

**TRADES UNION CONGRESS (GHANA) AND INTERNAL  
DEMOCRACY: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT FOR SOCIAL  
ENGAGEMENT**

**By Akua O. Britwum**

**MAY 22-23 2003**

## 2.0 Introduction and Background

The information for developing this paper has been derived mainly from two APADEP<sup>1</sup> research projects. The first is a trend study designed to examine the historical experience of the Trades Union Congress (Ghana) (TUC) the second is a survey on the Trade Union Situation and Workers' Participation in Ghana. The TUC a confederation of 17 national unions and for decades the only labour centre in Ghana. Other labour associations operated as single labour organisations till 1998 when a few came together to form a second labour centre the Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL). The TUC still commands great influence on the labour front, and the word TUC in Ghana remains synonymous with organised labour. This paper utilises information from these two sources together with literature to examine union democracy as the basis of union strength.

Trades unions are restricted in terms of the proportion of the nation's labour force that they organise. The highest levels of representation achieved anywhere according to Adu-Amankwah (1993) is 40. In Ghana the coverage is about one quarter of formal sector workers. Their limited coverage notwithstanding they do have a role to play in terms of promoting workers rights. In the first place they provide example to other segments of the working population as the value of organisation in meeting needs and aspirations of the exploited and the oppressed. For the non-waged sections of the nations labour force trades unions provide a learning ground to associate consistently around their needs in order to develop forms of cooperation to help in the fight for social justice. Trade union strength was derived from their numbers, global character, organised nature, and the militancy of its membership. The nature of production was an additional instrument giving rise to, expanding and strengthening trade union activity. Finally they provide the test for the existence and strength of civil society an essential ingredient for enacting the principle of democratic autonomy in Africa.

The formation of trade unions cut across the troublesome ethnic, political, and religious divides. The location of trade unions in crucial sectors of the economy and their presence in urban administrative centres make their struggles a ready challenge to the stability of the nation state. Trade unions as a result manage to play significant roles in the governance of the countries in which they exist. They have been very instrumental in the fight for political independence of their respective countries from colonial rule and today they constitute a useful rallying point for resistance to oppressive and dictatorial regimes in Africa. Trade unions we identify as strong social movements in the fight for democracy and increasing recognition of people rights to decent living and participation in the process. We believe further that the strength of the unions is derived wholly from how internally democratic they are and the extent to which members feel that they own decisions and actions their leaders take

Several developments at the global level in the political organisation and production relations which begun as early as the 1980s, have cast doubt over the very existence of trade unions. Underlying these events is the shift in philosophy, which dictates a decline in state participation in production with a corresponding increase in the private sector dominance in production.

---

<sup>1</sup> APADEP stands for the African Workers' Participation Development Programme is trade union-university collaboration with funding from the FNV (Dutch Federation of Trades Unions) designed to establish permanent structures of education and research on the realities and local needs of African trades unions. Its activities started in 1982 and to date 12 African countries have been involved at various levels. They are Guinea, Cape Verde, Mali, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa.

These events have resulted in the following factors that have caused an erosion in trade union strength (Mozhayev 1990):

- Changes in the nature of production which no longer prompts workers to associate as they used to
- Decline in the size of workers with the tradition of organising and an increase in the number of golden-collar workers; highly educated and highly skilled specialists who are not much interested in organising
- Structural Adjustment Policies of the 1980s which has caused the transfer of nearly all public enterprises and industries to private owners who are only interested in making profit and therefore exploit labour.
- The dominant positions assumed by trans-national corporations who take over public enterprises; they are less susceptible to the influence of democratic institutions and changes in government policies
- Introduction of innovations such as rationalisation designed to cut labour costs
- World Bank and IMF who create conditions that gives them complete control over countries and only grant credits to developing countries who show proof that their economies are healthy by closing many “inefficient” enterprises, and modernise production with the consequence of reduced labour force and erosion of trade union strength.
- The accompanying liberalised environment where increased calls for democracy have come together with calls for pluralism even for trade unions.

The result has been a drastic fall in the membership of trade unions, loss of revenue and the break up of trade unions into even smaller units in some nations. Any attempt by workers to defend their interests by opposing ultra-liberal policies is interpreted by their government as attempts by trade unions to hamper efforts to modernise the economies of their countries (Kester, 1997).

The primary concern of trade unions has been the defence of workers rights in the work place. It has been easy to conceive of any process of defending workers’ right as promoting democracy. Very little attention is devoted to the union themselves and the extent to which their own structures promote the very democratic processes they hold governments and employers to ransom. Efforts aimed at strengthening trade unions have concentrated on the space trade unions can create within the work place and at the national level to impact on decision making. Such an approach concentrates on examining the strength and weaknesses of the trade unions and the structures within the work place that can be used to promote worker participation in decision making. Issues of democracy are seen more in terms of how national political structures can be used to promote trade union activities and hence impact on labour rights (Fossum 1985; Kester 1997).

The question such a situation raises is whether unions have been too concerned with job security and/or union security to examine how the ideals democracy they pursue transcends into their own fold. Union democracy is central to union strength and to their survival as social movement engaged in the fight for a democratic society that recognises the rights of its citizens to a decent living. The strength of unions depends on the legitimacy which is derived from a strong sense of ownership that members have of the policy direction of the leadership. It is with this strength that trade unions in Africa can engage the governments on economic policy—NEPAD being one such example.

The concern with NEPAD has been in relation to its fundamental flaws as a developmental alternative to Africa's economic problems. The concern is based on the belief that NEPAD derives basically from the ultra-liberal economic perspectives of SAPs which are responsible for the present socio-economic problems that African countries are experiencing. The economic strategies that have evolved and the revisions in the role of the state, has resulted in a decrease in the government responsibility towards its citizens.

This paper recognises that it is no longer adequate for trade unions work for reforms of the various editions of the neo-liberal economic policies that African governments whether voluntary or involuntary impose on their nations as development strategies. Trade unions in Africa should lead the process for developing alternatives that their governments to adopt and implement for the desired social change that will take their countries out the present state of dependence. This process call for strong unions that have the mandate of the people they represent. The paper examines union strength and the extent to which they are ready to engage with their governments by presenting the trade union situation in Ghana as a way of opening up a debate about union strength and the ability of African unions to engage their governments in the search for alternatives. The movement for democracy and the increasing recognition of the right of all peoples to decent living and participation in the process that shape their lives should in itself be democratic. A goal that is altruistic should translate into the organisational structure that is developed to pursue its realisation.

The principles for evaluating union democracy should be based on how unions can be made to operate to promote survival and internal cohesion (Fossum 1990; Mozhayev 1990; Coleman 1960). Trade union democracy covers several issues that are seen to ensure membership participation in union activities and decision-making. Issues examined therefore are those that are related to representation, the extent to which trade unions are representative of the labour force within a particular country and how socially representative union leaders are of the membership they represent. The expectation is that trade union leaders will be in a better position to serve the interests of the people they lead once their background is representative of the group their decisions affect. Leadership influence and the amount of power they hold over membership is also an area of concern to works that examine union democracy. Other issues that have informed discussions on union democracy are what have been described as time-line factors (Walter and Lipset 1960) i.e. conditions in the history of trade unions which have influenced internal democracy specifically succession to leadership position, adaptation to crisis situations, and the nature of the origin of the union. These events have been known to shape to a large extent internal democracy in unions. Examining union democracy should afford an opportunity to evaluate union cohesion as well as the opportunity to suggest ways in which trade unions can be assisted to strengthen their internal structures in order to face the challenges that the present political and economic environment pose for them. The discussion here will cover three areas of the structure and operations of the TUC, authority structure, time line factors and female representation and participation in union activities.

## **2.1 Authority Structure**

The TUC co-ordinates the activities of its affiliated unions, gives guidance on labour matters and speaks on behalf of all labour in Ghana (Obeng-Fosu 1999). The TUC also provides delegates to the ILO and other international conferences and is responsible for providing representatives on a number of state Boards and Committees that deal with matters of concern to workers.

In theory, it is a powerful organisation in practice it is a loose confederation of national unions, which derives its survival and existence to what the national unions make of it. It has no direct membership and few owe it direct allegiance.

Two main organs operate the TUC; it's political wing comprising elected officers and the administrative structure, the technocrats and others whose work gives support to the political section. The elected officers are drawn from the TUC membership; officers who head the specialised departments that make up the administrative wing are appointed from the larger world of job seekers. The political wing includes the governing bodies of the TUC from which authority to take decisions rests.

The authority structure of the TUC is multi-layered, spanning eight levels with each layer having distinct areas of authority. Membership in each layer is clearly defined; some of the layers though repeat membership. The eight-layered structure is composed of the District Councils of Labour (DCL), Regional Councils of Labour (RCL), the Executive Committee (EC), the Finance Board, the Steering Committee (SC), the Executive Board (EB), the Secretariat and the Quadrennial Delegates Congress (Congress) the highest decision making body of the TUC.

The allocation of duties and responsibilities within the TUC is determined by its constitution. Lower levels of organisation are charged with responsibilities that concern their peculiar needs and interests at the district or region. The subject of discussions at meetings also points to differences in levels of responsibility and this has implications for the authority jurisdiction of a particular layer of TUC's organisation. Regional and District Councils of labour spend meeting times discussing welfare and educational issues, with few or no instances of touching on the issues that affect the running of the entire Congress. There are reports of DCLs voting to give support to TUC decisions an indication that DCLs are not the source of important decisions that guide the work of the Congress.

Congress is the supreme authority of the TUC in the sense that no other body can reverse its decisions. Congress is the only body that can amend the TUC constitution but the decisions as to what to amend does not originate from it. The EB also has the mandate to determine the criteria for inviting observers to Congress. The part that the Secretariat Bureau (SB) played in initiating decisions for the EB to endorse for the subsequent approval of the Congress suggest that most of the ideas that directed the TUC originated from the SB. The EC, and the SC, now play this role<sup>2</sup>. Though the two bodies, the EB and SC are different technically, in composition they are the same most of the members with voting rights in the EB make up the entire membership of the Steering Committee. The role of the SC, the EC, and the EB as bodies, which run the affairs of the TUC in between Congress, gives them considerable powers. In fact, the constitution describes them as the governing bodies of the TUC. The frequency with which Congress can meet affects how much power it can wield.

When the TUC first came into existence, delegates met annually. This was changed to biannual conference at the turn of independence and later to an affair that occurs every four years. The business of convening Congress is so expensive that it can not meet with the same frequency as the others.

---

<sup>2</sup> With the coming into force of the new constitution in the year 2000 the Secretariat Bureau's functions have been taken over by the EC and the SC.

Shively (1991) has raised the fact that a significant part of government power of any state is not necessarily under political control. Public administrators as a group have a significant power, as a result of their role in policy making. Union structures reflect state government structures in the sense that there is a core of elected officers who take decisions on behalf of union members and a group of administrators who assist them in the performance of this task. These administrators generally have specialised knowledge in the areas that they operate and a higher educational background than the elected officers they assist. Most receive further specialised training and education even whilst on the job. Elected leaders on the other hand rise through the ranks as labour activists. The structure that requires and allows elected officers to acquire specialised training for their positions is almost ineffective. Very few elected officers receive training on the job to the same extent as the administrators.

The specialised departments of the TUC are an important part of the TUC structure. Even though they are only supposed to have administrative responsibilities, the practice of their duties gives them some amount of power. They produce the research reports that guide TUC decisions; the officers are members of the EB and the SC, significant bodies in the governing structures of the TUC. Thus whereas the membership on the SC excludes Regional Secretaries, and the EB, District Secretaries, the Heads of the specialised departments are members of these two bodies. Within the Constitution of the TUC, the Secretariat is placed higher than the RCLs and the DCLs. This appears to give some recognition to its authority in the power structure of the TUC.

A remarkable part of the government to the TUC can therefore be said to be under the indirect control of these specialised departments and their heads. Shively's contention that the politically responsive part of government must ensure that administrators are put under control might not be too easy to ensure in the TUC for several reasons. They are responsible for providing information that guides decisions. This responsibility gives them considerable authority to determine which way decision-making should go. High educational background and responsibilities of the specialised departments according to Arthiabah and Mbiah give their heads some impressions about their importance in the TUC's structure. They report instances of rivalry between General Secretaries and some heads of departments. Some have felt themselves to be in a better position to head the TUC than the General Secretaries of the national unions who aspire to the position of Secretary General. There is record of departmental heads that have become elected officials of the TUC; no elected officer has ever opted to become a head of department.

Clearly the decision making within the TUC is top-down and highly bureaucratized and leaves little room for membership participation. The trend has been to increase the efficiency with which the TUC affairs are executed by expanding membership of top decision-making bodies, bringing and creating more decision-making structures. Efforts made to activate inactive layers and strengthen administrative structures that support the political wing of the TUC. What remains is the creation of a link between districts and top layers of the TUC governing bodies.

## **2.2 The Origins of the TUC**

Trade union origins in Ghana have been attributed to two main factors, the reaction of workers to situations they consider to infringe on their rights and colonial labour policy. Popular grassroots organisations in reaction to felt threats to workers' interests first gave impetus for workers to organise. Later efforts of the colonial government offered the environment for organising union

activities which were described then as haphazard and lacking structure (Arthiabah and Mbiah 1995; Obeng-Fosu 1999).

The initiative that brought the TUC into existence has been credited to the Railway Union. When it was first formed, the Gold Coast Trade Union Congress as it was then called had a membership of 6,030, within fourteen (14) unions with its headquarters at Sekondi. Later events in the 1952 caused the creation of the Ghana Trades Union Congress by a group of unemployed. In 1953, however two were merged to form the TUC as it is known today. Subsequent political developments drew the TUC into the struggle for independence, creating a bond between the TUC and the post independence government of Ghana (the Convention People's Party—CPP). This bond laid the foundation of certain structures that still affect internal democracy. The early leadership of the TUC developed a strong link with the ruling party to the extent that the TUC was seen as the labour wing of the party. Leadership moved into high government positions such as Ministers of State and Ambassadors. Ready union support for government policy was assured. The trade union and state relationship according to Fashoyin (1992) is not peculiar to Ghana, it is a continent-wide event described as political unionism where trade unions in Africa were expected to play production roles, by stimulating productivity and at the same time moderating wage demands in the national interests. The close association between trade unions and ruling governments has given African trade unions their distinct character today.

The years 1957 to 1965 have been described as years of prosperity in terms of membership growth, guaranteed union dues and above all, peaceful industrial atmosphere. This was the result of gestures of appreciation on the part of the CPP government to the TUC for the contribution of workers to the struggle that brought political independence to Ghana. The appreciation came in the form of legislation that gave legal backing to the right of labour to organise, payment of dues by the check-off system and gifts of infrastructure like the hall of trade unions in Accra. Union mergers under Industrial Relations Act 1958, the Union Shop Act (compulsory Union Membership) in 1960, and the check-off system provided a sound financial and structural base for the National Unions and the TUC. Trade union structure in Ghana has therefore been dictated by the state's conception of workers' role in national development and labour rights for organisation, the beliefs of activists as a determining factor in shaping the course of trade unionism has been on the low side.

The check-off system introduced by legislation through the CPP government has contributed immensely to enhance union activities and reduce the need for unions to recruit in those areas that they are already organised. It has given the national unions and the TUC access to considerable funds to support their activities. Unions are spared the trouble of having to go after workers to collect dues and levies and organise workers in workplaces that are already registered. The check-off system promotes complacency on the part of leadership, since there is no need to organise fresh recruitment in workplaces where workers are already unionised. The captive membership encourages apathy, they find themselves trade union members not as a result of any believe that they have but simply because of the place they work. Reports from the districts indicate that most workers do not identify readily with the TUC but rather relate the identity of the TUC with its District officers. One DCL officer reports that members of local unions say to him "TUC we do not hear of you these days"<sup>3</sup>. The fact that membership participation is considerably low can be attested to by reports of low meeting attendance in the districts and the regions. Low participation is further compounded by the very low frequency with which meetings are held.

---

<sup>3</sup> Personal interviews with members RCL of the Central Region, February 2000.

Analysts say that TUC/state alliance was unavoidable under the CPP because the party was considered a workers' party as a result of the socialist ideology it pursued and the earlier co-operation fostered between the CPP and TUC during the struggle for independence. The flip side of this association was the fate the TUC suffered when the CPP government was overthrown. The loss in terms of assets, arrests, and detention and the breakdown of its entire structure have been well documented by Adu-Amankwah, Arthiabah and Mbiah as well as Obeng-Fosu. Membership allegiance to leadership was put to a test and failed. There was no organised attempt to resist the military government's interference in trade union affairs. Membership of TUC had already been disillusioned by the increasing interference of the ruling party in TUC affairs.

Later events lead to a divorce between TUC and the ruling governments but did not reduce state interest in TUC affairs. The factors that have dictated TUC/state relations over the years have been the industrial environment, which depended to a large extent on government's economic policies and their effect on labour interests. TUC/state relations have taken three forms over the years; there were the early years of close association that brought prosperity to the unions later, years of hostility on the part of government to trade union influence on labour which have seen attempts to reduce that union power. The longest and closest association has already been discussed that with the CPP government, which produced positive gains, but at the same time set the tone for subsequent TUC/state relations that have been chequered over the years. The last form is what operates at present, a neutral stand where TUC maintains its independence from government. The neutral stand was expected to keep it out state manipulation and remove the attraction to make it a target for control.

The initial period of crisis and hostile state relations with government is the first military coup of 1966. The most important point here is how vulnerable the TUC became and how its close association with state created a cleavage between leadership and membership. The result was the loss of leadership contact with membership and in that a loss of membership solidarity and allegiance. When government protection was lost it became easy to get rid of union leaders, reduce the influence of the TUC and put in place a system that would be less threatening to the anti-worker policy of the military government of 1966. The hostile relations were transferred to the civilian regime of the Progress Party that succeeded the military. The ruling party had hopes of promoting free enterprise and practising western type democracy it was therefore believed that state-union and union-employers relationship should operate on the conflict model. The ensuing tense industrial unrest led to a strained industrial situation that only served to heighten the already hostile relations between the state and the TUC.

The considerable losses suffered by the TUC in that period still affect its ability to promote internal democracy today. Adu-Amankwah, (1990) Arthiabah and Mbiah (1995) and Obeng-Fosu (1999) have documented these losses. They include a repeal of the compulsory trade union membership Act that led to the loss of the civil service membership of the TUC and the sale of trade union assets and the decentralisation of its funds to the national unions. Others are the burning of TUC documentation creating a data blank in the affairs of the TUC from 1950s to 1960s. The TUC has considerably difficulty with mobilising its funds because National Unions have more control. The TUC staff as a result is poorly paid compared to staff of the national unions.

The loose cohesion and lack of commitment of membership as well as leadership to the independence of the TUC was revealed further in the period when members of national unions participated actively in the dissolution of the TUC. The board of receivers who toured the regions in 1971 to sell TUC assets included TUC officers. The national unions required very little

motivation to organise extraordinary conferences to draw up new constitutions to meet the dictates of the ruling government. Considerable efforts were made later by the second military government of 1972 to restore the loss TUC suffered under the previous governments. Most of its assets were restored and laws dissolving it also repealed.

The military regime of 1981 saw the TUC as a possible source of opposition to its broadly populist policies. The TUC at that point in time was seen as too strong for the state. The old strategy of direct interference where TUC leaders were dismissed was not appropriate at this moment in Ghana's history. The government adopted a method described by Adu-Amankwah as more sophisticated. Worker upsurge in Accra-Tema Metropolitan area led to the formation of the Association of Local Unions (ALU). When the ALU failed in its first attempt to oust the leaders of the TUC the state intervened directly and froze the accounts of the TUC and the national unions. The police were further deployed to place the Hall of Trade Unions under heavy guard. The Secretary-General and some General Secretaries of National Unions were forced to resign. In April 1982, the ALU formed an Interim Management Committee to run the affairs of the TUC.

The ALU take over of the TUC leadership according to Adu-Amankwa was in reaction to a long period of discontent with the leadership which had failed to divorce itself from the gratitude owed the military regime of 1972-1979 long after the regime had been discredited. Economic decline and the loss of workers rights that ensued created a lot of discontent in workers. The position of the TUC made it incapable of defending workers rights. Membership accused the TUC leadership of "bureaucratism, opportunism, betrayal of the interests of workers and self-perpetuation in office" (Adu-Amankwa 1990: 95). This discontent was fuelled by calls from the military regime of the Provincial National Defence Council in 1981 to workers to assert their rights by exercising the so-called "power to the working people" that the coup of 1981 had given them.

ALU take over however met internal resistance, some local branches withheld their dues, others denounced the take over, yet more refused to dispose of their elected leaders. The state was very instrumental again in asserting the rule of the ALU. Workers of Takoradi an industrial city located to the Western region of Ghana organised a protest demonstration to capital Accra the strong arm of the state the army stopped the demonstration before it could leave Takoradi.

The wave over which the ALU take over was riding fizzled out and by 1983 a renewed TUC was in place with fresh leadership and slightly revised constitutions. The new leadership however was made up mainly of members of the "old regime" a few ALU radicals and a new crop of activists who had emerged as a result of events in the period. The ALU take-over also left its dent there were reports of lost assets in the form of documents and funds that to today remain unaccounted for. The consistent maligning of leadership by the state media created discontent amongst membership that still lingers in the form of court cases and lockouts of General Secretaries. The authority of TUC over the national unions was reduced further.

The years 1988-1990 has been described as the period when the TUC and the state both viewed each other with suspicion and unease. The tense relation between the state and the TUC was a result of the ultra liberal economic policies adopted by government, which infringed substantially on workers' rights. It has become a TUC policy to stay out of politics, maintain neutral relations between itself, and state. Its neutrality is affirmed in its constitution that maintains that it remains independent of party politics. None of its leaders and members of the EB are allowed by constitution to hold political office or address rallies organised by political parties. The constitution prescribes a penalty for this. It has become one of the most important civil society organs that

exercise a critical protection of civil rights as a result of its distance from the state. What remains to be done is enhancing membership participation to such extent that ruling governments will be unable to interfere in the affairs of the TUC without meeting stiff and sustained resistance from members. This is an important pre-requisite for the TUC to engage with government for social change.

### **2.3 Female Trade Union Representation and Participation**

The TUC is a male dominated organisation. Its membership strength does not reflect fe/male proportions of the Ghanaian labour force. In Ghana the low representation of women in the trade unions has been blamed on occupational sex segregation. The employment sectors in which trade unions are organised tend to exclude a large proportion of working women. Trade unions activities are concentrated on formal sector workers where female labour force participation is very low. It has been estimated that over three-quarters of the female labour force in Sub-Saharan Africa is in the informal or the domestic sector where trade union organisation is very weak (APADEP; 1997). In Ghana out of an estimated labour force of 8 million, only 500,000 are covered by the trade unions. Out of this 25% are women.

The low female membership is further compounded by very low levels of active female participation in union activities. A summary of APADEP research results for Ghana, Guinea, Mali, and Tanzania in 1997 revealed that women were marginalized in the trade union world. They were said to be a small minority and were under represented in trade union structures. Women hardly had any access to trade union leadership. The situation of low female involvement in trade union activities has led to a biased assumption that women are not involved with the trade union because they do not want to. The implication of such an assumption according to Walton is that women have a free choice. They can and do make a conscious choice to be or not to be part of the trade unions or take part in trade union activities. This is far from the reality, several forces bind women's lives, which gives them little choice to participate actively in trade union activities.

The governing structures of all the 17 national unions that make up the TUC reveal male dominance in terms of leadership. The proportion of female held positions in the leadership structure of trade unions decreases as the positions rise in terms of hierarchy. Female representation tends to increase at the lower levels of local and branch unions. Such proportions of representation however do not reflect union membership in most instances. A substantial proportion of the offices held by females were representatives of female groups or concerns. The rest tend to be positions that pander to sex stereotypes like trustees and secretaries.

In 1992 to 1996 for example out of a top professional staff of 39 persons, only six were females representing 15.4%. Five out of the six held positions that made them directly responsible for women issues. The sixth was a data processing officer. Until recently when women's wings were created in the TUC, females held no top positions in the union structure. The problem is far from being solved despite the actions that have been taken. Female participation in union decision-making is low. Deliberate policy of 25% female participation in trade union activities is able to ensure that participation in Congress is proportional to the female/male composition in the TUC. The same cannot be said for the other governing bodies, female/male proportion on the EB and Steering Committee are 6.7% and 3.1% respectively. The Executive Committee as now constituted has no female representation because females are yet to be elected as officers of the TUC by Congress. Females who hold office at lower union levels are more likely to be trustees, positions that do not command too much power in terms of decision-making amongst the executives.

The extent and nature of female participation in TUC is revealing because not only does it tell us the level at which female workers participate in decision-making but also that female involvement in union activities is weak. The situation becomes one of a great challenge for the TUC to ensure that the membership it claims to have under its umbrella should all be involved with the same intensity in all its activities.

The TUC acknowledges low female participation and representation is a problem and has committed itself to improve the situation. A special unit was set up in 1969 to deal with gender issues guided by a gender policy<sup>4</sup>. The justification for its gender policy states that “TUC and its affiliates have recognised the relevance of responding to a changing situation and conditions that undermine its character as a democratic organisation”<sup>5</sup>.

The strategies adopted are multi-faceted; they include capacity building and skill acquisition for potential female activists. Other procedures set in place include creating special positions in the core leadership and the EB for women. The policy’s strategies also include special educational programmes that the four regional women’s organisers are supposed to spearhead. The TUC’s policy also ensures that female participation in all activities it organises have a 25-30%.

The efforts to improve women’s participation in union activities have made some success in terms bringing more women in decision-making structures of the TUC. The policy document of 1996 records growing consciousness amongst women and women holding positions previously considered male preserves. National unions are reported to have appointed women co-ordinators and set up structures to deal with women issues at all levels. National unions have also amended constitutions to provide space for women to participate in union activities. The success has been possible because of the special positions created for women. Women are yet to fill traditional trade union power positions on their own strength. They continue to participate on decision-making bodies as observers with no voting rights. Males are more likely to receive trade union education than females and female training is restricted to local, district and regional level. An APADEP survey revealed that most union activist blame women’s under representation on their lack of capacity and apathy and that women’s entry into the TUC governing structures is the problem. Once women gain entry into leadership positions their perception of their union work is the same as for men (Britwum 2000). It is also not clear the extent to which female activists participate in activities that have not been designed exclusively to address women’s issues (Britwum 2000). This will require further investigation.

The 1996 policy laments the minimal impact that has been achieved and points to gaps in the areas of minimal collaboration and co-ordination between the women’s desk of TUC and the National Unions. Other gaps identified include the absence of information sharing structures between the TUC and National Unions and the gross under-representation of women in decision-making positions in proportion to their numbers. Such a situation raises questions about the TUC strategy in encouraging more balanced female/male participation beyond numbers. The concerns of the women’s desk remain varied and the focus appears to be too broad and therefore tends to blur the primary concern, increasing participation of women in trade union activities both qualitatively and quantitatively. The focus on women also helps to create an impression that the low female participation is a woman’s problem and not one of gender. A lot of effort will have to be geared

---

<sup>4</sup> See the Policies of the Trades Union Congress (Ghana), 2000

<sup>5</sup> Policies of the Trades Union Congress Adopted at the 5<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Congress 1996, page 31.

towards addressing this gap in order to ensure real balance in male female participation in union activities.

There is the need to understand the dynamics of the trade union structure and how it promotes a male character that discourages female participation. For example to what extent is the image of a successful union activist in consonance with an ideal woman in our various communities. It is important that gender roles and how they act to discourage female participation and encourage greater male participation in union activities be subjected to further scrutiny. The capacity of the women's desk to make an impact requires a closer examination.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Trade union internal democracy in Ghana is determined mainly by factors such as the authority structure and the scope of power that various levels enjoy. The decision making structures do not create adequate space for membership participation. This situation is compounded further by the fact that a remarkable part of the TUC decision making structure is under the control of its specialised departments. Though the system ensures continuity, and upholds the quality of the information that guides trade union decision making, it cedes political power to its administrative wing without adequate provision for its full implication.

Trade union state relations which have in the main given the specific character and acts to direct ruling governments to be interested in TUC affairs is another important factor that points what direction union government will take. Economic policies that government pursue are the key determinant factors shaping the nature of the relationship and these are the very factors that are calling for a new role for trade unions to give direction to social movements in Africa. The neo-liberal framework within which NEPAD is couched suggests further erosion of labour rights and increased tension in state/trade union relations in Africa. Already examples abound on the continent Zimbabwe is only a classic example. The very process calling for renewed trade union strength is the one that contains the ingredients for weakening further trade unions on the continent.

Female representation both in quality and quantity continues to elude the TUC despite efforts to address the imbalance. Efforts call for addressing the patriarchal nature of the trade unions on the continent and give women greater say in union affairs a gender sensitive union is important for ensuring gender sensitive economic policies. The TUC like other trade unions on the continent have a crucial role to play in directing their nations towards the desired development goals. This they can do with strength. Trade unions in this sense then should develop their own concept of development and determine how they will work towards the achievement of that development goal. More time will have to be spent on developing alternatives and building strong unions across the continent to carry the process forward. An important prerequisite is the structures and internal dynamism that will be developed to support the movement to engage our governments. It is only strong unions that can engage their government in any meaningful dialogue. We need to spend some time on building strong unions.

## **Bibliography**

- Adu-Amankwa K. 1990  
“The State, Trade Unions and Democracy in Ghana, 1982-1990.”  
A Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for Obtaining the Degree of Master of Arts in Development Studies at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.
- APADEP. 1995.  
Document of a Workshop on “Democratic Participation for Economic and Social Development” Koforidua, May 1998.
- Arthiabah, Peter Blay and Harry Thiam Mbiah. 1995.  
*Half a Century of Toil, Trouble & Progress: The History of the Trades Union Congress of Ghana.* Accra; Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Brennan, Geoffrey and Loren Lomasky. 1993  
*Democracy and Decision: the Pure Theory of Electoral Preference.*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Britwum Akua O 2000  
“Female Trade Union Representation and Participation in Ghana” in P Agbesinyale ed. (2000)  
*Democratic Workers’ Participation for Economic and Social Development: the Case of Ghana.* An APADEP Survey Report on Trade Union Situation and Workers’ Participation in Ghana. Accra: TUC/APADEP
- Fossum, John A. 1982.  
*Labor Relations: Development, Structure, Process.* Plano; Business Publications, Inc.
- Galenson Walter and Lipset Martin Lipset. (eds.) 1960  
*Labor and Trade Unionism: an Interdisciplinary Reader.* London; John Wiley & Sons.
- Kester, Gerard and Ousmane O. Sidibe. 1997.  
“Trade Unions it is Your Turn” in Gerard Kester and Ousmane O. Sidibe. 1997. *Trade Unions and Sustainable Democracy in Africa (pp. 1-18)* Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Mozhayev, Vsevolod. 1990  
*New Political Thinking and the World Trade Union Movement.* Moscow; Profizdat
- Obeng-Fosu, Patrick. 1999.  
*Industrial Relations in Ghana: the Law and Practice.* Accra; Ghana Universities Press.
- Ramaswamy E. A. and F. B. Schiphorst. 1998.  
“Human Resource Management, Trade Unions and Empowerment: Two Cases from India” Working Paper Series. No. 271. The Hague ISS.
- Shively, Philips W. 1991  
*Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science.*  
London: MacGraw-Hill, Inc. (pp 276-293).