

Africa: Celebrating May Day: Trade unions as schools of democracy

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At the heart of the protest movement in Sudan is a trade union. Proving again that democratic influence and change require collective participation and organization.

It is telling that it was the work of a trade union, the newly established Sudan Professionals Association (SPA), [rather than war, sanctions](#) or charges by the International Criminal Court against President Omar al-Bashir, that ended his regime after 30 years. Proving once again that strong, mass and independent trade unions are schools of democracy and have been crucial in democracy building, from the workplace to the national level in Africa.

The [SPA](#), a professional association of independent trade unions, was formed in 2016. The SPA is a [reigniting the historically important role of trade unions in Sudanese politics](#), according to Sudanese-American journalist Isma'il Kushkush. Sudan's [trade union movement was crucial](#) in revolutions against military regimes in 1964 and 1985. Wary of the power of trade unions' power, when then-General al-Bashir took power in 1989, he not only dissolved the government and political parties, but also the trade unions. Then, in 1993, when Bashir introduced a nominally civilian regime, he set up his trade union federation he could control: the Sudanese Workers' Trade Union Federation (SWTUF).

In its reporting of the ongoing protests in Sudan, [The New York Times](#) and [Al Jazeera](#) also emphasize the role of SPA as the leader of the protests. As the Times reports, "Led by doctors and engineers, the [SPA] harnessed the wave of fury that erupted during a protest over the soaring price of bread in December, and shaped it into a sustained mass movement."

The SPA is now [conducting negotiations](#) with the military on the transition to a civilian, democratic regime. Although the outcome is uncertain, the ongoing protests—which have lasted for four months—have already had a greater impact than previous protests for democracy in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Those protests did show the potential for mass politics. In 2011, protests were driven by youth and student movements led by the middle classes, and 2012's protests, via party youth organizations, gave protesters access to mosques. Nevertheless, these protesters were brutally repressed by the regime, followed by arrests and torture.

This time around, the repression did not manage to quell protests. AIAC's Caitlin Chandler [writes in Dissent Magazine](#) how SPA mobilized people from different backgrounds to create a protest movement that is inclusive and rooted in working-class struggles.

There are several reasons why the ongoing protests have had greater impact than in the past: Anthropologist [Nisrin Elamin and](#) political scientist [Zachariah Mampilly](#) point to four key factors: First, they have reached outside the capital Khartoum; second, opposition parties participate; third, the regime was already fragmented; and "... Finally, there is the broader regional context. The ongoing protests are the latest in [Africa's third wave](#), which has been ongoing for more

than a decade now and has claimed significant victories in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Tunisia and, most recently, in neighboring Ethiopia.” In addition: In 2018, an increase in bread and petrol prices added an economic dimension to democratic demands, and made ordinary people take to the streets.

National structure and democratic culture

Trade unions have helped fight colonialism, and authoritarian and racist regimes, and to deepen democracy worldwide. In Africa, in recent decades, we have seen this from Niger and [Tunisia](#), to [South Africa](#) and Zambia. The trade union movement has characteristics that make them particularly well-placed for this role, and especially feared by authoritarian regimes.

In most African countries, the largest and most representative organizations are religious institutions, farmers’ organizations and trade unions. [The trade union movement represents grassroots based social structures for mobilization that contrast to top-down, populist parties driven by “strong men” \(or big men\)](#). Trade unions have representative structures from the workplace to the national level, and across geographical, ethnic, religious and historical divisions. Teachers’ unions are usually the largest in all countries, and often the most radical. In Nigeria, the National Union of Teachers has representation in all Nigeria’s 36 states, from the northeast where Boko Haram ravages, the cosmopolitan democracy bastion Lagos and to the oil-rich Niger Delta characterized by resource conflicts and violence. The nation-wide structures make them well-placed organizationally to mobilize broadly, and union leaders are responsible to members through democratic structures. It does not mean that the trade union movement in Nigeria does not relate to regional and ethnic divisions, but that they have learned to find compromise and build solidarity and community across these. In Sudan, we can imagine that the SPA, which brings together teachers, doctors and lawyers, has the opportunity for broad mobilization and joins heavy and relevant expertise.

The trade union movement targets issues that concern the popular masses, combining demands for economic, civic and political rights: It fights for wages in workplaces and for economic and social welfare benefits from the state, such as subsidies, education and health; Unionists exercise and claim active citizenship and the right to participate, in the form of voting and organizational rights, and demand to be represented in public bodies and at the workplace. In addition, many trade unions—from Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Ghana—have been at the forefront in the struggle against corruption, with demands for political accountability and transparency. In Africa, the trade union movement is not just about class mobilization, but trade unions are carriers of democratic and urban culture and radical ideology in contrast to ethno-populist parties, as Nic Cheesman and Miles Larmer [have argued](#).

Schools of democracy and co-determination—during and outside elections

Trade unions are at their core about co-determination and democracy between elections. Trade union work provides knowledge and experience about rights and organization, from local elections of shop-stewards, development of common workers’ demands and of representative, collective bargaining. The opportunity to have a voice and influence of one’s own life at the workplace, is not least important when extensive privatization means that politicians have renounced—or have been deprived of direct control by ever-larger parts of the economy. Popular influence through elections is limited. This is especially true in African states that often rely on development aid. The Malawian economist, Thandika Mkandawire calls such states “[choiceless democracies](#).”

The experiences of organized workers are directly transferable to the role of democratic citizens, with rights and obligations. US researcher Ann Karreth [shows](#) that trade union members participate more than others in elections and other democratic processes. They contact politicians and

participate in protests more often. She calls this “participatory spillover effects.” As an African advisor in the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO-Norway), I have met many union representatives in a number of African countries who told me how experiences as shop-stewards provided them with a political awakening and confidence to actively participate in other forums, or even run for political office.

The negotiation skills from the workplace, based on compromise, and the balance between rights and duties as an employee, is transferable to social relations between state and citizen. Not surprisingly, trade unions often act as mediators between political elites and ordinary people, and as negotiators of political change. We have seen this in Nigeria through a series of [protests against increased petrol prices](#) between 1986 and 2012, and in the [Tunisian revolution](#). Now we see it in Sudan.

The trade union movement represents a unique combination of expertise and power. In Nigeria, organized academics have contributed ideological and professional expertise to the larger trade union movement, while the oil and transport workers have decisive strike power and public sector federations can shut down governments. We can only imagine how the combined expertise of the SPA, which organizes, among other things, doctors, teachers and lawyers, positions them to play a mobilizing and mediating role.

Several trade unions in Africa run voter education programs, as the Trade Union Congress in Ghana does, and election observation, in the case of the Nigeria Labor Congress in Nigeria and Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU).

There is no a clear pattern on how [African trade unions relate to party politics](#). Typically, in many post-independent countries, the trade union movement allied with liberation movements, such as the ANC in South Africa and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe. While the ZCTU in Zimbabwe detached from ZANU-PF and formed the opposition party MDC in 1999, the trade union movement in South Africa is torn over its relationship with the ANC. (COSATU endorsed the ANC in the May 2019 elections and the current President, Cyril Ramaphosa, was once general secretary of the black mineworkers’ union; some unions that broke away from COSATU, most notably metalworkers union, NUMSA, will contest the election as the Socialist Workers Revolutionary Party.) The Nigerian Labor Party was formed by the trade union movement, but has not been able to transfer popular support to the trade union movement into votes. Problematic historical experiences with party co-operation, have led TUC Ghana and ZCTU Zambia, to decide not to support any party or allow its union representatives to run for political office.

International solidarity

The trade union movement must be strong, united, democratic and independent in order to play an effective democratic role, argue Jon Kraus and his co-authors in the new book, [Trade unions and the coming of democracy in Africa](#). Trade unions’ institutional capacity is weakened by neoliberal economic policy, and by limitations on democratic and labor rights. The International Trade Union Confederation’s annual [Global Rights Index](#), which surveys the worst countries for workers shows that trade unions worldwide are the first in line for attacks on their rights by governments and employers. Many countries in Africa are sadly ranked at the top of the index. Many unions are led by undemocratic union leaders, and in many countries unions are under government control (Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan under recently deposed al-Bashir). Nevertheless, even state-controlled unions may have some of the democratic functions mentioned above. In a number of other countries, governments are trying to manipulate trade union divisions (Uganda and Zimbabwe) to break their unity. Elsewhere, internal conflicts lead to division.

Cheesman and Larmer fear that the weakening of the trade union movement since the 1980s has created a democratic vacuum and left room for populism and demands for charismatic leaders who can give a voice to the poor. This vacuum is sometimes also filled by former trade union leaders. [My own research](#) suggests that deregulation, and ever-increasing use of subcontractors and contract staff in the Nigerian oil industry, has not only weakened the trade union movement, but also opened up for informal, closed and clientelistic employment relationships rather than the formal and merit-based employment and negotiated employment contracts promoted by unions.

Finally, this May Day let us remind ourselves that while individuals are important as a symbol and inspiration—as the iconic “woman in white,” Alaa Salah—or as leaders, democratic influence and change require collective participation and organization.

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