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Konings, P.J.J.

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## **Organised Labour and Neo-Liberal Economic and Political Reforms in West and Central Africa**

*Piet Konings*

Neo-liberal economic and political reforms in Africa have been the focus of a considerable number of studies in the last two decades. Nevertheless, some conspicuous lacunae still exist in the growing body of literature. In their overview of the literature on democratisation, Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot (1995) mention that the role of certain civil-society organisations in economic and political liberalisation, and trade unions in particular, has been understudied.

From the 1980s onwards, faced with a deep and prolonged economic crisis, virtually all African governments have been required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and Western donors to implement a neo-liberal reform package in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). The aim of the SAPs has been to reduce the government's role in the economy, to establish free markets and a secure environment for private capital, and to enhance Africa's competitiveness in the global economic order. Their central demands include drastic cuts in public expenditure such as the elimination of subsidies, the dismantling of price controls, rationalisation in the public sector through privatisation, lay-offs, wage-cuts and closures, liberalisation of the economy guided by market forces domestically and comparative advantage internationally, promotion of commodity exports and foreign investment, and currency devaluation. In terms of macroeconomic performance, structural adjustment has produced widely diverging results in Africa but the social consequences have been more uniformly negative. It is now generally recognised that wage-workers have been among the most seriously affected by the economic crisis and structural adjustment. They are being confronted with retrenchments and job insecurity, wage restraints and the suspension of benefits, soaring consumer prices and user-charges for public services, flexible management practices and subcontracting, and an intensification of managerial efforts to increase labour productivity.

World Bank Reports have often attempted to justify these anti-labour measures, both in economic and political terms (Bangura and Beckman 1993; Adesina 1994; Gibbon 1995; World Bank 1995). The economic justification for structural adjustment is that workers are "too many and too costly". This is attributed to misconceived policies, including the development of an overprotected and over-

unions, their relationship with political parties and other civil-society organisations, and their search for innovative ways to respond to neo-liberal economic and political reforms and champion the cause of the workers (see Konings 2000:169–70; Beckman 2002:93–4). The Ghana case deserves most attention since there have been significant changes in state–trade-union relations during political liberalisation. The Cameroonian case instead has been characterised by a remarkable degree of continuity in these relations as aptly observed by Nyamnjoh (1996:20): “Today Cameroonians have multipartyism but the one-party logic persists.”

Ghana has earned the reputation among Western donors as being one of the few relative success stories in Africa concerning both economic and political liberalisation. Several authors (Rothchild 1991; Nugent 1995; Hutchful 2002) have highlighted the spectacular adoption in 1983 of a neo-liberal economic reform package by a radical populist military regime, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), albeit without abandoning its populist rhetoric altogether. Following the rigorous execution of its SAP, there was a relatively peaceful transition from the military PNDC regime to the civilian National Democratic Congress government in 1992, with Flight-Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings being promoted from PNDC chairperson to president of Ghana’s Fourth Republic. Not only has the Fourth Republic outlasted earlier democratic interludes, it has also spawned a fragile institutionalisation of some of the rules and procedures of the democratic game, manifest, among other things, in a large degree of autonomy for the press and judiciary, and the resurgence of civil society (Sandbrook and Oelbaum 1997). Ghana, moreover, is said to have a relatively strong labour movement that, after having been subordinated to the state during the Convention People’s Party (CPP) era, has been able to sustain a tenuous defence of labour rights and union autonomy in spite of repeated military interventions and impositions (Damachi 1974; Konings 1977; Jeffries 1978; Crisp 1984; Akwetey 1994; Panford 2001). Although Ghanaian trade-union leaders tended to be strong advocates of neo-liberal political reforms, they were nevertheless opposed to any alliances with opposition movements and parties. They regarded trade-union autonomy as an essential prerequisite for the defence of workers’ interests and the pursuit of creative responses to economic and political liberalisation.

In sharp contrast to Ghana, Cameroon has gained the reputation of being a disappointing ‘adjuster’ after the Biya government reluctantly agreed to implement an SAP in 1988/89. Several authors (Van de Walle 1993; Konings 1996; Gabriel 1999) have argued that the neo-patrimonial nature of the Cameroonian post-colonial state forms a clear obstacle to neo-liberal economic and political reforms that threaten the ruling elite’s control over state resources and rent-seeking activities. As a result, the process of economic and political liberalisation has been slow and erratic in Cameroon. The Cameroonian trade-union movement, too, has less standing and influence than its Ghanaian counterpart, having been subdued and deactivated by the one-party state following independence and reunification in 1961, and with its leadership co-opted into the “hegemonic alliance”

(Bayart 1979). This proved to be the main reason for its blatant failure to defend workers’ interests during economic liberalisation and to support the movement for political liberalisation. Autonomous trade unions have emerged during political liberalisation that are characterised by a high degree of militancy, thus posing a serious challenge to continuing state intervention in the unions.

This study is based on the author’s long-standing research on organised labour in Ghana and Cameroon (see Konings 1977, 1986, 1993, 1998). Since 1975 I have regularly carried out intensive fieldwork in both countries, and I have remained a keen observer of any developments in state–trade-union relationships.

### **The Ghanaian Trade-Union Movement and Structural Adjustment under the PNDC (1981–1992)**

When the PNDC seized power on December 31, 1981, the labour movement was in a state of disarray. The leadership of the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) was severely compromised in the eyes of many of its members who accused it of bureaucracy, opportunism, the betrayal of workers’ interests, and self-perpetuation in office. In recognition of a series of measures favourable to the labour movement, the GTUC leadership had refused to support the protest actions of other civil-society organisations against the corrupt and oppressive Supreme Military Council regime (1972–9), which was eventually overthrown by Rawlings during his first coup in June 1979. Neither had it offered any effective leadership in the labour disputes that destroyed the subsequent Third Republic (1979–81) (Kraus 1979; Chazan 1983). Shortly after the 1981 coup, a group of militant trade unionists in the Accra–Tema area that were organised in the so-called Association of Local Unions (ALU) launched a *putsch* of their own taking over power from the compromised GTUC leadership.

The new leadership expressed its objectives in terms of building a dynamic, revolutionary and democratic trade-union movement (Adu-Amankwah 1990; Yeebo 1991). From the very start, the PNDC had supported the change of leadership which, it thought, would bring the trade-union movement more in line with the regime’s populist orientations. The new leaders were indeed more committed to the ‘revolution’ than their predecessors. Nevertheless, they continued to assert the independence of the labour movement and its right to represent the interest of workers. This latter claim became an immediate source of friction between the revamped trade-union movement and the PNDC, since new, and apparently competitive, labour organisations had been created in the early days of the ‘revolution’, the so-called Workers’ Defence Committees (WDCs) (Konings 1986; Rawlings 1986; Hansen and Ninsin 1989).

The installation of WDCs in the work place undoubtedly posed the greatest challenge in Ghanaian labour history to the existing power relations within enterprises. The WDCs had wide-ranging responsibilities including the propagation and defence of the revolution, the exposure of management malpractices and cor-

ruption, the distribution of essential commodities, supervision of promotions, demotions, transfers and dismissals, and – even though this was barely visible during the most radical phase of the populist regime – disciplining workers and raising productivity. Above all, the WDCs were supposed to secure an active role for workers in the decision-making process. Understandably, in the absence of any clear guidelines for relations between the newly formed WDCs and the trade unions, there were numerous power struggles between the two organisations. Most union leaders were inclined to perceive the WDCs as instruments of the PNDC's hidden agenda to either replace or control the unions. Given this situation, the GTUC leadership took the unprecedented step of calling on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to help resolve the issue of who legitimately represented the workers (Gyimah-Boadi and Essuman-Johnson 1993:202). Although the ILO proved incapable of resolving the dispute, the conflict between the two labour organisations was eventually more or less settled when the WDCs were abolished in late 1984 and replaced by Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). Placed under the strict control of the regime, one of the main roles of the CDRs was to check any resistance by the labour movement to structural adjustment. As a result, they rapidly lost the confidence of the rank and file (Ninsin 1989:35–7).

Hutchful (1989) convincingly showed that the World Bank continuously insisted on the abolition of the WDCs as a major condition for the allocation of funds: “the concentrated fire of the World Bank was reserved for the WDCs and their alleged ‘propensity to engage in disruptive tactics,’” in particular “the harassment of private enterprise”. Clamping down on these ‘revolutionary’ organs was therefore viewed by the PNDC as a necessary prerequisite to reassure the Bretton Woods institutions of a peaceful environment – both industrially and politically – for the optimum utilisation of their global financial resources. The PNDC had an additional interest in their abolition, having often accused the national co-ordination of the Defence Committees of revolutionary overzealousness and of establishing a parallel government (Konings 1986; Yeebo 1991). The curbing of the WDCs’ power, however, had the probably unintended consequence of reunifying the labour movement in its struggle against structural adjustment.

A wider gulf between the PNDC and organised labour developed after the presentation of the first SAP-inspired budget in April 1983. Its announcement of severe curtailments in public subsidies and price rises came as a shock to the workers, who had been the main supporters of Rawlings’s ‘revolution’. Strikingly, although the ALU leaders of the GTUC had not been consulted in advance and deeply resented the perceived failure of the regime to shift the burden of adjustment from the shoulders of the poor to those of the rich, they refused to mobilise angry workers against the anti-labour budget. Being still strongly committed to the revolution, they appealed to the workers to exercise utmost restraint so as not to jeopardise the long-term goals of the workers’ struggles (Herbst 1991:186). Nevertheless, they expressed reservations about the budget as a whole and called for the suspension of some points, in particular increases in the price

of petrol and the severe limits set on wage increases through collective bargaining. Their criticism provoked a violent WDC attack on the GTUC headquarters no doubt with PNDC support.

An important event for future relations between state and organised labour took place at the end of the same year. After being postponed several times, the GTUC delegates’ conference was finally held. The ALU leadership was voted out of office, being generally seen as too subservient to the Rawlings regime (Yeebo 1991), and was replaced by the old guard. The newly elected secretary-general A.K. Yankey, had served on the ousted GTUC board as the general secretary of the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers’ Union. These old-guard leaders were not concerned with safeguarding the ideals of the revolution since they had been among its principal casualties in 1982. They were more worried about preserving trade-union autonomy versus the state and upholding what they considered was the essential task of the unions, namely the defence of workers’ interests, even if it meant jeopardising the good relationship that had been established.

Rawlings addressed the assembled delegates at the congress in a speech that was to herald future conflicts. He warned that the GTUC was viewed by the people as an organisation that had “attempted to hold the rest of the community to ransom in order to extract benefits for its members”. This, he asserted, was untenable in the “revolutionary situation, in which we are all working for the common good”. Yankey, in reply, said he hoped that the labour movement would be consulted on all future economic measures, and ended by maintaining that the GTUC was full behind PNDC efforts to rebuild the country. This was immediately belied by PNDC eyes when the GTUC called for a minimum wage of 300 cedis a day at a time when the lowest paid workers could expect only 21 to 25 cedis. Rawlings greeted the demand with derision and anger. It was “absolute rubbish – the outcome of ignorant minds. Are such people enemies?” (Adu-Amankwa 1990:100). The distance between the PNDC and the GTUC remained as to what a reasonable wage was.

The new GTUC leadership started attacking the various SAP measures for the nefarious effects on workers’ living and working conditions, leading to the development of increasingly antagonistic relations between the unions and the regime. For example, a resolution adopted by the GTUC executive board in 1984 noted

As a result of these IMF and World Bank conditions, the working people of Ghana now face unbearable conditions of life expressed in poor nutrition, high prices of goods and services, inadequate housing, continuing deterioration of social services and growing unemployment above all we caution government that the above conditions pose serious implications for the sharpening of class conflict in the society. (Herbst 1991:184)

The GTUC repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of the SAP “as being imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions”, the restoration of collective bargaining pr

cedures, and union participation in the economic decision-making process (Adu-Amankwah 1990). However, while they continued to agitate against the reforms, the new leaders clearly recognised that, given the autocratic nature of the PNDC, there were limits to the regime's patience when it came to confronting actual protests. The new secretary-general, A.K. Yankey, therefore sought to operate cautiously, doubting the ability of the GTUC to survive a war of attrition. Consequently, he usually tried to make known the GTUC position by presenting memoranda to the government and press communications to the general public. This form of trade-union protest appeared to have little impact on the government, which mostly ignored union demands. Only on rare occasions did the regime feel compelled to make concessions (Adu-Amankwah and Tutu 1997).

The GTUC's greatest victory during this period was in 1986 when the government unilaterally cancelled leave allowances for public-sector workers. The GTUC leadership told the government that lack of communication between the regime and the unions left it with no choice but to call a general strike. It exhorted workers to wave red flags and wear red armbands and headbands (the customary sign of mourning). The outrage expressed by ordinary workers, who perceived the allowances as a welcome addition to their meagre incomes, suggested that the strike enjoyed the overwhelming support of its members. The PNDC realised that it had gone too far and swiftly reinstated the allowances and soon also reactivated the existing tripartite institutions and created new bilateral forms of consultation. Subsequent government attempts to convene these forums on an ad hoc basis and to use them as instruments for compromising the unions (by having them accept already predetermined wage levels) created new sources of conflict between the PNDC and the GTUC. Workers, too, regularly expressed their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the tripartite negotiations. For example, at the May Day rally in 1991 they protested against low wages and waved banners, some of which accused their leaders of collaborating with the PNDC (Akwetey 2001:92).

The PNDC effectively deployed a variety of strategies to contain trade-union opposition. First, the government and its leading spokesmen, using the state-controlled media, continued to accuse the trade-union movement of being selfish, of making unrealistic demands, misleading the workers, and being engaged in subversive activities aimed at destabilising and derailing the revolution (Adu-Amankwah 1990; Gyimah-Boadi and Essuman-Johnson 1993). Second, the PNDC continued to use divide-and-rule tactics against organised labour, capitalising on the fact that the SAP had a differential impact on the various sectors of the economy. Thus, the Ghana Private Road Transport Union, which generally endorsed the liberalisation measures (increased fares, imports of vehicles and spare parts), and the Railway Workers' Union, which had benefited from the rehabilitation of the railways, were easily pitted against the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) whose members were threatened with privatisation and job losses (Nugent 1995). Third, while radical trade-union leaders were being hounded by the security agencies, the PNDC was careful to nurture its relationship with those it perceived as moderates. An excellent example is the

intimidating tactics used by the PNDC during the elections at the 1988 Congress in Cape Coast. These elections took place under the watchful eye of numerous state security agents. In his opening address, Captain (retired) Tsikata, the PNDC member in charge of national security who played a key role in the containment of labour during the PNDC era (Adu-Amankwah Nugent 1995), cautioned the delegates as follows against electing a militant ership:

The trade union movement is like a ship sailing slowly but surely to its destination. If we permit these infantile leftists, these super-revolutionaries, these people who want to be more Catholic than the Pope to seize control of this ship, [which] I say is moving slowly but surely, well for those who can swim, 'good luck', but for those of you who cannot swim, you better say your last prayers. (Adu-Amankwah 1990:103-4)

Due to these intimidatory tactics, the majority of the delegates refused to elect radical general secretary of the ICU and acting secretary-general of the C.L.G. Ocloo, as the secretary-general of the GTUC. Ocloo was later even forced to go into exile because of his outspoken and independent stand on trade-union matters. Yankey, who was then re-elected with the support of the PNDC, became more or less co-opted into the regime. He was subsequently appointed a member of the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), an agency created by the PNDC to oversee the formulation of new political and constitutional arrangements for the country. Following this appointment, he regularly assured the PNDC of GTUC support for its economic policies (Adu-Amankwah 1990). He was subsequently offered an ambassadorial post.

It is also beyond any doubt that some trade-union members remained susceptible to the regime's continued use of populist rhetoric. Rawlings, with his apparent honesty and modest behaviour, seems not to have lost his charismatic appeal as the champion of the common man (Hutchful 2002:175).

In the last instance, the PNDC did not hesitate to employ strong-arm tactics including coercion and repression. While the PNDC left workers some latitude in remoulding power relations in the workplace between 1982 and 1984, in the mid-1980s there was a good chance that the coercive apparatus of the state was being actively deployed on the side of management and employers in the event of a dispute. For example, when Cocobod wanted to lay off over 20 000 workers in November 1985, the PNDC passed a special law (PNDC Law 125) that ordered the management to ignore the labour law regarding retrenchments. When union leaders were summoned to the Bureau of National Investigation (the state security agency), were held for a couple of hours and then released with a warning to behave "if they did not want to spend Christmas in detention". Subsequently, the government was to deploy security forces at the GTUC headquarters to prevent its leadership from holding a mass meeting to protest against the method of retrenchment. It was a mark of the regime's ruthlessness in dealing

with worker and union protests that relatively few strikes were recorded between 1983 and 1991, even though labour discontent was running high (Gyimah-Boadi and Essuman-Johnson 1993:206).

### **The Ghanaian Trade-Union Movement and Structural Adjustment under the NDC (1992–2000)**

The global trend towards political liberalisation from the end of the 1980s, the new standards of Western governments and international financial institutions for capital allocation that linked structural adjustment to liberal democracy, and the growing opposition of urban civil-society organisations in Ghana to military rule all contributed to the PNDC announcement in 1991 that the country would return to a multiparty system (Nugent 1995; Drah and Oquaye 1996; Ninsin 1998; Hutchful 2002).

The GTUC has been an active advocate of neo-liberal reforms for a number of reasons, the most important being the creation of a political system in which it could operate without fear of repressive military tactics and could participate in the economic decision-making process. For example, the GTUC secretary-general, A.K. Yankey, made the following observation at the 1991 Labour Day rally: "Experience in Africa shows that SAPs fail if they are not based on a high degree of national consensus which depends on free and independent trade unions operating within a strengthened tripartite arrangement for the discussion of key policy issues" (Panford 2001:94). At its Third Quadrennial Delegates Conference at Cape Coast in March 1988, the GTUC called for the convening of a democratic National Constituent Assembly to formulate a constitution that could be submitted to the people for approval, and introduce a large measure of political liberalisation. It also took the lead in opposing the 1988 'no-party' District Assembly elections (Ayee 1994), urging a boycott. Although its pro-democracy and pro-human-rights position coincided with that of the Movement for Freedom and Justice (an opposition umbrella organisation created in 1990), the GTUC refused to join this organisation and support its struggle for the introduction of multipartyism in Ghana. And, even more significantly, around the time that the campaign for multiparty elections began in the autumn of 1992, the GTUC constitution was amended to prohibit the organisation from entering into alliance with any political party for the purpose of winning elections. This amendment appears to have been motivated partly by the bitter lessons learnt by the GTUC in prior alliances with political parties such as the CPP, 1958–66 and the Social Democratic Front (SDF), 1979–81. A second reason was a lack of confidence in the alternative constituted by the opposition coalition to Rawlings. The labour movement also mistrusted a number of opposition leaders who, as members of the Progress Party government (1969–72), had dissolved the GTUC in 1971 for its allegedly 'unofficial opposition'. As a result, the GTUC concluded that it would be in a better position to defend workers' interests if it preserved its autonomy towards the political parties. Its conclusion seems to be justified by the

generally negative experiences of trade-union alliances in other African tries. The Zambian experience highlights the fact that union alliances with political parties to facilitate political transition cannot necessarily guarantee that labour movement will become more influential in government circles. The alliance of the Zambian trade unions declined when its ally, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, committed itself to an ambitious economic liberalisation programme after electoral victory (Akwetey 2001; Rakner 2001). Union alliances with political parties also appear problematic in other African countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe (Webster and Adler 2001; Sachikonye 2001).

During the transition period Rawlings formed his own party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), which pledged to continue PNDC policies. Several authors (see Nugent 1995; Hutchful 2002) have already explained why Rawlings and the NDC were able to win both the 1992 and 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections. What is of greater relevance here is that it swiftly became clear that the NDC government would find it harder than the PNDC to implement the harsh SAP measures. Rawlings, who had never bothered to hide his dislike for neo-liberal political reforms, immediately blamed democracy for undermining the adjustment process. To a certain extent, he was right. Political liberalisation and mobilisation by the pro-democracy forces now encouraged more open, articulate and better-organised resistance to adjustment policies rendered repression less feasible as an avenue to policy reform. However, Hutchful (2002:220–23) aptly observes, internal processes of regime transformation in response to the challenge of competitive politics provide a second key to understanding the apparent lack of government resolve to execute the harsh measures, which drew scorn from international donors. The regime's increasing concern with winning elections was bringing about a shift in power from technocrats to political brokers who were more interested in patronage than in managerial rationality. Corruption by the ruling political elite became increasingly blatant, eroding the ascetic image that had served the regime so well during the early years of structural adjustment and robbing it of the moral stature and ability to demand sacrifices.

One of the effects of political liberalisation on industrial relations was renewed labour militancy. The civil and public services in particular were regularly paralysed by severe and protracted strike actions – a manifestation of the workers' relative freedom to voice their long-standing grievances about low real incomes, increasing retrenchments and job insecurity, persistent government efforts to postpone or reduce end-of-service benefits that prevented retrenched workers from setting up in the informal sector, and flexible management practices. On several occasions, workers invaded the office of the minister of finance and economic planning, Dr Kwesi Botchwey, who had occupied this post since 1982. He was generally perceived as one of the main architects of structural adjustment in Ghana, and threatened to hurt him.

The mounting social discontent exploded in 1995. Finally, on March 1, the NDC-dominated parliament approved a new value-added tax (VAT) of 17.5 per cent as part of the Bretton Woods institutions' strategy of enhancing public revenues. A few months later, on May 11, a group of opposition leaders calling itself the Alliance for Change organised a massive demonstration by workers, youth, the unemployed and members of the general public to protest against the imposition of the new tax. The anti-VAT protests, which were supported by the GTUC, were initially restricted to Accra but spread later to other regional capitals as well. The demonstrators chanted in Akan '*Kume preko*' (You might as well kill me now) to express their willingness to die rather than live under structural adjustment. In many respects, these demonstrations resembled the previous anti-SAP uprisings in Zambia (from 1985 to 1987) and in Nigeria (in 1986 and 1988–9) where revolts by the urban masses protesting against the withdrawal of subsidies and concomitant price hikes forced their governments to withdraw SAPs temporarily (Simutanyi 1996; Bangura and Beckman 1993). Although the anti-VAT demonstrations in Ghana were of a peaceful nature, participants were nevertheless attacked by members of the pro-government Association of Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, resulting in the death of four demonstrators and numerous injuries, some critical. Confronted with such a dangerous situation, President Rawlings recalled parliament from recess and, under a certificate of urgency, it reduced the rate of VAT to 15.5 per cent, before dropping it completely on June 11. The government also announced financial compensation for the deaths and injuries caused during the demonstrations.

Developments preceding the 2000 elections were reminiscent of events associated with the VAT debacle. After a lull, growing signs of public dissatisfaction with the effects of the SAP emerged that resulted in serious strikes, demonstrations and boycotts. There were various reasons for this renewed expression of mass discontent: there was the serious deterioration in the general economic situation as a result of the record fall of cocoa and gold prices on the world market coupled with a steep rise in the import of oil; the widening gap between the mass suffering of so many and the lavish lifestyles of NDC politicians and apparatchiks; and in addition the implementation of the Price Waterhouse Report. After expectation for several years that the report would finally resolve the thorny issue of wages and salary structures in the public service, it instead generated one of the stormiest labour responses in the country, almost leading to a nationwide strike (Panford 2001).

Political liberalisation also had important effects on the labour movement. Just before handing over power to the NDC, the PNDC allowed public servants, previously barred from direct collective bargaining, to bargain with the government over wages and conditions of service. The 1992 constitution for the first time recognised the right of workers to join any local, national or international union of their choice and to demonstrate against public policies without having to go through the cumbersome procedure of acquiring a police permit beforehand (Panford 2001). These constitutional provisions permitted workers to form and

join trade unions and trade-union federations that were not affiliated to GTUC. With the registration in 1992 of the Textile, Garment and Leather ployees' Union (TGLEU), a breakaway ICU union, the first non-GTUC union was born in Ghana. In April 1999, the TGLEU and a few other relatively small unions and public servants' associations founded a new trade-union federation, the Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL), to "inject new blood and competition into union organisation to meet the challenges of the SAP" (GFL 1999). The GFL is still in its infancy and has not yet been able to challenge the dominant position of the much older and larger GTUC in the field of industrial relations.

Having achieved a larger measure of autonomy during political liberalisation, the GTUC began to reassert its right to promote the interests of the workers through the pursuit of collective bargaining, participation in the national decision-making process, and other ways of representing the workers such as representation in parliament on issues that were considered of vital importance. Its newly elected leadership proved less reluctant to deploy the general-strike weapon to back demands for higher wages and to denounce the NDC government's repeated attempts to violate collective agreements as well as decisions arrived at in the tripartite and tripartite forums. For instance, in January 1995 the GTUC threatened a general strike on these issues. Subsequently, the government allowed the tripartite forum to negotiate a new national minimum wage, and promised to implement the decisions of the tripartite meetings (Adu-Amankwah and Panford 1997:265–6). The GTUC also began to explore other ways of forcing the government to respect collective-bargaining procedures. It has increasingly relied on the courts in Ghana, and has filed two complaints with the ILO to prevent the government from rejecting conditions of work and lay-off benefits established through collective bargaining.

Interestingly, the GTUC began to assume a series of new initiatives to meet the challenges posed by economic and political liberalisation. At its Fifth Quinquennial Congress at the University of Cape Coast in August 1996, it adopted a number of policies that it has been implementing ever since (GTUC 1996).

The first was to strengthen the organisation. The GTUC has been confronted with a declining membership since the implementation of SAP. Estimated membership has dropped from a peak of 708 000 in 1990 to 521 000 in 1996. One measure proposed to increase membership was the organisation of senior members in the industrial and commercial sectors, a measure that met with fierce resistance from the Ghana Employers' Association and individual employers in the case of the Standard Chartered Bank of Ghana. In this instance, the GTUC filed a court writ to compel the chief labour officer to issue a collective bargaining certificate to the senior staff involved. A second measure proposed to increase membership was an intensification of the unions' efforts to organise workers in the rapidly expanding informal sector. Since the 1970s, a few national unions had already started organising in the informal sector (Konings and Yanney 2000; Panford 2001). This was to be given a further boost by more



scious planning so that appropriate organisational forms would be developed for bringing informal-sector workers and associations into the framework of the union organisation. A few recent initiatives include the following. The Public Service Workers' Union has organised small-scale photographers into the Ghana Union of Professional Photographers, and the ICU assisted hairdressers and barbers to form the Ghana Hairdressers and Beauticians' Association. A third measure proposed to increase membership was to pay more attention to the organisation of women, who are more likely to lose their jobs during SAPs. Women will also be given more leadership positions within unions.

The second policy initiative taken at the Fifth Quadrennial Congress was the establishment of worker-owned enterprises. This initiative – not a completely new phenomenon in Ghanaian labour history – was an attempt to contribute to employment generation, to expand the base for union membership, and to improve and broaden the main sources of union finances. Following a close study of the Histadrut model in Israel, the GTUC had launched a number of worker-owned enterprises during the CPP era (Konings 1977:112–3; Damachi 1974:35, 60). In addition, within the framework of the military National Redemption Council's policies in the 1970s to 'indigenise' the commanding heights of the economy, the GTUC encouraged unions and workers to obtain shares in foreign and foreign-state enterprises (Konings 1977:151–53). It was thought that this would "create a greater sense of belonging and promote a higher sense of responsibility among workers" (Ninsin 1989:27). In 1996, the GTUC resolved to set up a Labour Enterprises Trust (LET) with a minimum share capital of 25 billion cedis. This was based on the assumption that an estimated 500 000 workers would contribute 50 000 cedis over a 20-month period. However, at the end of the subscription period it emerged that no more than 86 000 workers had contributed to LET, amounting to 5.5 billion cedis (only 22 per cent of the expected share capital) (LET Company 2000). The LET board then started investing in projects such as the Accra City Car Project, an insurance project, as well as water-tanker and radio-taxi services. Excluding the Accra City Car Project, the projects created 90 jobs. Future projects will include the establishment of a commercial bank, security services, fuel service stations, waste management, estate management, and a supermarket (Yanney 2000). A historic moment in Ghanaian labour history occurred in January 1999 when the local branch of the Ghana Mine Workers' Union took over Prestea Goldfields from Barnex, a South African gold-mining company, by investing its members' one-million-dollar severance award in continued mining operations. Workers and management resolved to run the first worker-owned mining company in Ghana, which was renamed Prestea Gold Resources Ltd, as effectively as possible. The 1473 miners took this radical measure to save their jobs and to forestall economic decline and social decay in the Prestea area (Yanney 2000; Panford 2001). It is still too early to assess the prospects for labour-owned enterprises in Ghana. Compared to South Africa (Iheduru 2001), 'labour capitalism' in Ghana is still at an early stage.

A third policy initiative taken at the Fifth Quadrennial Congress was the improvement of workers' representation and participation. While the GTUC continued to oppose SAPs, its opposition was weakened by the lack of a credible policy alternative. This can be attributed mainly to the fact that its search capabilities at present are too limited to intervene meaningfully in the policy debate (Hutchful 2002:173) and this is the reason why the GTUC needs to expand its research activities and collaborate more closely with the country's research institutes. Besides its determination to improve workers' participation in the national decision-making process and collective bargaining, the GTUC also decided to initiate a research programme on industrial democracy and evaluate the rank and file on workers' participation in enterprises. This drive for greater participation by workers is a clear indication that the trade unions are not only prepared to contribute to the development of a democratic culture in so doing but also to come to grips with forms of collective action that are complementary to traditional collective bargaining with its often confrontational nature (see Moyo and Schiphorst 1995). Realising that many enterprises will need to restructure if they are to survive and meet global competition, the unions appear to be accepting responsibility for improving their efficiency and productivity in exchange for a greater say in decision-making.

A final policy initiative taken at the Fifth Quadrennial Congress was the integration of relations with other civil-society organisations. Back in 1986 the GTUC had already mobilised the support of Ghana's most important public-service associations – the Ghana National Association of Teachers, the Ghana Registered Nurses' Association (GRNA) and the Ghana Civil Service Association – resulting in the formation of a common platform in defence of workers' interests, the so-called Ghana Consultative Labour Forum, but this came virtually dormant during the 1990s. In 1999, the GRNA and a newly formed public-service association, the Judicial Services Staff Association, came to join the new labour federation, the Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL). Besides the labour organisations, links to other civil-society organisations such as the Ghana Bar Association and the media were strengthened as well. In 1996 the GTUC requested that the government set up a national forum, made up of the state, the tripartite partners and important civil-society associations, on the state of the Ghanaian economy. This idea materialised in May 1996 when, under the auspices of the Tripartite Committee, labour, business and other civil-society groups such as the Bar and Journalist Associations met the government and political parties to discuss the economy (Akwetey 2001).

Ghana has often been presented as a model country for neo-liberal economic and political reforms in Africa. By strengthening its organisation, allying it to other civil-society organisations and adopting a number of new initiatives in response to globalisation, the GTUC, too, appears to be a trendsetter in state–union relations in West and Central Africa.



## Trade Unionism and Economic and Political Liberalisation in Cameroon

Cameroon used to be one of the most prosperous and stable countries in West-Central Africa but since the mid-1980s onwards it has been facing an unprecedented economic and political crisis (Konings 1996). After some initial hesitation, the Biya government could no longer escape from calling upon the Bretton Woods institutions due to the deteriorating economic situation. In 1988/89, it was forced to implement an SAP. Given the fusion between the post-colonial state and civil society, it is not altogether surprising that the Cameroonian trade-union movement put up hardly any protest against the austere SAP measures.

Trade unionism in both Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon was characterised by a high degree of militancy during colonial rule. Unlike their Francophone counterparts, Anglophone trade-union leaders appeared to disapprove of close alliances with the nationalist movement and parties, largely accepting the British-imposed model of autonomous and economic trade unionism (Joseph 1977; Bayart 1979; Konings 1993). However, following independence and reunification in 1961, the Ahidjo regime (1961–82) gradually succeeded in merging all the existing trade union centres into a single body, the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW), and subordinating it to the state for the sake of national reconstruction. As shown elsewhere (Konings 1993, 1998), Ahidjo's attempts to transform trade unionism from a vehicle of labour resistance into an instrument of labour control were never fully successful. Although the NUCW leadership was effectively co-opted into the hegemonic alliance (Bayart 1979), it often failed to impose 'social peace' on regional and local trade unions.

The close relationship between the state and trade unions continued under Ahidjo's successor, Paul Biya. At the 1985 Bamenda Congress, Biya changed the name of the single party from the Cameroon National Union to the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and commended the central labour organisation on the constructive role it had played in society. The NUCW, in turn, immediately changed its name to the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC), and its then president, J.E. Abondo, "thanked President Paul Biya a thousand times for all that he had done for the workers" (Fondation Friedrich-Ebert 1994). Soon afterwards, Mr Abondo was appointed minister of defence, a clear reward for his services to the regime.

Although the corrupt and authoritarian Biya regime swiftly lost its legitimacy during the severe economic and political crisis, the CTUC continued to support the regime. Like the ruling CPDM party, it strongly condemned the increasing calls in civil society for political liberalisation and the introduction of a multi-party system. When the first opposition party, the SDF, was formed in the Anglophone part of the country in 1990, the then CTUC president, D. Fouda Sima, expressed, as did other CPDM loyalists, "his total rejection of what the head of state has called political models imported from abroad" (Konings

2000:179). Together with other CTUC leaders, he subsequently participated in anti-democracy marches organised by the regime.

After the Biya government, under considerable pressure from the Bretton Woods institutions and Western donors, notably France, had been compelled to introduce a multiparty system and increased freedom of speech and association in December of that same year (Konings 1996), a growing dissatisfaction could be seen among the rank and file with the CTUC's performance and its continuing alliance with the ruling CPDM party. This was manifest in a series of strikes, particularly in the parastatal sector, against retrenchment and other SAP measures, and in the workers' support of the opposition. Many workers participated in the protracted 1991 'ghost town' campaign – essentially a civil disobedience action aimed at bringing the economy to a complete standstill and called by the radical opposition to force the Biya regime to hold a sovereign national conference (Takougang and Krieger 1998:126–31).

Even within the CTUC regional and local leadership, severe criticism of its position and calls for union autonomy versus the state and political parties could be heard (see Mehler 1997). The president of the CTUC in the Fako division of Anglophone Cameroon, C.P.N. Vewessee, who in the meantime had joined the opposition, was to become the most vocal opponent of the corrupt national leadership of the CTUC, openly condemning it for its continued alliance with the ruling party and its complete neglect of the defence of workers' interests during the economic crisis and the SAP. Moreover, he advocated the unions' direct involvement in the struggle for the establishment of a truly democratic system in the country. In February 1991 he declared:

The workers expect an independent and strong trade union organisation that would be autonomous in relation to all political parties and state bodies and institutions. This will relieve the trade unions of the rubber-stamp element in the country's political life. If the trade union does not become more militant and resolute in its demands, then the CTUC won't be of much help to the workers. (Konings 1995:531)

Under mounting pressure, the CTUC finally recognised the right of its members to join the political party of their choice on April 2, 1991. The new Labour Code of 1992 guaranteed trade-union autonomy towards the state, and the CTUC subsequently changed its name to the Confederation of Cameroon Trade Unions (CCTU) to reflect its newly acquired autonomous status. However, this did not mean the end of government intervention in the unions. The government developed several strategies to keep the unions under its control. The 1992 CCTU elections were clearly manipulated by the government buying the support of a number of delegates to make sure that Etame Ndedi, the trade-union representative in the CPDM central committee, instead of Mr Vewessee, the popular and outspoken Anglophone trade-union leader, would be elected president of the central labour organisation. While the government succeeded in this endeavour, it

could not forestall the election of a number of autonomous trade-union leaders. One of them, Louis Sombès, became secretary-general.

Government intervention in the union became even more overt in late 1993 when Mr Sombès was sacked by the union president, Etame Ndedi, for having called a general strike of civil servants in protest at severe cuts in their remuneration. Both the regime and the union president tried to prevent a meeting of the union executive, the majority of whom advocated Sombès' reinstatement. Not even protests from the ILO could dissuade the government from further intervening in the matter. It openly supported the installation of Jules Mousseni, a CPDM loyalist and second vice-secretary-general of the CCTU, who had been unilaterally nominated by Etame Ndedi as the new secretary-general of the union. This led the ILO to rebuff Etame Ndedi and the government at its June 1994 Annual Convention in Geneva by refusing to accredit Mousseni. Given the stalemate Sombès' dismissal had caused in the union and the Geneva debacle, the first vice-president of the CCTU convened a meeting of the union executive in July 1994, which decided to reinstate Sombès and sack Etame Ndedi instead. A few months later, in September 1994, security forces raided the union headquarters in Yaoundé and forcibly removed Sombès from office, throwing him into prison (Fondation Friedrich-Ebert 1994:78; Eboussi Boulaga 1997:347-8). Realising that not even the arrest of Sombès could prevent the CCTU from asserting its autonomy, the regime decided to sponsor a rival trade-union centre, the Union of Free Trade Unions of Cameroon, which was to serve as an instrument for the continuing incorporation of trade unionism into the state (Konings 2000).

Unfortunately, it soon became manifest that the CCTU was not going to play a more significant role in economic and political liberalisation than its new rival. From 1997 onwards it split into two factions, with both having claimed leadership ever since. Their struggles for power appear to have been motivated not only by differences over the federation's policies and strategies but also by sheer material interests: leadership positions in the federation offered the incumbents multiple opportunities to divert the substantial union dues to personal ends and to travel abroad regularly at the invitation of international labour organisations. The leadership struggle has given rise to numerous court cases, the organisation of several 'unity' conferences held under the auspices of the ILO and international labour organisations, and renewed government interference in the federation. The minister of labour, Pius Ondoua, has persistently refused to recognise the leadership of the reformist faction backed by the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), openly supporting the other faction that appeared closer to the government and its policies, and to meet and negotiate with the federation. On September 12, 2001, the secretary-general of the ICFTU, Bill Jordan, informed President Paul Biya that his organisation would lodge a complaint with the ILO about renewed government interference in trade-union matters (*Le Messager* October 1, 2001). Given the two federations' lack of defence of workers' interests, workers were increasingly inclined to resort to strike action during political liberalisation. This was particularly the case in the

Francophone area, where trade unionism tended to be centrally organised. In the Anglophone area, where trade unionism had a stronger base at the local and regional level, union leaders usually played a more active role in the defence of workers' interests (Konings 1993). For example, in the Cameroon Development Corporation, a huge agro-industrial parastatal in Anglophone Cameroon with current labour force of approximately 14 000, trade unionism has continued to play a significant mediating role between workers and management. When the corporation was in need of restructuring during the severe fiscal crisis starting in 1986/87, both management and labour called upon the union for assistance. For the management, the union was a vital organisation in controlling the anticipated resistance of the militant labour force to a painful adjustment programme. To the workers, it offered a defence in a situation where their bargaining power was extremely weak. To save the corporation from total collapse, the union agreed with the management in 1990 on austere adjustment measures, including a drastic cut in the salaries and fringe benefits of all the workers and managerial staff members, an increase in workers' productivity, and the introduction of a compulsory savings scheme, in return for management promises to safeguard workers' jobs. As soon as it became clear that the management was not keeping to the terms of the agreement and was laying off a considerable number of workers, the union called a strike in May 1992 that brought about several modifications favourable to the workers (Konings 1995).

The most important development during political liberalisation was the emergence of several autonomous trade unions in the civil and public services, especially in the educational sector. Their leaders strongly condemned the inactivity of the existing labour federations and pledged to contribute to the resurgence of militant trade unionism in Cameroon and to serve as a countervailing power to the ruling regime (Fondation Friedrich-Ebert 1994; Sindjoun 1999). Unsurprisingly, they soon became victims of state repression under the pretext that public servants were prohibited by law from forming trade unions.

The first autonomous trade union was set up by university lecturers when, on June 1, 1991, the Syndicat National des Enseignants du Supérieur (SYNES) was founded at the University of Yaoundé after security forces and pro-government militia had terrorised student opponents (Konings 2002). The regime did everything to weaken or eliminate SYNES. Its leadership was intimidated and eventually physically attacked. Its president, Jongwa Dipoko, and its secretary-general, Issidore Nomba, were summoned by the disciplinary board of the university and suspended from teaching and doing research for a period of two years because of their trade-union activities. After a complaint by SYNES, the ILO insisted in 1993 that civil servants in Cameroon be given the right to unionise. The Biya government simply ignored the ILO demand, arguing that an illegal organisation like SYNES could not lodge a complaint against the government.

Following the establishment of SYNES, other autonomous unions were formed in the educational sector. The most important in the Francophone area were the

Syndicat National Autonome de l'Enseignement Secondaire and the Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Primaire et Maternel. The most important in the Anglophone area were the Teachers' Association of Cameroon and the Cameroon Anglophone Teachers Trade Union. In January–February 1994, the autonomous trade unions in the educational sector participated in a general strike in the public service in protest against two drastic cuts in their salaries (amounting to 70 per cent) in 1993, the non-payment of their September–October 1993 salaries, and the 50 per cent devaluation of the Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) franc in January 1994.

Since 1995 the autonomous unions have called numerous strikes, demonstrations and boycotts in the educational sector. The majority of their demands concern reforms in the educational sector, participation in educational decision-making, and improvement in conditions of service. The government has been particularly reluctant to sign new statutes for teachers and to publish the text of application after finally signing these statutes.

Cameroon has often been presented as a bad adjuster. Cameroonian trade unions appear to have performed no better, having largely failed to play any significant role in economic and political liberalisation. The emergence of autonomous trade unions in the public sector is a sign of hope.

## Conclusion

One has to be extremely careful when making pessimistic or optimistic generalisations about the role of trade unions in Africa. My West and Central African case studies provide ample evidence that the widespread pessimism about the role of African unions in the current economic and political liberalisation processes seems to be more relevant to Cameroon than to Ghana, especially during the NDC era. It has been shown that a number of factors are responsible for the better performance of trade unions in Ghana than in Cameroon, notably their stronger organisational capacity, their greater autonomy towards the state and political parties, and their search for innovative ways to respond to neo-liberal economic and political reforms and to defend workers' interests.

Although the Ghanaian trade-union movement was able to maintain a certain measure of autonomy during the PNDC era, it largely failed to achieve any meaningful say in economic decision-making or to win any substantial concessions for its members. The military PNDC was one of the few regimes in Africa that succeeded in rigorously implementing the austere SAP measures, essentially on the basis of an ascetic, populist style of leadership and severe repression. Strongly convinced that a constitutional government would provide more space for the defence of workers' interests than a military regime, the GTUC became a strong advocate of neo-liberal political reforms. It thus provided a mass popular base for the country's democratic movement that had hitherto been derided by the regime as the preserve of the elite. Unlike the Zambian trade-union movement, the

GTUC refused to enter into any formal alliance with the opposition, fearing in part that such an alliance would harm its representation of workers' interests in a multiparty system.

During the NDC era, the government found it hard to execute its SAP in an environment of political liberalisation and electoral competition, leading to the resurgence of worker militancy and the development of increased trade-union autonomy. The latter enabled the unions to better defend workers' interests and promote trade-union rights. Even more significantly, the economic and political reforms have since become a source of inspiration for Ghanaian union leaders in their pursuit of new and innovative ways to mobilise workers. They have attempted to strengthen the organisation by recruiting new members from outside the traditional trade-union constituency, notably senior staff members, informal-sector workers and women, and have begun to establish worker-owned enterprises. They have taken a number of initiatives to improve workers' participation in the national decision-making process and in enterprises. And finally, they have created or intensified relations with other civil-society organisations.

Unlike its Ghanaian counterpart, the Cameroonian trade-union movement has failed to play any significant role during economic and political liberalisation, largely due to the close links between the neo-patrimonial regime and the union leadership. Even after the CCTU had finally achieved a certain measure of autonomy during political liberalisation, the government continued to intervene in trade-union matters for the purpose of political control and even sponsored the foundation of a rival federation led by members of the ruling party. Moreover, the CCTU has become almost completely paralysed by internal factional divisions and struggles for power. One of the positive consequences of the two federations' blatant neglect of the defence of workers' interests has been the emergence of militant autonomous trade unions in the public service, particularly in the educational sector. Unsurprisingly, their leaders have been subjected to persistent victimisation by the regime.

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