



International  
Labour  
Organization

# Trade union unity, multiplicity and plurality: Lessons for the next generation of Myanmar trade union leaders in a globalized world<sup>1</sup>

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Countless studies show that wages today are amongst the lowest on record as a share of wealth, and inequality keeps increasing in country after country. Yet, more than a quarter of a century ago and more recently, the OECD (2018) clearly and unequivocally established that the existence of trade unions and the exercise of collective bargaining through trade unions was the best insurance against inequality and an efficient tool to build economic and social stability.

The capacity of working women and men to promote their interests rests on their ability to leverage collective power. It is in this context that trade unions today continue to consider the very essence of their existence and the organizational structures required to deliver progress on behalf of their members.

A past President of the Canadian Labour Congress, Bob White, used to state the obvious when declaring that working women and men gave themselves the benefits of an organization in order to move forward. He would always follow by saying that “to move backwards, they didn’t need an organization, they could do it all by themselves!”, meaning essentially by doing nothing. The somewhat casual comment reflects however an understanding of the trade union movement anchored on the inherent and effective organizing power of a group of workers.

Freedom of Association is a “fundamental, indivisible and inalienable” human right. Trade unions have the right to exist in order to defend and promote the interests of working women and men. The principle is enshrined in numerous United Nations’ international instruments, including in the International Labour Organization’s internationally recognized core labour standards. The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) is referred to as an “enabling convention”, highlighting that its implementation allows for other conventions and rights to be more efficiently realized.

The above echoes two distinct philosophies embodied in the trade unionism whereby, on the one hand workers understand and assume their collective power to join forces, and on the other, workers claim a fundamental right to draw workers into a collective organization as a matter of principle. In other words, one approach focuses on establishing a power relationship between workers and employers, and the other focuses on the recognition of the intrinsic right to associate. While the two statements are clearly not contradictory, they have led to quite different organizing approaches and different outcomes.

To understand the above, it is particularly relevant to look at how trade unions emerge, how they develop, evolve and mature. These characteristics hinges on the historical and socio-political context in which workers’ organizations materialize. In some countries, a reliance on the principle of Freedom of Association led to the creation of a plurality or even a multiplicity of national trade union confederations. In other countries, a focus on bargaining collectively led national trade union confederations towards more unitary structures.

The model adopted by trade unions in many anglo-saxon and northern European countries (UK, Germany, Austria, for example) is usually based on a *unitary* approach. One main national trade union centre or confederation where workers from various sectors, private and public are represented, regardless of social, political or religious affiliations.

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<sup>1</sup> The right of workers and employers to establish and join organizations of their own choosing is a fundamental right laid down in the ILO Convention on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948 (No. 87). Different models of trade union formation are therefore permissible under the Convention. Any restrictions on this right of free organization, such as the imposition of a trade union monopoly by law, represent a clear violation of the Convention.

## ▶ Trade union unity

In Canada, to illustrate, the main national trade union confederation –the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) - is the result of a merger that took place in the mid-1950s between a confederation of old trade unions bringing together workers of a particular trade (ironworkers, hat makers, printers – often referred to as guilds) and industrial workers’ unions (bringing together all the workers in a particular factory or workplace). Efforts continue to be made to maintain an internal balance and a broad representation of the earlier organizations’ personalities within the new structure so that every worker continues to feel comfortable belonging to the “House of Labour”.

There are variations of this approach of course. Scandinavian countries historically tended to have national confederations representing blue collar of skilled or unskilled manual workers; and white collar of professional, managerial, or administrative workers and academic workers. Interestingly however, in Denmark, the two national confederations for blue and white-collar workers have recently merged to increase their collective power.

These confederations sometimes referred to as “umbrella organizations” have the main advantage of size, and with it, policy and political influence as long as they can bring their affiliates to agree to a position. The affiliates on the other hand retain much of the power and resources for their internal priorities and programs. Organising new members, for instance, remains primarily within the jurisdiction of the affiliates.

## ▶ Pluralism

The Southern European model of trade unionism (France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, for instance) would today represent typical examples of plurality with three to five or so different national confederations, usually reflecting somewhat different ideologies or countries’ main political streams. This plurality broadly came about after World War II in the context of the Cold War. In Italy for instance, a Confederation exists with historic links to the communist party. A second one, set up after the war, is more closely linked to the Italian Christian Democratic party. And finally, a third confederation is more generally aligned with the social democratic parties. A similar scenario exists in Belgium (with socialists, Christians, and liberals).

In this approach, national confederations will each set up federations which compete for members in a particular sector. It will be evident that stronger ideological or political alignments create a stronger context for political activism by trade union militants, in addition to offering working women and men a more competitive climate for affiliation. A rather obvious limit of this model is linked to a division which authorities and other actors in the labour market will often seek to exploit.

## ▶ Multiplicity

Multiplicity, as a third model of trade unionism, has developed in some other countries (often in Asia and Africa), and is characterized by the existence of a substantially larger number of national confederations. This growth usually reflects stresses within an already fractured labour movement. It has been seen that, individual trade union leaders may sometimes opt to split up existing national confederations over trivial issues, undermining the unity of the trade union movement.

An example of this particular model is visible in Bangladesh, where in addition to six main confederations (all affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and representing six different political parties, there are a multitude of other national confederations. In some African countries, there sometimes exist over 40 or 50 national confederations, each of which, in reality, only represent some few workers in a couple of sectors of the economy.

The multiplication of new trade union confederations in some countries is often explained by the mere exercise of the intrinsic right to Freedom of Association. Another way of putting this would be to say that because the right to Freedom of Association exists, any group of workers can exercise that right and create a trade union organization or national confederation. In reality however, differences leading to the creation of new organizations very often reflect personal differences of opinion or conflicting ambitions amongst individual leaders within existing confederations. This multiplication reflects a way to avoid internal democracy through legitimate debates, statutory or congress decisions in the limited interest of individual personalities. In this approach, the focus is placed strongly on the identity of a leader and a perception of belonging to their expressed social agenda. The result is often small, weak and poorly resourced national confederations.

By contrast, in the more unitary approach outlined above, dues paying members perceive themselves more readily as the 'owners' of the trade union. Internal democracy becomes an essential element of the structures, and industrial democracy an important element of workplace objectives. An essential element of the unitary approach refers to the resources that workers themselves are willing to invest in their organization, or the 'You get what you are willing to pay for' principle.

Studies about the history and nature of trade unions in different parts of the world (Africa and Asia for instance) explore the impact of trade union plurality and more specifically of trade union multiplicity on trade union strength (ILO, 2012). The ITUC-Africa recently carried out an extensive review of its affiliates in a study on the state of the union movement (ILO, 2010). The study included countries where plurality and multiplicity are the prevailing norm, as well as some countries with one to two, more unitary national confederations. It will come as no surprise that the national centers in the latter countries were generally better resourced, with a stronger membership base and with a higher level of influence on economic and social policies within their countries.

The study found that in countries with more fragmented trade union movements, and where confederations are closely tied to various political actors, trade union leaders tend to depend more on these 'outside' political actors (political parties, governments, trade union solidarity support organizations) for resources than on their own union members' dues. The effect is a clear loss of independence for the leaders and the policies of their confederations.

Another impact pointed out in the study refers to lack of leadership renewal and the opportunity for young and energetic trade unionists to advance within the structures of their confederations. As older leaders depend on outside resources for income, they do not move on, creating frustration in young activists. In turn, these young leaders too often see the creation of new confederations as the way to assert themselves.

## ► Conclusion

The above raises lessons to reflect upon in countries such as Myanmar where, until 2012, trade unions were not allowed. As has been the case in many countries coming out of dictatorship, workers and activists have very understandably strived first to be heard, and to be recognized as legitimate. In Myanmar, as in some neighbouring countries, a number of trade union organizations and/or NGOs were set up with the stated intent to represent workers' interests.

It is important for trade union leaders on the one hand to thoroughly understand the socio- political, economic and historical contexts in which they seek to achieve leverage on governments and employers in best representing the legitimate interests of their members. It is equally important for trade union leaders to clearly understand that the different structures often proposed (including by Trade Union Solidarity Support Organisations - TUSOs) reflect the particular experiences of persons from countries with different models of trade unionism.

The same analysis - exploring the benefits and pitfalls associated with a unitary, plural and multiplicity models - could be made for employers and their organizations.

Finding the correct balance in terms of focusing human energies and available resources represents the main challenge for trade unions. As globalization continues to concentrate financial and economic power in fewer hands (World Bank, 2018), trade union multiplicity is not poised to serve the mobilization of workers' power, and will most likely instead lead to a waste of available and scarce resources. Given the relatively recent emergence of Myanmar's trade union movement, a more unitary approach, as explained above, may therefore offer better outcomes for trade unions and their members.

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