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Trade-Union Activism Among University Teachers During Cameroon's Political Liberalisation

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ABSTRACT

Academic staff trade unions in universities have succeeded in preserving a considerable degree of autonomy versus the state in a number of West African countries since independence, enabling them to play a significant role in the defence of their members' interests. Cameroon forms an exception in the region as it was not until political liberalisation in the early 1990s that an autonomous academic staff trade union emerged there. This article examines the role of this trade union amidst the deep crisis bedevilling the university system in Cameroon. Faced with apparent government insensitivity to its demands, it has displayed a considerable degree of militancy but its failure to achieve important gains for its members has, it will be argued, been mainly due to the government's evasive and repressive strategies. Only recently have the government and the university authorities become more prepared to solve university teachers' contractual problems and grievances through dialogue and negotiation.

Keywords: Cameroon, university crisis, trade unionism

1. INTRODUCTION

As elsewhere in Africa, political liberalisation in Cameroon in the early 1990s created more space for university teachers to organise and voice their multiple grievances about the deepening crisis in tertiary education and their poor living and working conditions. This led to an unprecedented degree of militancy in their actions that has received relatively little attention in the existing literature (cf. Woods 1996; Proteau 2002; Anugwom 2002; Bianchini 2001, 2004).

After independence, African governments started allocating substantial funds to the educational sector, mainly for developmental and egalitarian purposes (Boyle 1999). Generally speaking, however, gains have been more impressive in quantitative than in qualitative terms. It soon became evident that African governments simply lacked the financial means to continue subsidising the basic infrastructure needed to cope with the massive growth in the student population. This resulted in rapidly falling educational standards (Mbembe 1985; Ndongko and Tambo 2000; Konings 2002). It is common in Cameroon to hear people say that 'there is a shortage of everything in our schools and universities except students'. The severe economic crisis and subsequent structural adjustment

programmes have aggravated the situation, with state support for the educational sector being increasingly withdrawn.

Unsurprisingly, deteriorating conditions of service in African universities have negatively affected the morale and commitment of lecturers, who are expected to teach growing numbers of students in deplorable working conditions for little remuneration. Even worse, they were faced during the economic crisis with regular delays in the payment of their salaries and various allowances and, in some cases, with drastic cuts in these already meagre salaries. They are, therefore, inclined to hold the corrupt and authoritarian African post-colonial regimes responsible for their predicament. In the past, university teachers commanded respect and enjoyed high status in African societies (Foster 1965; Berry 1985) but this high status has been greatly reduced by the dramatic decline in their living and working conditions.

Given this situation, university teachers resorted first of all to individual solutions for their problems. Some are no longer prepared to be 'duty conscious' and are often absent, arguing 'little work for little pay'. Others try to combine teaching with a variety of informal income-generating activities, both during and after working hours, to secure a livelihood. Most university teachers are now involved in agricultural and/or commercial activities and it is, for example, not uncommon at night to get into a taxi driven by a university lecturer, or to find students drinking in a bar run by their professor (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002: 56). University lecturers are equally engaged in the sale of *polycops* (photocopied lecture notes) to students – a practice encouraged by the absence of basic textbooks and journals in the generally poorly stocked African university libraries. Some staff do not even hesitate to sell marks to students. Many university lecturers are also constantly on the lookout for short-term, but well-paid, consultancy opportunities on offer with NGOs and other external donors. And finally, a growing number of university teachers are applying for better-paid jobs in Cameroon's public and private sectors, and elsewhere. The African brain-drain has increased dangerously in the last few decades.

Besides such individual survival strategies, university teachers are also joining existing or newly created professional associations and academic staff trade unions for the defence of their common interests. In some West African countries – like Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Burkina Faso – academic staff trade unions have been common for a long time. Most of them have succeeded in preserving a certain measure of autonomy versus the state, which has enabled them to play a significant role in the defence of their members' interests in the post-colonial era (Anugwom 2002; Proteau 2002; Bianchini 2004).

In sharp contrast to these West African states, there were no academic staff trade unions in Cameroon after independence and reunification in 1961. The Cameroonian autocratic post-colonial regimes prohibited teachers in the public service from forming trade unions and managed to subordinate the existing trade unions to the state for the sake of national reconstruction (Konings 1993, 2003). It was not until political liberalisation in the early 1990s that an autonomous

academic staff trade union emerged, the so-called *Syndicat des Enseignants du Supérieur* (SYNES). Its leaders strongly condemned the inactivity of the existing state-controlled trade-union federation and pledged to contribute to the development of militant trade unionism in the country and to serve as a countervailing power to the ruling regime (Fondation Friedrich-Ebert 1994; Sindjoun 1999). They demanded university reforms, the participation of SYNES in the decision-making process, and a considerable improvement in its members' living and working conditions. They have responded to apparent government insensitivity to their demands by staging a variety of protest actions.

This article is divided into two sections. The first section describes the emergence of SYNES during the deepening crisis in university education and political liberalisation. The second section analyses the various actions taken by the SYNES leadership to realise university reforms and improvements in its members' intolerable conditions of service.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF SYNES

Until the 1993 university reforms, there was only one university in Cameroon, namely the University of Yaoundé. This university was established on 26 July 1962 with considerable French support (Ndongko and Gwei 2000: 126–41). Although it was officially a bilingual (French and English) institution after independence and reunification (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003), virtually all classes were given in French. Likewise, the university programmes corresponded in structure and content to those in the French university system (Tambo 2003: 18). This drastically reduced the success rate of Anglophone students, limited their access to the university, and increased their frustrations. Anglophone students and parents thus began to demand an English-speaking university based on Anglo-Saxon traditions that would be consistent with the education system prevailing in Anglophone primary and secondary schools (Konings 2002).

As could have been predicted, the University of Yaoundé gradually proved incapable of coping with the massive increase in the student population. The number of students increased from 35 in 1962 to 10,000 in 1982 and to 41,000 in 1992 (Mehler 1998: 59; Mbu 1993: 82) but the university infrastructure was able to cater for at most 7,000 students. Lecture rooms, libraries, laboratories and office space for lecturers were inadequate and lacked the necessary equipment.

Given this situation, the Cameroonian government eventually decided to decentralise university education against the advice of the World Bank, which strongly discouraged the creation of new tertiary educational institutions while Cameroon was in such a deep economic crisis. Decree no. 93/026 of January 1993 established six state universities in different regional centres and spelled out their governance structures and regulations. Four were to be bilingual: the

University of Yaoundé I (Centre Province), the University of Yaoundé II (Centre Province), the University of Douala (Littoral Province), and the University of Dschang (West Province). Of the two remaining universities, the University of Ngaoundere (Adamawa Province) was to be a French-speaking institution and the University of Buea (South West Province), in response to the long-standing demands of Anglophones for a university based on the Anglo-Saxon model, was to be English-speaking. Njeuma *et al.* (1999: 10) highly commended the above reforms:

The creation of six universities addressed the problem of regional distribution of universities. The improved regional distribution of universities made higher education more accessible to Cameroonians in undeserved regions and from low-income backgrounds. Many students, who might not have had access to university education because of the high cost of living in Yaoundé and the long distance of that city from their homes, now found universities physically and financially within reach... Furthermore, enrolments in other universities increased while those of Yaoundé have decreased considerably. Total enrolment has also increased after an initial drop in 1993/94, which is explained by the decision in that year to eliminate student bursaries.

What Njeuma *et al.* fail to mention, however, is that the 1993 university reforms created a serious problem with funding, as the World Bank had previously warned. As a result of the grave economic crisis that hit Cameroon in the mid-1980s (Konings 1996), the government lacked the financial means to provide the basic infrastructure for the six newly created state universities. Jua and Nyamnjoh (2002: 55) vividly describe the effects of insufficient funds on the setting up of an academic library at the English-speaking University of Buea:

No funds were allocated either for the purchase of books or for current periodicals. Ironically, in 1998 a new library, though still not befitting a university, was built with funding from *Coopération Française* – that is, by the French interests that were using the Yaoundé regime as their Trojan horse. Still lacking a budget for the purchase of books, the University of Buea depended wholly on philanthropic organisations and other sources. The university, in effect, became a cultural toxic dumping site for unwanted or obsolete literature. Its librarians had the arduous task of going through collections of discarded books in order to create a library which, in the social sciences, could easily fit into a living room of modest size.

A lack of funds also led to regular delays in the payment of salaries, causing university teachers undue hardship. And, even worse, their incomes were seriously affected when, in 1993, there was a drastic cut in civil servants' salaries amounting to 60–70 per cent, followed by a 50-per-cent devaluation in the CFA franc in January 1994 (Konings 1996).

Coupled with a heavy teaching load as a result of the massive increase in student numbers, the low salaries offered in Cameroon's university system have not only demotivated the existing teaching staff but have also made it increasingly difficult for the six state universities to attract new and competent staff. Cameroonian graduates of European and American universities are extremely reluctant to return to Cameroon, opting instead to live and work in countries where salaries are higher and where there are fewer obstacles to scholarly work. Returning graduates prefer to enter the military or join the police, trading the higher social status of academic life for a better salary. The cumulative effect has been the replacing of academics with PhDs with those holding only a master's degree. Of course, the serious shortage of high-level academic staff, in particular associate and full professors, discourages the introduction of PhD programmes (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002: 61).

The vast majority of the academic staff in Cameroon have also become unhappy with the existing political control in the universities and their authoritarian form of administration (Kom 1996; Ouendji 1996). There has been no clear separation of politics and academics in universities since the one-party state was established in 1966. All promotions and appointments to administrative posts are politically motivated: loyalty to the regime appears to be more important in a university career than intellectual merit. As Francis Nyamnjoh (1999: 107) has aptly observed:

The system has little regard for virtue and meritocracy, and proves to have more room for loyal mediocrity than critical excellence... A second- or third-rate academic, for example, who provides the regime with the conceptual rhetoric it needs to justify its excesses and high-handedness, is more likely to be promoted to professor (with or without publications) and made dean, vice-chancellor or even minister, and to accumulate portfolios, than his more productive but critical counterpart who is denied promotion and recognition for being a genuine intellectual.

Political control and censorship discourage dissent and stifle innovative and critical research. As a consequence, some university teachers find it more rewarding to engage in political activities than in scholarly pursuits. This phenomenon, incidentally, begins to explain their regular absence from the university during election periods when they are sent by the regime on campaign missions. A large proportion of the already meagre university funds are devoted to such political activities, while requests for scholarly and research activities, for example to attend conferences, are consistently rejected.

It was not until political liberalisation in the early 1990s that lecturers in the then single university institution in Cameroon, the University of Yaoundé, began to voice their multiple grievances and to organise themselves. This happened in the wake of the complete paralysis of university life by a protracted student revolt and the subsequent military occupation of the campus and brutal terrorisation of the newly established student organisation, the so-called 'Parliament', by security forces and pro-government student militia (Konings

2002). On 1 June 1991, the *Syndicat des Enseignants du Supérieur* (SYNES) was founded, the first autonomous trade union in the Cameroonian public service. A few days later, on 11 June 1991, the leadership of the new trade union filed a request for legalisation and registration, but this was immediately dismissed by the local administration as contravening existing trade-union legislation.

Cameroonian legislation on trade unionism in the public service is complicated, and even contradictory. The 1992 Labour Code generally excludes civil servants from forming trade unions. Nonetheless, Law no. 68/LF/19 of 18 November 1968 still provides for the legal existence of trade unions in the civil service provided the prior approval of the Minister of Territorial Administration has been granted. The problem is that such approval is rarely given, in spite of the political liberalisation process of the early 1990s. The few trade unions in the civil service that have obtained approval and registration were either created or controlled by the government itself. A further deterrent to the formation of trade unions in the civil service is the 1992 Labour Code that exposes leaders of unregistered trade unions to persecution.

The regime did everything it could to weaken or destroy SYNES, which it perceived as an illegal organisation led by a bunch of subversives and troublemakers. Its leadership was intimidated and even physically attacked. Its president, Jongwane Dipoko, and its secretary-general, Issidore Noumba, were summoned by the disciplinary board of the university and suspended from teaching and doing research for a two-year period because of their trade-union activities (Konings 2003). Its members were frequently subject to arbitrary punitive measures, including transfers, dismissals and the suspension of salaries. The government and university authorities resorted to police violence to quell any demonstrations and strikes by SYNES. For example, on 1 June 1993, at the SYNES university celebrations, the organisers were denied access to the University of Yaoundé's Amphi 700 (a large lecture hall) and events were subsequently held outdoors outside the Vice-Chancellor's office and in the presence of the military. The worst nearly happened when the operation's commander ordered the SYNES chairman to refrain from reading his speech (Ouendji 1996: 121). Even the building housing the union office was set on fire. After a complaint by SYNES, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) insisted in 1993 that civil servants be given the right to unionise in conformity with the conventions signed by the Cameroonian government. The Biya government, however, simply ignored the ILO demand, arguing that an 'illegal' organisation like SYNES could not lodge a complaint against the government.

Despite extreme government repression, the SYNES leadership, strongly supported by its membership, did not give up the struggle but undertook a variety of actions to bring about necessary university reforms, participation in the decision-making process and improvements in its members' deplorable working and living conditions.

3. SYNES ACTIVISM

Soon after its foundation, the SYNES leadership organised a variety of protest actions. It boycotted examinations and staged a number of demonstrations and strikes to protest against repeated delays in the payment of salaries and allowances to university teachers (Dipoko 1994: 97).

In April 1992 it sent a series of letters to the Vice-Chancellor in which it demanded an extension of the retirement age of university teachers from 55 to 65 and complained about the university teachers' low salaries as well as the insecurity prevailing on campus in the wake of military occupation and student militia operations.¹ At the same time, it issued a White Paper entitled 'The University in Cameroon: An Institution in Disarray' (SYNES 1992) in which it offered a critical analysis of the university system and administration in Cameroon and proposed various solutions. It particularly called for a depoliticization of the university, guarantees of university liberties and immunities, participation by the teaching staff in the decision-making process, larger investments in basic infrastructure, university decentralisation, appropriate syllabuses and teaching programmes, and better conditions of service for lecturers. The government and university authorities either ignored these SYNES actions or resorted to repression.

SYNES also participated in a general strike in the public service that lasted from 8 December 1993 until 10 March 1994. This was an overt protest action by civil servants against the 1993 cuts in their salaries, the non-payment of their September-October 1993 salaries and the 50-per-cent devaluation of the CFA franc in January 1994. The strike was supported by several newly created trade unions in the public sector, such as some of the teaching unions in Francophone Cameroon and the Cameroon Public Servants' Union (CAPSU) in Anglophone Cameroon, whose membership also included a number of public-school teachers. Inspection tours were organised by SYNES in the University of Yaoundé to ensure that lecturers kept to the strike. Names of blacklegs were noted and published in the national media. The government reacted by suspending some of the striking SYNES members and the SYNES leadership then resolved to report the Cameroonian government to the ILO for a second time.² It also created a solidarity fund, requesting all members contribute FCFA 10,000 towards the upkeep of their suspended colleagues.

Following this strike, the SYNES leadership spent a great deal of energy on the mobilisation of lecturers in the newly created state universities, setting up local chapters. It also sought to strengthen the bargaining position of teachers in general by establishing an alliance with other newly formed teaching unions in Francophone Cameroon, where trade unionism is extremely fragmented (Konings forthcoming). Together with the *Syndicat National Autonome de l'Enseignement Secondaire* (SNAES) and the *Syndicat National des Enseignants*

¹ *Dikalo*, 11 May 1992, p. 6.

² *Cameroon Post*, 1-2 February 1994, p. 16.

du Primaire et de la Maternelle (SNEPMA), it formed a federation in 1994, the so-called *Fédération des Syndicats de l'Enseignement et de la Recherche* (FESER). FESER devoted particular attention to the achievement of special statutes for the various categories of teachers in the public service, which were supposed to introduce significant improvements in their conditions of service.

Due to its own organisational activities and persistent repressive tactics on the part of the government, the SYNES leadership restrained from staging any major actions between 1995 and 1999. By the end of the 1990s, however, one could observe a certain relaxation in the hitherto strained relations between SYNES and the government. Under considerable pressure from international organisations and donors, the government appeared less inclined to immediately suppress any actions of autonomous civil-society organisations. While still refusing to give SYNES a legal status, it showed a greater willingness to enter into dialogue.

In fact, a renewed strike threat by the SYNES leadership in December 1999 led to the first negotiations between both parties. At a meeting with the new Minister of Higher Education, Jean-Marie Atangana Mebara, the SYNES leadership agreed to call off the planned strike after the minister had promised to find solutions to various SYNES demands, particularly a special statute for university teachers, a substantial improvement in their conditions of service, and the provision of well-equipped libraries and laboratories in the six state universities. Considering the urgency of the requested reforms, a 'stock-taking meeting' was then planned for mid-February 2000, which the minister later moved to 24 February 2000.

However, when the 50 members of the SYNES National Council met on 23 February 2000 to prepare for the planned meeting the next day, they discovered that the Ministry of Higher Education had not tackled any of the requested reforms. They became even angrier when they heard that the ministry had attempted to create a government-controlled academic staff trade union to fight SYNES with the assistance of Professor Mono Ndjana, a professor of philosophy at the University of Yaoundé and one of the regime's most faithful ideologues (Konings 2002). In response to the minister's 'manifestation of bad faith', the SYNES National Council unanimously decided to boycott the following day's meeting with the minister and to call a series of intermittent strike actions. SYNES members were even more determined to go on strike since the government had recently granted a new statute to other categories of civil servants, notably magistrates, the army and the police. Unsurprisingly, they immediately interpreted this as renewed proof of the government's lack of concern for the deplorable living and working conditions of those who had taught the country's political elite, accusing the government of discriminatory behaviour.³

The first week-long strike was planned to start on 20 March 2000. Some university authorities tried to forestall the strike, especially Dr Dorothy Njeuma,

³ *The Post*, 28 February 2000, pp. 1-2; and 13 March 2000, p. 9.

the Vice-Chancellor of the English-speaking University of Buea. She is a member of the Political Bureau of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) and extremely hostile to any trade-union activism on campus. At the beginning of the strike, she convened a university congregation, apparently intending to quell the strike, but it was heavily boycotted and only administrative staff and a handful of blacklegs attended. Faced with this serious blow, Dr Njeuma resorted to divide-and-rule tactics and tried to intimidate the assistant lecturers, who formed the core of the academic staff, by reminding them of their probationary status and warning them that participation in the strike might jeopardise their future employment. Nevertheless, the assistant lecturers stuck to their guns – a clear expression of the general level of discontent among the Cameroonian academic staff and the rank and file's confidence in the SYNES leadership. The massive adherence to the strike took Dr Njeuma by surprise as she had always prided herself on her ability to put down dissent.⁴

This strike action was followed by a few more between March and May 2000, but a planned strike in May 2000 was eventually called off 'in the interest of students and their parents'. The SYNES leadership realised that continuing the strikes might invalidate the 1999–2000 academic year with grave financial complications and subsequent problems for students and their parents. By taking the interests of students and their parents into consideration, the SYNES leadership wanted to show the public that they were not the irresponsible people they were often alleged to be by the government and the university authorities alike.

These strike actions had no other effect than to punish some of the strikers. In September 2000 the University of Buea administration announced that the contracts of three assistant lecturers would not be renewed. This measure was justified officially in terms of their failure to publish but as this is rarely a criterion for promotion in Cameroonian universities, it was widely believed that their participation in the SYNES strikes was the real reason for their dismissal. Despite threats of legal and strike actions by SYNES, Dr Njeuma refused to revise her decision. In an attempt to calm the potentially explosive situation, the Minister of Higher Education, Jean-Marie Atangana Mebara, decided to intervene in the conflict. After a meeting with the three assistant lecturers, he reinstated them but transferred them to the University of Douala.⁵ In acknowledgement of the minister's kind gesture, the SYNES leadership postponed a strike action planned for November 2000 but it made the minister understand, in no uncertain terms, that it would embark upon another series of strikes in 2001 if the government did not sign a special statute for university teachers before the end of the year.⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27 March 2000, pp. 1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 December 2000, pp. 1 and 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 January 2001, pp. 1 and 3.

When the two parties failed to come at an agreement on the special statute at a meeting on 14 December 2000, the SYNES launched another week-long strike on 15 January 2001. This strike, too, appeared to have no immediate effect. On various occasions, high-level government officials, including President Paul Biya and Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge, declared that the new statute was about to be signed, while on other occasions, they appealed to the SYNES leadership for patience, stressing that the government was incapable of improving the university teachers' conditions of service until the funds due from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative were available.⁷ Nothing happened, however. In the course of 2001, the SYNES leadership devised a new, supposedly more effective, strategy in the hope of achieving its major goal, the so-called 'Operation 0/20' – an action whereby students were given the lowest possible score (of zero) for each test or examination.⁸

Eventually, SYNES actions yielded some success. Decree no. 2002/041 of 4 February 2002 addressed some of the university teachers' longstanding grievances, including a modest increase in salaries and research allowances. Although the decree measures fell far below their expectations, SYNES leaders decided to fight for their actual implementation, having learnt from experience that the government could not be trusted. They therefore resolved that (i) Operation 0/20 would continue; (ii) lecturers would not set any questions for the end-of-semester examinations; and (iii) the second semester would not commence as scheduled.⁹ Soon afterwards, they called off these actions when it became evident that the government was going to implement the decree.

From 2002–2004, the SYNES leadership still threatened to go on strike a few times when the government postponed the payment of increased salaries and research allowances. Each time, however, both parties eventually arrived at a settlement, mainly because both the government and the university authorities have finally come to accept SYNES as a *fait accompli* and are more prepared to settle conflicts by negotiation than by repressive and evasive tactics.

4. CONCLUSION

Political liberalisation in the early 1990s created space for the emergence of an autonomous trade union for university academic staff in Cameroon. University teachers rallied around the new trade union, the SYNES, when it started defending members' interests in the grave crisis bedevilling the university system. This crisis is clearly multi-dimensional: the existing universities have been grossly under-funded – especially during the economic malaise and structural adjustment programme, their autonomy and academic freedom have been severely curtailed, and teaching staff have suffered a sharp fall in income,

⁷ For the HIPC initiative in Cameroon, see Tamba (2001).

⁸ *La Nouvelle Expression*, 23 October 2001.

⁹ *The Post*, 1 March 2002.

livelihood and status. The loyal support of its members has emboldened the SYNES leadership and has been one of the reasons for its resilience.

Denied all legal recognition by the government, SYNES could not achieve its objectives by peaceful means and was, therefore, compelled to initiate various forms of militant action, including strikes, demonstrations and the boycotting of examinations, to bring pressure to bear upon the government. While these actions tended to disrupt academic life, thus aggravating the existing crisis in the universities, they failed to achieve any major gains for SYNES members because of the government's uncompromising and authoritarian stance. Although continuing to refuse SYNES a legal status, the government has of late appeared to be more inclined to enter into negotiation than to rely on mere repression. Under considerable pressure from international organisations and donors, the government seems to have finally recognised that trade-union participation in the decision-making process is a more effective way of tackling the enormous problems facing Cameroonian universities and university teachers than evasive and repressive tactics.

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