

Trade union movement leads the way in Kenya¹

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The working class in Kenya has brought about fundamental change in the political and economic fields. While every progressive social class has been struggling for change, it was the working class that ensured major qualitative changes and influenced other classes in the process.

Kenyan workers began struggling for their economic and political rights as soon as foreign capital came to Kenya for its resources and labour. The first mass campaigns against colonialism were organised by peasants and were nationality-based. Although they scored valuable victories, they were defeated by a better armed colonial force. The lessons of these struggles were not lost on the growing working class who soon took leadership in the anti-colonial movements.

The working class began to set up their own organisations - trade unions - and used the strike weapon to achieve their goals. The first strike was organised in the year 1900. The colonial administration tried to divide the working class by preventing the formation of non-racial trade unions. Early trade unions included the Indian Trade Union (Mombasa and Nairobi, 1914), Workers Federation of British East Africa (for European workers) which was formed in 1919 with Lee Mellor as the President, and the Indian Employees Association formed in 1919 under Hassanali Amershi's Presidency.

The first African workers' movements had to take the form of Associations, for example the Kenya African Civil Servants Association, the Railway African Staff Association, and the various local government staff associations - all formed after the First World War. Other early trade unions included:

- Railway Artisan Union (1922) – formed by Sudh Singh (Makhan Singh's father) as a way of uniting Asian and African workers. (Chandan, 2004. P. 16).
- Trade Union Committee of Mombasa (1931)
- Workers' Protective Society of Kenya (1931)

Workers in Mombasa organised the Trade Union Committee of Mombasa in 1931 at a mass meeting of artisans, masons, and workers, while in Nairobi, the railway artisans formed the

¹ Source: Durrani, Shiraz (2006): *Never be silent: publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963*. London: Vita Books.

Kenya Indian Labour Trade Union in 1934. But by April 1935, it was decided to make the Union non-racial and to change the name to the Labour Trade Union of Kenya. This was a significant development for the working class in Kenya as it brought together workers of all races. It was also to prove an important development for publishing in Kenya.

In the early period of worker organisations, their newspapers and publishing as a whole helped to give publicity to worker meetings and news about strikes. They informed workers throughout the country about worker actions in one town or in one industry.

The formation of workers' organisations was an event of great significance. But this could not have been achieved without an effective communications strategy which ensured that all workers were informed and involved in the work of such an organisation. It was necessary to publicise their activities and to gain more support from other workers. This was initially done by the use of established friendly newspapers. An example of this was the use of newspapers to report the aims of the Trade Union Committee of Mombasa. These reports were carried by *Fairplay* which was edited by Dr. A.C.L. de Souza. *Fairplay* reported the speech of R. M. Shah, the President of the Trade Union Committee, giving particular emphasis to his reference to "the position of the artisan and labour class in this country and their various grievances arising out of the social injustices being done to them."²

Fairplay also carried reports from another meeting which was attended by about a thousand people. It asked the Government to ensure that "in fixing the common electorate and the qualification of the voters it should include the people of the artisan, labour, workman and mason class."³ Such reports encouraged workers in other parts of the country to take a more active part in the struggle, and also helped to build worker solidarity. This in turn led to the formation of more worker organisations.

In the same way, the formation of the new non-racial Labour Trade Union of Kenya⁴ was followed by communication from the Union which was published in the *Colonial Times*:

Various speakers spoke upon the conditions of workers in Kenya... the Union was the only body in East Africa that could struggle for the demands of the workers... the main objects [of the Union] were to organise workers in Kenya, defend their rights and struggle for anything in their interests.⁵

One of the first acts of the Union was to purchase a typewriter and a rotary cyclostyle machine. Thus began a new phase in Kenyan publishing. Previously, publishing was beyond the reach of most nationals, particularly the working class, as a consequence of the exorbitant charges for printing. The costs were high not only because the machinery had to be imported from Britain,

2 *Fairplay* February 14, 1931, quoted in Singh, Makhan (1969), pp. 41-42.

3 *Colonial Times* April 27, 1935, quoted in Singh, Makhan (1969), p. 42.

4 The name was changed in March 1937 to the Labour Trade Union of East Africa "to meet the demands for membership from Uganda and Tanganyika workers" - Singh, Makhan (1969), p.59.

5 *Colonial Times*, April 27, 1935, quoted in Singh, Makhan (1969), p.49.

but the charges were kept high to discourage Kenyan publishing. Most presses were owned by colonial interests and the few controlled by Kenyans could not meet the needs of all.

Thus the decision of the Union to use cheap cyclostyling was significant as it brought relevant technology within its reach. In addition, the Union developed the use of handbills which could be produced cheaply and distributed easily without colonial censorship, formal or informal. These handbills contained information of relevance to workers about their rights, and also about union matters and activities. In addition, they carried news items of interest to workers, since not many newspapers catered for the needs of workers. The Union produced its handbills in the main worker languages such as Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Gujarati, Hindi, and Punjabi, as well as English. These handbills then provided relevant content to activists who used the well-established oral channels of communication to pass on the messages to people throughout the country. The easy availability of relevant news, in a form and language that made it easily accessible, played an important part in raising class consciousness of Kenyan workers and helped to strengthen their organisations.

A whole new set of worker activities developed around the production and distribution of these handbills. Such activities, in turn, strengthened the organisation capability of the resistance movement.

One of the early activities of the Union was to struggle for an eight hour working day. This was the decision of the Second Annual General Meeting of the Labour Trade Union of Kenya, held from 6-13 September, 1936. Makhan Singh explains some of the ways in which mass publicity was given to this important decision and examines the contents of one of the Kiswahili handbills:

The decision [to campaign for an eight hour working day] was further popularised through handbills, meetings in residential areas, works discussion and public announcements (preceded by ringing of a large bell) in the main thoroughfares of Nairobi. After about ten days of this campaign, daily mass meetings began to be held in Ramgarhia Plot, Campos Ribeiro Avenue, Nairobi. The campaign created a new spirit among workers. A Union announcement issued during the campaign stated:

Hii ni kuwapa habari ya kuwa tangu mwezi wa 1st Oktoba, 1936, mfanyaji-wa-kazi wowote asifanzi kazi zaidi ya saa nane, na wala asipunguziwe mshahara wake. Na iwapo mfanyaji-wa-kazi ameondolewa kazini kutofanza kazi zaidi ya

saa nane siku moja haikubaliwi kunadikwa mtu mengine pahali pake, isipokuwa ni kwa yule aliyondolewa na kuandika tena.

Jambo maujudi kitakiwalo ni ya kuwa tangu 1st Oktoba saa kufanza kazi saa nane, na kazi kufungwa papo hapo. Iwapo kazi yatakikana kwa haraka zaidi ya hizo saa nane lazima kulipwa kwa hizo saa zaidi.

English translation:

With effect from 1st October, 1936, no worker should work for more than eight hours a day and there should be no reduction of wages. If any worker is dismissed for not having worked for more than eight hours a day, no one else should take up the job, and efforts should be made to get the worker reinstated.

The method to make the campaign a success is that from 1st October onwards all work should be stopped at the completion of eight hours. If in urgent cases work is to be done for more than eight hours, overtime should be paid.

Makhan Singh notes that:

The effect of the success was felt all over Kenya and in Uganda and Tanganyika too. The membership of the Union went up to more than 1,000. The campaign clearly demonstrated how the unity and solidarity of workers could be built up for a common cause. The success created a tremendous enthusiasm and encouragement amongst members of the Union and other workers for the coming struggle for increase in wages and recognition of the Union. (Singh, Makhan (1969, p. 55).

Such handbills became a regular way for the Union to announce its meetings, to organise workers for strikes, and to educate workers on their rights. Examples of some other handbills are given below:

A handbill was issued to invite workers to a meeting on Sunday September 6, 1936. It was printed by the Khalsa Press, Nairobi and was issued in several languages. The following is a translation from the Gujarati one. The handbill invited workers to the meeting which would discuss 12 points, some of which were:

- Do not work for low salary, work 8 hours a day, and be paid monthly, not by hours.
- Railway and PWD [Public Works Department] workers are temporary, and should be made permanent.
- Congratulate press workers for establishing their own Union.
- Reduce school fees.
- Compensation should be paid by Government on injury at work.
- Appeal to all Kenyan workers to unite.⁶

The handbill calling workers for a meeting on October 18, 1936 stated: "Taxes should be reduced. No taxes should be imposed on the poor."⁷ The handbill dated October 31, 1936 was a news item for workers informing them that the workers of the company, Lalji Visram, were on strike until the workers' demands for an eight hour day was accepted. The handbill calling

6 This handbill, and the ones mentioned later, are available in the Makhan Singh Archives, Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi. MAK/A.

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workers to a meeting on November 29, 1936 combined encouragement to workers, and asked them to be steadfast in fulfilling their historic mission with news about a strike in progress:

Struggle between capitalists and workers has started in earnest

Our worker comrades! Come forward! March ahead! If you do not march ahead today, then remember that you will be crushed under the heels of capitalists tomorrow. Workers should have a united stand and should stand up strongly against the capitalists so that they should not ever have the courage to attempt to exploit workers again, nor to take away workers' rights from them.

Note: The workers of M/s Karsan Ladha have gone on strike for higher wages. It has been reported that the strike situation is becoming serious.

This has now become a question of life or death for workers.

- LABOUR TRADE UNION OF KENYA

November 29, 1936 ⁸

Another handbill dated March 4, 1937 gave details of a strike by Dar es Salaam workers. Printed by the Khalsa Press, the handbill gave the aims of the workers as the achievement of an 8 hour day and a one shilling increase in wages. It informed readers that the workers were picketing the works. It then made a request from LTUEA (Labour Trade Union of East Africa) to all Kenyan workers not to go to Dar es Salaam as workers, as the employers were thus hoping to break the strike. It ended by asking Kenyan workers to donate money to be sent to Dar es Salaam workers.

Yet another handbill, printed in 1935 and written in Punjabi, English, Urdu, and Gujarati was printed by Khalsa Press, Nairobi for the Labour Trade Union of Kenya (LTUK) and informed workers about a Union meeting.

The employers were not slow in following the lead of the Union in its mass communication tactics, so successful were the handbills in publicising Union activities. But the employers did not achieve much success, though they produced a few handbills. For example when the Union led the workers out on strike in April 1937 for an 8-hour day and 25% wage increase, the Indian Contractors and Builders' Association brought out a handbill printed by the Colonial Printing Works, trying to deny some of the facts mentioned in Union handbills. The workers just ignored such propaganda.

The strike for an 8-hour day and wage increases finally came to a successful end after 62 days and ended on June 3, 1937. The Union brought out another handbill informing workers about the success of the strike. All Nairobi employers agreed to an 8 hour day, and gave between 15-22% increases in wages and recognised the workers' right to be represented by their Unions. All workers dismissed during the strike were reinstated. The Union announced a demonstration to celebrate the Nairobi workers victory.

⁸ Makhan Singh Archives (translated from Gujarati by the author).

The Union was successful in the strike because of good organisation and solidarity which could only be achieved with a good communication system. The “mainstream” newspapers could not have given the Union total control over its communications during the course of the strike. Using a relatively cheap and simple technology and controlling the distribution network, the Union ensured that its communication lines were not disrupted by employers or the colonial authorities.

Besides producing handbills, the Union also started a monthly newspaper called the *Kenya Worker* with Makhan Singh as the Editor. Makhan Singh was the main person behind the consolidation of the trade unions at that time and he brought with him working class experience from India which he creatively applied to the Kenyan situation. Not only was he a good organiser and trade unionist, he was also an excellent communicator and understood well the needs of ensuring effective communications between trade unions and workers. It was largely his influence that shaped the successful strikes and publishing policies of the trade union movement in Kenya.

But the colonial government did not allow the trade union newspaper to survive. It was too dangerous a threat from the working class struggling for its economic and political rights. It used minor legal technicalities to ban it. Makhan Singh (1969, p.56) provides details:

From 1st November 1936, the Union began publishing a monthly paper called *Kenya Worker*. Three issues were published in Punjabi and one in Urdu. The Union's plans were to publish the paper also in English, Gujarati and Swahili. Makhan Singh was its editor. A few months later the paper was named *East African Kirti*. Its Editor was Mota Singh, the President of the Union at that time. The paper stopped after three issues had been published. This was due to the Government having prosecuted the editor for not having obtained registration for the paper. He was fined for the “offence”. Both the papers contained articles about the Union's policies and news about workers' struggles and national and international news of general interest.

The Annual Return made under the Newspaper Registration Ordinance indicated that *East African Kirti* was published weekly and that the average circulation was 1,000 copies per week.

By 1948, there were 16 trade unions affiliated to the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, with a total membership of 10,000 workers. The economic conditions of Kenyan workers and peasants had worsened after the Second World War. More land was being taken over for settlement of British (ex) soldiers, and peasants were left landless and forced to work as cheap labour for the settlers. Workers' conditions were also deteriorating. While the workers were continuing to organise and to go on strikes, political organisations were also being formed. In February 1946, the African nationalist organisation, the Kenya African Study Union changed its name to Kenya African Union (KAU). There was a close co-operation between the trade unions and the KAU with many trade union officials being active in the political organisations.

The year 1947 saw the struggle of the squatters from Kijabe, Kiambu and other areas culminating in the squatters' demonstration on the lawn of the Government House in Nairobi. Similarly the struggle of workers was gathering strength. This was shown clearly by the General Strike in Mombasa from 13-25 January, 1947. The strike led by Chege Kibachia was an important achievement for the working class in Kenya. It set the scene for the intensifying struggles of the people of Kenya in the following period. Sichernman, in her “chronology of Kenyan history and politics”, captures the mood of the period:

1947 (13-25 January) - General Strike of 15,000 of the 20,000 workers in Mombasa, during which city is paralysed and 400 people arrested. Strike is notable for its discipline and for involving “even the most atomised of employees - domestic servants and Africans who performed odd jobs”. Led by Chege Kibachia, African Workers Federation (soon renamed Transport and Allied Workers Union) is formed during strike; it calls strikes and organises union branches all over country, stressing solidarity of workers across lines of craft and industry...government arrests Kibachia on 22 Aug. and on 5 Sept, police kill three strikers and wound six others at Uplands Bacon Factory near Lari. Mombasa strike and widespread rural protests make 1947 “key year” in which government loses control in Nairobi and Gikuyuland. (Sichermann, 1990, pp. 72-73).

Throughout the colonial history of Kenya, there has been a very close link between trade unionists and those involved in national politics. Many trade union activists saw that the only way to achieve their aims was to be active in direct political activities. In addition, trade union and political activists were involved in the publishing field as well. Earlier, we saw Makhan Singh's involvement in trade union work, which inevitably involved him in publishing. Similarly, Chege Kibachia carried out his trade union and political work through the publishing field as well. In 1947 he was an assistant editor of *Sauti ya Mwafrika*.

The next period, 1948-63 to which we now turn, was in many ways the most dynamic and revolutionary period in the history of Kenya. Many forces that had been preparing the people for active resistance to colonialism were in place by the end of 1947. A long history of struggle at different levels had been leading to one conclusion: that there could not be any meaningful change for the majority of people without an armed struggle. Various peaceful methods had been tried, but with limited success. The lesson of past struggle was that a strong organisational structure, leadership, and a correct ideological stand were necessary if Kenya was not to become a “settlers' colony” as happened in Zimbabwe.

The experiences of a creative alliance between trade union, working class, and progressive nationalist movements showed what can be achieved with patient planning and with mass popular support. But for all these to succeed, it was essential that there should be a free flow of information among the people, and between the people and their trade union and political organisations. The trade union experience had also shown that it was possible to build a new publishing sector with worker control over content, production and distribution of material. In addition the importance of oral communication was shown when news of strike and worker struggles was carried by word of mouth over large parts of the country – often by railway workers, taxi, bus and lorry drivers.

All these lessons and experiences were to prove invaluable in the next period even in the face of one of the most brutal suppressions seen anywhere in the colonial world.

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