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THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICAN INDUSTRY, FELIXTON IN KWA-ZULU NATAL

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to highlight the role of trade unions in industrial relations system in South Africa: A study of Mondi Kraft industry, Felixton in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The identified roles include, resolving conflicts between the management and the employees, improving the remunerations of the employees, creating conducive forum for mediation and conciliation process within the industry. Moreover, trade unions have been in existence for many years. Even though their introduction was generally encountered with resistance, since their establishment, trade unions have been an important agent of social change worldwide. This article further confirms that over the years, trade unions have been involved in politics and other societal activities. The power of the unions is dependent on the extent of their membership, not only at individual companies but also across the industry.

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INTRODUCTION

Trade unionism may be seen as the social response to the advent of industrialization and capitalism. Prior to the industrial revolution there had been in Britain, trade guilds which, to a limited extent, protected the interests of craftsmen and their apprentices, but these guilds really represented the interests of the so-called employers and did not engage in bargaining. The industrial revolution brought with it a loss of independence and the extreme poor working conditions, as well as the belief in the freedom of contract, the operation of the market forces and the pursuit of self-interest. Although these beliefs might seem harmless or even advantageous, they could and did create the expectation of the workforce. This necessitated some form of protection for the employees, and at the same time, led to the birth of the "working class". The achievement of the necessary protection was not easy as society was geared mainly to increase production and to the

attainment of the economic goals, usually at the expense of the employees. For example, the British combinations Act of 1799/1800 prohibited coalition of employees for promoting their interests. Strike action was outlawed and was subjected to criminal prosecution. Nevertheless, the need to protect their job interest did bring groups of employees together, despite the obstacles encountered (Bendix, 1996). The actual beginnings of trade unionism in Britain are to be found in the so-called Friendly society of the late 18th century. Craftsmen, who contributed a small amount each week and were then entitled to receive benefits in case of sickness, retirement, unemployment and death, established these. This benefit function is still to be found in many unions today. The friendly societies were much localized and after the passage of the combinations Act, had to operate in secret. Thus, they lacked power and failed to make an impression on employers. A number of unions were established in this era, mostly by skilled workers; but, the Friendly societies before them, the unions were localized, lacked effective organization on a wider basis and did not engage in collective bargaining. In 1828, the general union of Operative Spinners of Great Britain was established. In 1834, Robert Owen founded the short-lived Grand National Consolidated Trade Union, which was

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intended to be a union of workers in all industries. Many of the unions formed did not last long, firstly because of poor organisations and secondly because unionism was still generally resisted by the state and by employers. It was only after 1850 that the first real trade unions, as we know them, were established, and those mainly among craftsmen. Salamon (1998) points out that "new" unions, as they were called, had a number of characteristics in common with modern trade unions. They were organised on a centralised, national level; they had national executive, as well as branch structures; they employed fulltime organisers, provided benefits and controlled entrance to their crafts by the apprenticeship system. They engaged in collective bargaining with employers, emerging with agreements on specific issues. Furthermore, they formulated joint policies, leading to their involvement in social and political matters and to the first Trade Union Congress in 1868. Organisation among non-craft workers only in the 1880s when the first unions for unskilled and semiskilled workers were established, as well as the first real general unions. The same period saw the emergence of white-collar unions representing for example, the interests of teachers, clerks and municipal employees.

The dilution of certain crafts by technology and the necessity for unions to organise on a wider scale led to the establishment of industrial unions. This was the picture at the beginning of the 20th century. Trade unions of various kinds had established themselves as a permanent feature on the industrial scene. The next twenty years, marked by accelerated industrialisation, saw trade unionism proliferating in most economically advanced Western societies (Bendix, 1996). Besides, trade unions of South Africa are the strongest and well-disciplined among countries in the African continent. South Africa has more than one hundred registered trade unions now, with three major federations of trade unions. In South Africa trade unions were started towards the dusk of 19th century but the early trade unions were formed for racially white workers. Continuous struggle for rights of black workers which was also part of the anti-apartheid movement, union registration and membership rights were established for blacks. During the turbulent years of anti-apartheid agitations trade unions played a vital role in South Africa. Now the trade unions of South Africa are politically active. Altogether South Africa's Trade unions has an active membership of 3.2 million with over 26 per cent of formal work force being members in one of the trade unions. The core purpose of trade unions in South Africa, as it is elsewhere in the world is to regulate relations between employers and their employees. This role of trade unions is defined throughout the labour related legislative framework of South Africa. Mondi Kraft was commissioned in 1984 to meet the needs of woodchip, pulp and paper packaging users by providing quality products from the optimum use of world class production facilities, supported by effective logistics, technical support, administration and information for the benefit of our customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers and the community at large, whilst recognising their responsibilities towards the environment.

Trade union federations of South Africa: The trade unions in South Africa is divided into three parts namely, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) and The National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). The Congress of South African Trade Unions is a central trade union federation in South Africa. It has about 21 functioning affiliated unions

and an estimated membership of 1.8 million which also has the distinction of the largest trade union confederations in South Africa. COSTU was established in 1985 with 33 trade unions. Establishing aim of COSTU were to strengthen the workforce in all industries, to fight exploitation of women workers, to demand withdrawal of state emergency, release of political prisoners, fight apartheid, for right to strike and picket, to regulate national minimum wage and to living wages. However, the Federation of Unions of South Africa is the second largest national trade union federation in South Africa. It was established in 1997, FEDUSA has a membership of 560 thousand and it represents workers in automobile industry, aviation, education, medical services, banking, aviation, healthcare and hotel industry. Besides, the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) of South Africa is a federation of 17 affiliated unions with nearly four hundred thousand strong membership support. The affiliated trade unions of NACTU is functional among workers in mining, construction, banking, insurance, hospitality, education, government, public sector and civic administration, electrical, textiles, agriculture, furniture, food processing, chemical, teachers, transport, etc. These three major union federations are the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU), COSATU and the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA). All three federations have representation at the National Economic, Development and Labor Council (NEDLAC). These are 2012 figures (SA info 2013). In addition to playing a major role in South African politics, COSATU also played an important role in the establishment of the industrial relations policies in South Africa and was instrumental against apartheid (Torres 2000). It currently has by far the most significant impact on South African employment relations of all the union federations (Nel *et al.*, 2012).

Types of trade unions: Throughout the world unions have taken various forms, shapes and sizes in their attempt to protect their members' interests. Windmuller states that although collective bargaining is only one of the activities carried on by trade unions, it is usually of such central importance that the prevailing structure of collective bargaining has had a decisive influence on the structure and government of trade unions (Fiorito, Gramm and Hendricks, 1991). Most of the early unions were of this type:

Industrial unions: Industrial unions aim to organize all workers in a single, well-defined industry, irrespective of the jobs performed by the members. Thus, unions may be found in the metal, auto, chemical, construction, textile, mining, paper, transport and food industries. Some of the largest unions in South Africa are industrial unions, for example the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA). The power of these unions is dependent on the extent of their membership, not only at individual companies but also across the industry. Recruitment of the unorganized workers is a major objective of these unions. The formation of a single union per industry is to prevent competition among its members.

General unions: General unions aim to organize all workers irrespective of industry or area of interest. The ideology of general unions was developed to help counter the fact that unskilled workers had no significant labour power. In line with Marxist theory, it was proposed that a single general union should unite the working class in a particular country to oppose the capitalist class. In most countries, only a few

general unions exist. The problem for general unions is that while they may develop a large membership, it may not be sufficiently concentrated in particular company or industry, thus lacking real power base. The diffusion of membership also places a strain on organizational resources. In South Africa, several general unions have played a significant role in the history of the union movement.

Craft Unions: Craft unions' main aims were to organize all workers in a specific skilled occupation, regardless of the industry or area in which the work was performed. Unions were thus formed to represent only plumbers, electricians, boiler makers, and carpenters. The motivation for unionization was the protection of skills and maintenance of status. There was thus a need for such workers to protect themselves not only from employers but also from the unskilled working class.

Some of their objectives were as follows:

- To restrain a high standard of training and restrict the entry of new apprentices, thus controlling the supply of workers in the trade and bolstering their bargaining power; and
- To prevent job fragmentation and the taking over of parts of their jobs by less skilled workers at lower rates of pay.

Many of the early craft unions in South Africa achieve their objectives by means of lobbying the government for protective legislation in the form of legalized job reservation and restricting apprenticeship opportunities only to whites. The move towards a non-racial, non-sexist labour relations dispensation together with technological change. Few whites in skilled positions and the growth of industrial unions have resulted in a deteriorating power base. Nevertheless, several influential unions representing skilled workers still exist in South Africa today. In 1995 some of the oldest craft unions in the country, namely the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the South African Boiler makers' Society, the Iron Moulders' and Mining Unions amalgamated to form the national employees' trade union. Von Holdt (1993) states that the potential for COSATU to organize such skilled workers is limited inter alia by the craft consciousness of artisans. They are set apart from other workers by their special training and higher rates of pay. Their position in the production process and by the fact that they are often monthly-paid rather than weekly-paid. The craft unions promised to protect their members in the workplace (Finnemore, 1997).

Why workers join trade unions?

The historical record seems to suggest that South African workers form and join unions largely to win higher wages and shorter hours. The difference lies in the fact that for a worker employed in an already unionized establishment, wages and hours are the same whether he is a union member or not. Rees (1962) revealed that other important factors that influenced the decision to join the industrial union were the radical activities in the workers' family or childhood or previous membership or activity in another union. There are workers who did not have a reason for joining trade unions. But in terms of family background or experience in the plant it is often reported that they joined largely because it was the normal thing to do in the plant. Together with internal factors, such as an employee's

own value system and needs. Furthermore, in USA, workers in many manufacturing industries chose to unionize after the passage of the 1935, Wagner Act. At that time, many of the manufacturing plants were oppressive places of employment. Each morning, men lined up at the gate. If there was no work they were sent home, if they were hired it was for that day only. They never knew when their day ended until the whistle blew. One of the workers recalled that some foremen were so initiating that workers had to do the foremen's yard-work on the weekend and had to bring along their daughters to provide sexual services (Carrel, 1995). The foremen managed by terror and hired prizes fighters to keep control. Workers could not talk during lunch and had to raise their hands to go to the bathroom. Such indignities, as well as poor wages and unsafe working conditions made workers ready to join unions. Today, it is unlikely that many managers would consider using the intimidating tactics. In general, however, when workers today chose to unionize, it is due to frustration with management over issues such as wages, benefits and off-air treatment. The labour union developed as a means by which collective power to accomplish goals that could not be accomplished alone. Whether that power is used to increase take-home wages, to ensure job protection, to improve working condition or simply sit across the bargaining table with employer, members believe that in a union there is strength. The most common union mean of demonstrating strengths has been the strikes (Carrel, 1995). Due to external socio-economic factors, a large number of employees joined the organized labour unions in Mondi Kraft Industry, namely, the National Employee Trade Union (NETU), the National Employee of South African Workers Union (NESAWU) and Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Union (CEPPWAWU).

External factors that encourage employees to join the union, namely

- The capacity of the union to assist the employee;
- Encouragement or even pressure from co-workers to join;
- Support the union enjoys in the broader society; and
- Lack of any other alternative available to the employee.

External pressures which inhibit the employee from joining a union, namely

- The cost of dues;
- Union ineffectiveness, for example poor recruiting methods;
- No co-worker support or intimidation; and
- Employer intimidation.

In South Africa, approximately 40% listed intimidation from employers is the reason for joining a union (Wheeler and McClendon, 1971). Gallagher and Strauss (1991) state that employers generally need to consider a multitude of factors in considering the costs and benefits of joining a union. A decision to leave a union may occur when members perceive that the cost outweigh the benefits, usually when a union has failed to satisfy the needs of its members. The level of union commitment that is an extent to which an individual accepts or identifies the goals and values of the union. It is a stronger predictor of union turn over than is a member's satisfaction with its specific performance. Much of the research into reasons why workers join trade unions concludes, "instrumental attitudes to unionism prevail over moral and

political commitment" (Hirszowics, 1981). The workers' aims are focused on bread and butter issues and the contents of their pay packet. In a social attitudes survey conducted in South Africa in 1989, 80% of workers gave economic reasons as an important reason for joining a union. In the survey conducted by Torres (1995), it was found that among 429 black union members, 60% stated a major reason for joining a union was "to improve wages and working conditions". The article also revealed that: Low-income groups more frequently state that they have joined the union to improve wages and working conditions that do high-income groups. Three out of four low-paid workers say they join unions to improve their wages and working conditions whereas only one out of three with incomes between R2 400 and R3 000 gives this reason for organization. It appears that with keeping Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as lower order needs for basic economic security are satisfied other needs may become pressing and influence decision making regarding unionization.

Conclusion

Throughout the world unions have taken various forms, shapes and sizes in their attempt to protect their members' interests. In terms of the functions we observed that collective bargaining is one of the activities used by trade unions. It is usually of such central importance that the prevailing structure of collective bargaining has had a decisive influence on the structure and government of trade unions. The article also strengthened the fact that, industrial unions aim to organize all workers in a single, well-defined industry, irrespective of the jobs performed by members, as part of the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) affiliation union of South Africa. The largest unions in South Africa include, among others, the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA). The power of these unions from the literature review confirms that it is dependent on the extent of their membership, not only at individual companies but also across the industry. The recruitment of the unorganized workers is a major objective of these unions. As a matter of fact, the only instrument which employees could use to fight for increment of their wages or pay was the medium of trade union negotiation forum. This has progressively helped the employees. Furthermore, it was clearly shown in this research that trade union activities have helped to improve the industrial relation system in South Africa.

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