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

Trade Unions in Kenyan History

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Abstract

Since the 1930s, the formation of workers organisations in Kenya has witnessed unprecedented growth. Motivated largely by deteriorating working conditions, these movements have attracted a great deal of research attention and inspired public policy debates on their rise and implications. This study traces in historical perspective, the emergence and development of trade unions and the system of industrial relations in Kenya. Colonialism, as shall be observed, introduced and institutionalised low wage policy and African workers formed Trade Unions to ameliorate their socio-economic and political conditions. The colonial government viewed African Trade Unions in Kenya as subversive movements and measures adopted led to the emergence of economistic "bread and butter" trade unions. It created a state controlled labour force not a working class responsible to market forces, because in their view, Trade unions were inimical because they interfered with business harmony. The policy has been perfected by the post independent government in Kenya. Based on archival research and literature on labour history, the study examines the enviable role of Trade Unions in Kenyan history.