Economic Development who led the team of government negotiators accused FUTA of obtaining funds for printing the t-shirts from a foreign government seeking regime change<sup>27</sup>. The leadership of the FUTA had

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<sup>26</sup> The video column "Vimasuma" which was telecasted daily immediately after the main News bulletin at 7pm in the state owned ITN network, attacked on consecutive days in September 2012 the FUTA leadership for receiving dollars in bulk from the LTTE sympathising Tamil diaspora. The FUTA leadership considered taking legal action against the TV station but abandoned the idea due to a lack of funds.

<sup>27</sup> Minister Basil Rajapakse was in no mood to accept the explanation by the FUTA negotiators that a lecturer had advanced money from her own

good reason to believe that their telephones and electronic mail were tapped and monitored. Public attacks launched by the Minister of Higher Education identifying Sri Lankan academics as a useless community who he accused of working only a few hours per week but who earn an unreasonably high salary didn't go well with academics who were over burdened with work<sup>28</sup> and struggling at the same time to meet the commitments of a university teacher marked by her social position despite low salaries. The aggressive role of the Minister moved even pro-government members of the FUTA to play active roles in the hundred day struggle. The "Patriotic University Teachers' Alliance" with a few pro-government members from Colombo-based universities emerged during the trade union action and attacked the FUTA struggle using air time offered to them in the state controlled media. Spokespersons of the Alliance who went public and were known to the FUTA membership did not command respect from the academic community at large especially as a result of their poor performances as academics and ended up causing more damage to the image of the government<sup>29</sup>. While the

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savings to buy and print t-shirts till the FUTA returned her money after selling them among its membership.

<sup>28</sup> A common complaint by the Sri Lankan academic community is about the need to spend a significant amount of time to apply new instruments of the corporate and audit culture that is widely being introduced that could otherwise be spent for teaching and research (See Rambukwella et al (2013) for a discussion on concerns of the academic community on 'leaner centred education' and 'academic quality assurance').

<sup>29</sup> The set of cartoons appeared in the article "FUTA Struggle: 100 Day Through the Vision of Cartoonists" published by The Colombotelegraph on 6th October 2012 is a proof of this public image.

continuous strike was on the Minister of Higher Education closed the state university system to make the strike action ineffective<sup>30</sup>. This, however, didn't have any significant impact on the strike action as the entire university system was already paralyzed by then. While conducting negotiations with the FUTA, the government also attempted to mediate through the labour tribunal so that the FUTA would be forced to abandon the strike action according to the labour law. The FUTA unanimously decided to ignore the summons by the Labour Commissioner. By holding a press conference the FUTA declared non-incorporation and expressed willingness to face mass scale imprisonment for the violation of the labour law if necessary. The government withdrew its efforts to force FUTA to the labour tribunal soon after this press conference.

### **From a strike action to a social movement**

In a way the FUTA had already fulfilled the criteria to become a social movement union even by 2011. It practiced a high level of participatory democracy though out its union history. As an independent trade union of professionals with more access to resources it had achieved its autonomy a long time back. The demand to allocate 6% of GDP or education was in the list of the FUTA demands since 2011 and hence was an articulation of worker

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Viewed on 12th October 2015 at <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/trade-union-struggle-nearing-100-days-through-the-vision-of-cartoonists/>

<sup>30</sup> Press Release issued by the Ministry of Higher Education on the 21st August 2012

interests beyond the workplace. The FUTA leadership for some years consisted of a few leaders who had additional experience outside the labour movement. Was it then that the actual launching of the strike that made the difference? Did the strike launched on already existing ground conditions provide the time and the space for the leadership and the membership to form a social movement? Was the strike the missing factor? This question can mislead us towards a wrong conclusion if we fail to take note of the nature of changes the FUTA underwent from pre-2012 into hundred day action as discussed above in detail. The usual mechanism for participatory decision making was expanded to achieve efficiency and clarity with the introduction of new forums such as the action committee and informal gatherings of leaders. The aspect of union autonomy was strengthened during 2012 through conscious interventions to improve self reliance for example by establishing various funds. The demand for 6% of GDP for education that was in the periphery in 2011 took centre stage in 2012 allowing the FUTA to articulate the membership interests far beyond the workplace. Strategies of social movement trade unionism (e.g. participatory democracy, autonomy, etc), therefore, seem to be too vague to determine the exact 'moment' that sparks a social movement. A trade union that falls into the category of a social movement union, therefore, does not automatically become a social movement during every strike action.

What is the social movement 'moment' of the FUTA? What combination of factors made hundred day action a social

movement? Without a strike action it wouldn't have happened. Continuous strike for almost three months provided the membership and specially the activists to work full time for the union action who are otherwise overloaded with academic responsibilities. The nonhierarchical leadership style of FUTA with Nirmal Dewasiri as the president played a crucial role in transforming hundred day action to a social movement. While individual leaders led different fronts of the struggle that was transformed to a social movement the union President who commanded respect from all facilitated the unity and vision among the membership. Executive committee meetings held on regular basis, daily meetings held at sister union levels, frequent meetings of the action committee, informal meetings of the leadership also held on regular basis and frequent meetings held with alliance partners strengthened the participatory democracy aspect of the action with a strong sense of inclusiveness and improved the efficiency and clarity of decision making at the same time. Independence of the FUTA in funding and human resources to design and implement hundred day action without being governed by outside interests was another key aspect that helped the struggle to become a social movement. The membership funded the union action and provided diverse expertise needed. Only a few trade unions could have achieved that level of autonomy. Establishment of the FUTA's own channels of communication within the context where both the state and the private media were directly and indirectly controlled by the government allowed to keep the four thousand strong membership intact, another important

dimension of an long drawn struggle. This was complemented by the presence of an external 'enemy' in the form of an arrogant government. The immature response of the government, in fact, helped the FUTA to win even a group of academics who took the government side at the initial stages of the action. However, the star point and key that converted the 2012 trade union action to a social movement is the demand to allocate 6% of GDP for education. This attracted masses island-wide irrespective of ethnicity, religion and class who as parents were already feeling the burden of severe funding cuts for education. The social status of the academic community that commanded respect from a wider cross section of the society also helped in this regard. The social movement 'moment' that sparked the hundred day action to a social movement was a result of the meeting of all the aspects described above. The social movement 'moment' of the FUTA can be considered as a unique moment that occurred within the special socio-political context of the Island in 2012. It can also shed light and propose general guidelines in more detail than the strategies used by social movement unionism to define the social movement 'moment' of social movement trade unionism.

### **Conclusion**

The story of 6% t-shirt is the story of the hundred day struggle launched in 2012 by the Federation of University Teachers' Associations, Sri Lanka. It started as a continuous strike conducted by a professional trade union and spread within the hundred days to become a social

movement attracting a broader cross section of the Sri Lankan public in support. Mobilisation of the public, which normally occurs through civil society or political action, encourages one to discuss the hundred day action by the FUTA outside the discourse on trade unionism which traditionally is confined to the workplace and interests of the membership. The failure of the traditional mode of trade unionism to win benefits for its membership under the neoliberal economic order has forced the trade union movement globally to look for new approaches. Social movement unionism is one such strategy that articulates worker interests beyond the workplace by forming alliances with the community and framing demands in such a way that winning demands is beneficial not only to the membership but to the community as well. The hundred day trade union action by the FUTA can be considered an ideal case study of social movement unionism. Strategies of social movement unionism serve trade unions to gain more ground in the community the union is positioned in and win sympathy and solidarity with actors outside the workplace. This, however, does not mean that a social movement union becomes a social movement each time the union is on a trade union action. Being categorized as a social movement union and being a real social movement are two different things. The hundred day struggle which in fact had transformed into a social movement during the cause of three months demonstrates how a social movement trade union indeed becomes a social movement. The hundred day experience presents insights as to how the simultaneous

application of many factors could spark a social movement while involved with a trade union action, namely: formulation of demands with appeal to masses; democratic nonhierarchical leadership consisting of many committed leaders; overall leadership with vision to guide action; frequent meetings and debates with members and partners to improve clarity and ownership; complete autonomy with regard to funding and human resources;

forming own channels of communication for accurate transmission of information and news; and, an outside 'enemy' so that the members and the partners of the movement felt threatened and remained united to fight back. This 'moment' of social movement with respect to the FUTA may well be unique to the socio-political context of the island in 2012, but provides several insights and lessons for social movements in general. 🙏

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