

# The problems of established trade unions

1974-1983

'The registered trade unions have become nothing more than glorified benefit societies.' **Linda Ensor** explores how this happened...

Even trade unions, which are well established with a developed policy, face problems. These are not quite so obvious compared to those of the new unions struggling for existence. All the things, which the new trade unions aim for, have been achieved. The union has its own well-developed benefits, stop orders exist for members' subscriptions, the union enjoys a dominant role in the industrial council, and through the 'union shop' principle, there is a steady membership. Organisers do not have to spend most of their working day recruiting members or maintaining existing members in good financial standing.

Despite the tremendous advantages listed, the established trade unions face their own set of problems, which are a severe hindrance to trade union solidarity, and to the expansion of the trade union movement. The problems the established trade unions face are those of age; officials tend to get cut off from the workers through spending more time on office work, industrial council meetings, and other related activities; there is a hardening of the arteries when leadership has become so entrenched that there is a constant cry for new faces, and finally decisions are made by a few people so that a gap is created between the ideal of democracy and the actual practice.

From being an active component of the labour movement, the established trade unions gradually have become more of an administrative system. Over the years, the established trade unions have striven to become more acceptable to the state, and have sacrificed their independence for the admitted benefits of recognition by the state

for their members. As they have become better established so the interests of their members have not necessarily become the interests of workers as a whole in a particular industry. As a Nationalist MP said in 1953, 'In the past the trade union was merely an organisation of individuals working in a certain industry in order to negotiate with their employers and, as far as the state was concerned, to discuss legislation. Gradually, however, every registered trade union in South Africa has become a recognised part of the state machinery for carrying out our industrial conciliation machinery. Consequently, in view of the fact that the state to a large extent gives recognition to trade unions as part of such machinery, it is obvious that the state has to watch very carefully in composing that machinery, that it can function in a manner in which will enable it to achieve the aim for which it was created.' (Hansard 5, August 14, 1953). This quote sums up the attitudes, which have now become absorbed by the established trade unions.

Over the years, trade unions have had to employ more and more officials who have not come up through the ranks, and who have special skills, through longer education, than most workers. These problems are made worse by the fact that workers who become officials tend to move off from the workers. A worker who is moved from the factory floor to the trade union office has a completely different set of duties to perform. Quite often the organisers earn a lot more than they would on the factory floor; instead of being paid weekly they are now being



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paid monthly, and allowances are provided for transport (a union car may even be provided) and other essentials. While a worker approaches a manager as an employee, a trade union official approaches a manager as a virtual equal with a greater freedom of action.

From being a production worker, a trade union organiser soon changes into an office worker. Directly a trade union selects one of its members in the factory to work for the collective interests of a salary, that worker becomes, consciously or not, lifted out of the working class into a new status, that of the salaried employee. The worker who becomes a trade union official ceases to be a worker economically and psychologically, and experiences the same gap between himself and the workers as does the non-worker. Trade union officials have to learn new skills and information, such as the cost of production of commodities produced in the industry, the source and cost of raw materials, the state of the industry, the wages and conditions of workers in different regions etc. He/she had to possess the talents of a general and those of a diplomat. Unfortunately trade union officials soon develop a protective concern for their own salaries, allowances, and status.

All these things tend to widen the gap between the workers and the trade union officials, even those officials who have come up from the factory floor. It is in this situation that firm direction by union executive committees become vital, otherwise workers might come to think that the trade union, the employers associations and the industrial council, are ranged against his/her interests as a worker.

As the established trade unions survived through the decades so the arteries of the union began to harden. As a result, workers rapidly lost interest in their organisations in which there was little change. A good organisation will temper the experience of age with the enthusiasm of youth. If the workers see that there is very little change

in representatives and elected officials and that these personnel are never effectively challenged, then apathy will result. It is a good principle that all official positions should require nominations, proposals, and ballots when elections fall due. Too often officials are unchallenged, and the workers feel very little sense of participation in government of the trade unions. Where there is an unbeatable candidate, some person should be encouraged to stand in opposition, so that the workers get used to the idea that reasonable difference of opinion is not treason but required at every election to provide healthy alternatives. All this means more work for the officials, but the benefits are a much higher degree of participation by the workers and officials can be more confident of worker support.

How has this situation come about? What are the reasons for a lack of democracy in trade unions? There are several reasons for this development, some of which the trade unions are quite aware of and try to combat. The first is that union members are not sufficiently well informed to effectively participate in decision-making. For the members of a union to have more power against the officials there must be good attendance at meetings and a large amount of interest in the day-to-day activities of the union. This rarely occurs, apathy being the normal state of affairs, to be broken only by a crisis. There are many reasons for this. Most union members, like other people, spend most of their time at work or with their families. Their remaining free time is taken up with friends, entertainment, and other recreational activities. Most trade union meetings are concerned with technical administrative matters, which are not of deep interest to the average member. As long as there is no trouble at the office only a small minority finds participation in union affairs sufficiently rewarding to sustain a high level of interest and activity. Other reasons for a lack of activity in union affairs are a fear of

possible victimisation from employers, transport problems, and a need to rest after a tiring week's work, if the union activities take place at the weekend. Many trade unions increase attendance fees as an inducement to attend, and while this practice may increase the number of members at meetings, it can make the meetings prohibitively expensive and also lower the quality of workers coming forward to represent the workers.

A more prosaic reason advanced for the lack of democracy in established trade unions, is that the leaders want to stay in office. While democracy requires that there should be a turnover in leadership, the secretary of a trade union tends to lead an upper middle class life style and is conscious of the need to maintain his/her standing in the community. Often a trade union official will earn as much as a professional but possesses more power. Most officials want some security of tenure because of their position in society. On the other hand, democracy requires insecurity for those in governing positions, and every official in a democratic society must anticipate a loss of office. But once a person has got a high job status he/she will always try to retain and protect it. If the official sees that there is a big gap between himself/herself and the workers, he/she will not want to become a worker again.

A final reason advanced is that large-scale organisations tend to give trade union officials a virtual monopoly of power. Trade unions, like all other large-scale organisations, have to develop a bureaucratic structure if they are to survive. To become more efficient there is a growing office staff and tight control on decisions. Bureaucracy is inherent in the sheer problem of administration, and in the necessity of unions to be 'responsible' in their dealings with management, and with other groups. In the end trade unions become parallel to the structures of business and government. Because of the necessity to be efficient and

to stick very carefully within the law and labour policy, there is increased power at the top and decreased power among the ordinary members. Opposition is seen as a danger, which cannot be tolerated because it gives strength to the union's enemies. Further reasons for oligarchy are that the only people in communication with all the members are the trade union officials, and that the officials may well possess skills of organisation, which are lacking in the rank and file.

These are serious statements of the democratic health of the established trade unions. In their defence, the leaders of trade unions argue that the trade unions are organised for industrial conflict, and that since the workers are engaged in perpetual conflict with management, internal opposition only serves the interests of the enemy. A further argument is that there is no need for factions in the organisation because all members are workers and have

common interests and objectives. It is quite true that certain trade unions have been severely weakened by internal conflict. As an example, the Natal branch of the Textile Worker's Industrial Union has been torn into two factions for many years and employers have taken advantage of the situation, and have certainly fostered it. The fighting amongst the workers in the Textile Union is one of the reasons for the low wages paid in this industry.

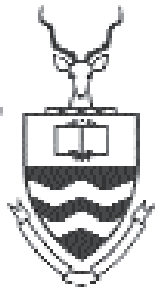
While these arguments do carry a certain force, it is important to realise that a high degree of democratic practice should be guaranteed. In many established trade unions we can see that the secretaries have been in their positions for decades. While it is true that these officials are often efficient and have maintained good administration, there are immense problems when they pass on (it seems as though very few trade union secretaries retire). Unless there is a high degree of participation in the affairs of the

trade union and a number of people have had the experience of running a trade union, then the interests of the members will certainly suffer when changes are eventually forced on the officials. It is important for every trade union member to become a trade unionist, not a member of an organisation. This is only possible where opposition is tolerated, where there is at least some turnover in jobs, and where young workers know that they have a chance of playing an important role. If this does not happen then employers will be justified in saying that it is only the trade union officials and not the workers who are trying to achieve things. A strong union needs to be efficient, but to be really efficient in putting forward the interests of its members, it has to be a democratic organisation.

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