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International Symposium

Africa and Asia Entanglements in Past and Present : Bridging History and Development Studies

African Trade Unions : Awkward Customers

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Abstract

This paper will consider three phases in the history of African trade unions. The first would be the organisational antecedents of trade unions. Second will be unions structured along the lines of the formations in industrial societies. Unions began through the activities of expatriate or racial minorities such as Greeks in Egypt, Indians in Kenya or white immigrants in South Africa. However the native workforce learnt from this model and became interested in this form of social force. In the conjuncture of the years just after World War II, big territory-wide union-led strikes exploded in many colonies (Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Tanganyika, the Rhodesias, French West Africa), not to speak of South Africa. Unions were inevitably linked to burgeoning nationalist movements.

After independence, the militancy of unions worked against the ambitions of new governments which no longer favoured insurgency and were hostile to an autonomous modern civil society. Typically unions were reorganised as bureaucratic structures responsible to the state, leaders were bought off or persecuted and growing economic problems undermined initial attempts by the state to reward wage workers. However despite this the struggle for union independence often continued under the surface and tended to become more effective with time.

In fact, this relatively quiescent phase was succeeded by a third phase, linked to grassroots movements calling for political democracy and the end to dictatorships or one-party rule in many countries. Trade unionism was critical in bringing about the end of apartheid in South Africa. This new second phase has continued all the way to the Arab Spring in very recent years. Trade unions continue to throw up politically significant leaders and now function as a salient part of civil society. However, their importance in the success of democracy movements does not mean that



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they succeed, or know how to succeed, in turning such movements into government policy to the advantage of organised workers.