

Review

Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa
 Edited by Jon Kraus (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007)

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This book is of immense importance for the establishment and consolidation of democracy in Africa. What makes it so significant is the fact that it argues that trade unions can and have played an immensely important role thus far: "Trade unions in many African countries played a muscular and seminal role in the late 1980s and early 1990s in mobilizing the mass protests and strikes that led to the overthrow of old authoritarian regimes and ushered in democratic transitions."

Jon Kraus maintains that unions can play a crucial role to help prevent the new political elite from enriching themselves and, by so doing, depriving the working poor and the unemployed of the state's resources. This is because, "When newly ensconced leaders can seize with impunity vast public resources in terms of salaries, offices, and contracts - as in democratic Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa - democracy becomes a mirage for the majority excluded from access."

Although the book provides information about the role of trade unions in many countries in Africa, its core consists of in-depth studies of seven countries: Ghana, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Each of the chapters is written by an expert on the country concerned. The chapter on South Africa is written by William (Bill) Freund. There is also very extensive material on Nigeria in the introduction and conclusion of the book.

Two countries that are of

particular interest to South Africa are Ghana and Zambia. This is because the policy of their trade union federations towards the ruling party and government is markedly different from that of Cosatu. They have both decided not to have a close working relationship with the ruling party. They base their decisions on bitter experiences over the course of their history with ruling parties and governments. They found that a close relationship limited and undermined them as they ended up the subordinate partners in the relationship.

The chapter on South Africa also argues that Cosatu has been restricted by being in alliance with the ANC.

As this aspect of the policy of trade unions is of immense importance for the consolidation of democracy it is worth looking more closely at another two African countries.

Zambia became independent in 1964 under the leadership of President Kaunda of the United National Independent Party (UNIP). In the same year the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) was established as the sole trade union centre. Trade unions were expected to play a developmental rather than representative role. That is, the unions were expected to focus on worker productivity and restrain wage demands and industrial action. There were close union-government ties and the ZCTU appeared to the government to have agreed to this role.

In 1973 UNIP formally declared Zambia a one-party state under a

new constitution. From 1974 to 1989 the price of copper fell. It accounted for 90 to 95% of Zambian exports and the economy steadily declined. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided loans, but imposed austerity measures and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). Wage freezes were imposed and workers' standard of living dropped. ZCTU resistance to government policies increased and protest strikes were launched. UNIP and the government started seeing the ZCTU as illegal opposition that had to be controlled or crushed.

In 1990 the ZCTU called for the restoration of multi-party democracy and took the initiative to campaign for its restoration. The campaign grew into a mass movement with the support of a range of community-based organisations, disaffected UNIP members, university lecturers, business, clergymen and traditional rulers.

In July 1990 the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) was launched. The ZCTU provided the mass mobilisation while business provided the funds for the MMD to defeat UNIP in a general election in October 1991. Frederick Chiluba, former leader of ZCTU, immediately took over as president from Kaunda.

The ZCTU had thus played a major role in replacing the autocratic one-party rule of UNIP with a democratic government under the MMD. This was the first time in the history of Africa that a trade union movement had taken

the initiative to form a political party that won an election and reinstated democratic government.

Ironically, the initially close relationship that existed between the ZCTU and the MMD after 1991 also came to an end as the trade union movement had to take up the cudgels on behalf of their worker members once again. The primary reason for this was that the MMD continued with the same austere economic programme as its predecessor, also dictated to it by the IMF. Once again the ZCTU learned that it could act more effectively in workers' interests if it cut its close relationship with the ruling party and remained independent.

The history of the relationship between the trade union movement and the different regimes in Ghana since 1958 is too long and complicated to present in this short book review. Suffice it to say that the Trade Union Congress (TUC) fought for its independence and worker rights for over 40 years.

It did, for the period 1960 to 1966 try to increase its influence by entering into an alliance with President Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP). Although the alliance did bring benefits to the labour movement the TUC also found itself severely compromised. Its implicit agreement with Nkrumah was that it would be subject to political control.

The CPP intervened in union leadership by removing trade union leaders and putting others in their place. Consequently, the unions' capacity to act and strike declined. Ghanaian trade union leaders learned from this period that trade union independence was extremely important.

Over the subsequent years the unions' relatively large size, their defense of their autonomy, and

organisation gave them the strength to withstand repression under several authoritarian regimes and instill the norms of democratic participation in Ghana. They also learned that democracy gave them freedom to pursue their own interests, something that dictatorships did not allow.

Kraus sums up the strategy of the trade union movement in Ghana to protect and advance democracy as follows: "They could and did create political space that ultimately enabled other, more political, actors to organize for democratic rights. The union movement in Ghana, unlike those in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, has not sought to play a direct role in organizing political power since the disastrous experience in 1960-66 under the Nkrumah regime."

How successful has the trade union movement in Ghana been in consolidating democracy? A test came during the elections in December 2008. The presidential election did not produce a clear winner. President Nana Akufo-Addo of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) got just over 49% of the vote.

His opponent, John Atta Mills of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), got nearly 48%. The NDC had however gained more seats and became the single largest party.

Since neither presidential candidate received more than 50% of the vote, a run-off election had to be held. On this occasion the result was reversed and Mills won by the thinnest of margins. He got 50.2% of the vote while Akufo-Addo received slightly less at 49.8% of the vote.

Far more important is what happened next. Unlike Kenya and Zimbabwe where the ruling presidents have clung to power, President Akufo-Addo quickly conceded defeat after the final results were declared. The real test whether democracy had been consolidated in Ghana was thus passed: a peaceful transfer of power took place after an opposition political party and its presidential candidate had won a free and fair election. LB

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