

Marxist Critique of Trade Unionism under Socialism and Communism

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Abstract

It was said that one of Marx's most powerful insights was that even the most successful and beneficial systems and institutions carry within them the seed of their own destructions and the trade union was a social response to the advent of industrialization and capitalism. Does unionism constitute the seed of destruction of capitalism? This puzzle was pursued in this article which was carried out with the doctrinal method. It critically reviewed the Marxist conflict model and its prognosis for unionism under capitalism, socialism and communism and determined whether unionism was the grave digger of capitalism. The researched relied mainly on content analyses of secondary resource materials namely: opinions of text writers. It found that even as unionism was a significant historical weapon in the arsenal of Marxist revolutionaries it did not become defining. Much as it was relied upon by socialists as an instrument of transformation of the society under socialism and communism, unionism remained blunt in remnant capitalism and transformed into corporatism.

Keywords:

Marxism, Trade Unionism, Capitalism, Socialism and Communism

Introduction

We shall not be constrained in this conversation as to whether socialism and communism are the same system. It shall be taken for granted that both forms of society are essentially the same one being an advanced stage of the other. However, according to Wilczynski (1977, p. 99), the position of labour under capitalism is fundamentally different from that under socialism. To Allen (1959, p. 10) socialists are concerned with a

more equitable distribution of wealth in society rather than with maximizing its production and they aim at abolishing the state of society in which the profit seeking motive is the impulse behind change and progress. Thus, Marxists are concerned with the role trade unions might play in developing a socialist society. They emphasize the class character and consciousness of union which requires mobilization within a revolutionary political party if their full potentials are to be achieved (Salamon, 1992 p. 96). As a social response to the advent of industrialization and capitalism, unions in their early years, enlisted the support of radical members of the existing political parties to lead their agitation for industrial reforms and to act as their voice in the parliament (Salamon, p. 88).

According to Dunlop (1975, 371), in the industrial relations of the socialist and communist countries, the role of the labour organization is portrayed as subservient to the Communist Party. Election of union officials is usually arranged by the Communist Party and higher positions in the leadership of unions are occupied by party members. To Wilczynski (p. 100), trade unions in socialist countries are a curious mixture of survivals from the past and modern adaptations to the needs of the state. In some respects, they are reminiscent of medieval guilds in that they embody the employers as representatives of the state and employees.

Functionally, Wilczynski (p. 101) has outlined a number of functions which the trade union performs in a socialist society. They cultivate the socialist attitude to work by devising rules for work discipline and teaching workers how to protect socialized property. They organize meetings to discuss ways and means of reaching and exceeding targets, quality improvement and rationalization of work.

They participate with the management in working out the details of output norms, work incentives, facilities and safety devices and taking up individual grievances against the management. Furthermore, unions organize educational and recreational activities and administer social insurance funds. But to him, the most important function of unions is sending elected representatives to the Federation of Trade Unions and cooperating with employers, the state and assisting in the implementation of the economic plan on the labour front.

The high degree of active involvement of communists in trade unions is inevitable given their belief in the establishment of a social system and government based on the pre-eminence of workers as a group (Salamon, p. 109). Allen (1975, p. 64) has argued that in a society where public ownership of means of production is dominant, the organization of unions is likely to be rationally determined in order to satisfy the planning needs of the community though there is no a-priori reason why the organization should be concerned primarily with production efficiency.

The unions would not resemble business unions but would be instruments of mass involvement in economic and social welfare matters. Their methods would differ markedly from those in the free enterprise countries. There would be no collective bargaining, for a free price mechanism would not exist within which bargaining over the price of labour could take place or would the existence of separate distinct economic interest be recognized. But there would be a close formal and informal relationship between unions and managements at local level and between unions and planning agencies at levels higher in the economic hierarchy. As it is put by Wilczynski (p. 99), when means of production are socialized, owners and workers become the same people so that the basis of antagonism is neutralized.

Statement of Problem

Is militant trade unionism still relevant in the modern world of the industry and capitalism or has it been overtaken by the emergence of collective bargaining, industrial democracy, corporatism or state interventionism? Has the institution of trade unionism acted out the script prophesied by Marxist ideology, philosophy and sociology as a weapon of

revolutionary social change or is the institution of trade unionism a category tied up with industrial capitalism and therefore inconevivable in a socialist, communist society?

Research Focus

The focus of this research was to find out whether the institution of trade unionism had played out the revolutionary role which Marxist ideology proposed for it and determine whether trade unionism can only be conceptualized within the framework of capitalism. It engaged in a Marxian review of the role of trade unionism in capitalism and socialism and determined whether unionism is currently relevant in the industrial world or it has transformed into corporatism.

Research Aim and Questions

This research was determined to find out whether the institution of trade unionism has played any significantly different roles under capitalism and socialism or whether it has been taken over by corporatism and participatory industrial democracy.

Research Methodology

This research was carried out through the doctrinal method. It reviewed secondary resource materials mainly qualitative analysis of hard literature in textbooks and related authoritative sources which were sought from the internet. Judicial authority was cited purposely for explicatory analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist Model and Trade Unionism

In the words of Cotgrove (1978, pp. 23 - 24) there is no doubt that much of sociology has been a debate with Marx whose theories have stimulated and challenged a substantial volume of scholarly work both of criticism and support. Whether Marx was a sociologist is a matter of controversy but Marxist methodology is capable of giving rise to broad positivist sociology on the one hand and a critical philosophy on the other hand. Its methodology is a product of the industrial society concerned with a revolutionary theory and a paradigm of social change (Wilmot, p. 185).

Marx was not just a scholar he was a revolutionary, one who wished to change the world. His model was not only a pluralist, conflict one, it was also a systems model in

that he saw the parts and elements in society as inter-related in a causal way. Differing from others, his model locates the main forces shaping society in three perspectives. First is the holistic perspective. Second is that social organization of economic production is the foundation on which the legal and political superstructure arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. Third is that the driving force behind history is the conflict of interest which derives from the relations of production between owners and workers (Cotgrove, p. 25). In other words, it views history as conflict between two opposing forces, thesis and the anti-thesis which is resolved by a new synthesis. The conditions of workers are seen as a result of class struggle between the capitalists whose aim is profit and the workers whose aim is to resist exploitation. The state in the process is often on the side of the employers of labour (Ekeh-Momoh, p. 44).

Marx was not alone on the conflict emphasis. There is a long tradition in sociology which has been influenced by the conflict thought. Social Darwinism with its doctrine of survival of the fittest in the competitive social struggle legitimized the authority of captains of industry in that their success was sufficient evidence of their fitness to govern industrial concerns and to demand obedience from their workers (Cotgrove, p. 25).

Conceptual Clarification

The Strike action

It falls to be considered whether the trade union methodology of strike or industrial action in general is capable of constituting sufficient digger of the grave of capitalism. The important weapon in the armory of the trade union is the ability to strike (Johnes & Taylor, 1989 p. 344). Strike is often depicted as the ultimate and most favoured form of collective action in that by stopping work and leaving the work place, the employees clearly demonstrate both the importance of the issue in dispute and their solidarity (Salamon, p. 381). But the phenomenon of strike has been seen from very diverse backgrounds. Knowles (cited in Salamon, p. 390) has canvassed that the causal links of strike or industrial action are triple. They are basic issues; solidarity issues and frictional issues. Basic issues concern wages and hours of work; solidarity issues concern recognition, closed shop and

inter union disputes. Frictional issues relate to working arrangements, redundancy and discipline.

However, for Salamon (p. 391), industrial action is attributed either to the presence of agitators on the union side who encourage the expression of conflict for their own power aggrandizement or as part of a deliberate design for socio-economic and political revolution, or to the fact that management's intentions have not been effectively communicated to employees and if they had, or as soon as they are, the conflict will cease. It follows from the foregoing submissions that the issue of strike becoming a revolutionary weapon is one out of every three situations and that it is not only deliberate, it is designed. Yet, the use of strike or threat of industrial action is perhaps the most controversial issue in industrial relations.

While the strike is the most obvious and frequently discussed form of industrial action, it is important to note that it is only one of a range of activities which may be classified as industrial action. Moreover, industrial action is not the exclusive preserve of the union and workers. Management can also instigate it. Picketing, ballots, works to rule, go slows, overtime bans are all forms of collective and industrial actions usually in breach of the individual contract of employment and open to workers and unions which seek to impose pressure upon an employer with the objective of seeking benefit or securing redress for the employees. Thus, strike will invariably be prosecuted as a last resort measure as it will be in the interest of workers, who will lose financially as a result of strike, to adopt approaches which will yield better and harmonious results at little or no cost to them (Towers, 1990 p. 313).

It is even be-labouring the issue to state that political strikes are illegal as are strikes in support of 'union only' contracts such as the closed shop. Although in *F.O. Anene v. J. Allen & co. limited* the Supreme Court of Nigeria, per Brett, JSC has held that a striker intends to return to work once the objects of the strike have been attained and although this may involve a fresh contract of service, an intention to repudiate the existing contract is not necessarily to be presumed.

The passion typically aroused by strikes often serves to obscure the fact that remarkably little is known about what causes them. They are

analogous to accidents. They are avoidable. The cost of an error is a strike (Johnes & Taylor, p 344). In their work, Begg et al (1994, p. 211) argued that if both parties to the industrial situation knew the settlement that would be reached after a strike, it would be better to settle and avoid loss of output and revenue that is caused than to proceed on one. One view of strike is that one party misjudges the other's position. As the strike progresses, each party becomes better aware of the requirements of the other party. But not all strikes are mistakes that could be avoided.

Strikes may also occur because of issues of credibility. It is a response to a breakdown in communication between the union's leadership, the rank and file and the management – which in developing countries is mainly the state and its apparatuses. Thus, strike activity is the most publicized aspect of industrial relations but by no means the most important one. It arouses considerable public comment and often provides dramatic situations with great political significance but in so doing, it tends to obscure other aspects of the relationship between the employer and the employee which make up industrial relations (Metcaf & Richardson, 1978, 271).

Literature Review Marxist perspectives on Trade Unionism

Classical economists of the 19th century like Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo were all concerned with the problem of labour as a factor of production but did not recognize the agonizing and traumatic experiences of the laboring class which social reformers like the Webbs and Marxists argued could be ameliorated by the institution of trade unionism (Tayo, 1992 p. 44) The Webbs recognized the difference between labour and capital but the mutual co-existence of both and accommodation of both rather than antagonism or revolution was crucial to the amicable resolution of conflict in the work place (Tayo, p. 3). For Marxists, improvement in the conditions of the laboring class could be achieved through the antagonistic role of trade unions while the ultimate aim would be the displacement or overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the subsequent installation of the proletarian dictatorship. Unlike the Webbs who saw the constructive role of unionism, Marxist methodology of bringing about improvement in the conditions

of workers endorses a violent challenge of the social order in the form of a revolution. In order words, Marxists see trade unions as revolutionary agents for changing the social order.

However, Ekeh-Momoh (2004, p. 44) argues that Marxist theory is not a trade union theory per se. It is a general theory of society and social change with implications for the analysis of industrial relations in a capitalist society. Marxist only see trade union as a way of organizing workers for the overthrow of exploitation which is responsible for the poor economic conditions of workers. Therefore those who believe in Marxist philosophy take trade unionism in a revolutionary approach and are radical and ready to call out workers for strike at any excuse.

On the other hand, Ekeh-Momoh has purveyed the views of Anderson which has also been presented by Salamon (p. 106) to the effect that trade union as an institution and in its sectional approach in representing the interest of the working classes does not challenge the existence of society based on division of classes but rather expresses it. The concept behind trade union is that members are working class and are just one of the factors of production invariably managed by the capitalists. The trade union therefore cannot be a vehicle for advancement towards socialism but is by nature tied to the capitalist society. It can only bargain within the society but cannot transform it. Anderson was thus of the view that for there to be an effective revolution, it must include intellectuals and the petit-bourgeoisie instead of workers alone (Ekeh-Momoh, pp. 45 – 46).

Citing in extensor Marx's 'Communist Manifesto', Hall (1980, p. 198) in his work, 'The Political and the Economic in Marx's Theory of Class' has restated Marx's position that the collision between capital and labour will take more and more the character of a collision between two classes and thereupon, workers will begin to form combinations against the bourgeoisie which combination transforms itself first into a class and consequently into a political party that compels the legislature to legitimize its interests. Hall had further opined that the economic emancipation of the working class is the end to which every political movement ought to be subordinated or predicated. Thus, the working class economic movement and its

political action are inexorably tied. In other words, the ultimate object of the political movement of the working class is the conquest of political power for its own class which naturally requires the organization of the working class. And every movement in which the working class as class confronts the ruling classes and tries to constrain them by pressure from without is political (Hall, p. 217).

The fraternalism developed within unionism can be converted into class consciousness within the social and political system. Unionism can be viewed as a political activity associated with the development of the working class. They are part of the overall political process for achieving fundamental changes in the nature of the economic and social systems. Unless this is realized and recognized by members and acted upon through policies and decisions, unions will not be fulfilling their primary purpose (Salamon, p. 37).

Contrary to the foregoing, Salamon (p. 32) has proposed the view that trade unions are regarded as an intrusion into the organization from outside which competes with management for the loyalty of employees. Many managers perceive trade unions, according to him, as little more than an historical anachronism that had a role to play within the framework of 19th century employer – employee relationships but with enlightened management in the 20th century, are no longer necessary to protect the employee's interest.

Salamon's proposition seems to have been supported by Guest (1995, p. 137) who has opined that trade unionism is in danger of joining the Royal family as a popular and largely historic relic; and like royalty, it lives on in a somewhat anachronistic role, on the fringes and margins of the lives of most workers. The occasional burst into public consciousness, occasioned by a strike or some other mis-behaviour by a member of the trade union family, occurs mainly in those anachronisms – the mines, railways and traditional manufacturing – which, like the unions, are equally disappearing rapidly from the industrial landscape.

Drawing a conclusion, Guest asserts that approaching the 21st century trade unions appear to be a phenomenon of the 20th century to which we are prepared to say good-bye. In 1982, Taylor (cited in Salamon, p. 5) had argued that Britain was not only suffering its

worst economic slump in the 1980s since the years between the two world wars, but also that the first industrial proletariat in the world was fast disappearing without a whimper.

What then has whittled down the militancy, membership and the relevance of the trade union in the recent modern times? Or as it is put by Ollman and Vernoff (1986, p. 177), why has the working class majority in the western nations failed to develop class consciousness leading to political action? To Nugent and O'Donnell (1994, p. 133) membership figures of trade unions requires caution for it is only one of the indicators of trade union strength and an imperfect one at that. In France, low membership has not traditionally deprived the unions of influence and relevance. In his work, 'Politics in Hard Times' Gourevitch (1986) submitted that the influence of the Communist Party amongst trade unions contributed to Mitterand's decision to nationalize industries. And in Germany, Denmark and Belgium, according to Nugent and O' Donnell, not only have unions been able to resist decline in membership, they have retained a key role in national policy arena as well as in the industry.

However, Johnes and Taylor (1989, pp. 340 – 341) have advanced the possible explanations for the decline of union membership. Firstly, they cited unemployment arguing that workers leave the union on being unemployed. Secondly, they cited the structural changes in industry positing that declining industries tend to be more unionized than growing ones. Thirdly, they canvassed the view that a change in the sex mix of employees in employment are increasing in their entry into paid employment. Finally, they cited the political change pursuing the view that union membership increases or decreases as a result of whether it is a labour or a conservative party that is in government.

Class conflict model and Unionism

Marxist perspective emphasizes that the organization is a microcosm and replica of the society within which it exists and advocates revolutionary approach to the desired social change. It concentrates on the nature of the society surrounding the organization. It assumes and emphasizes that the organization exists within a capitalist society in which, as Hayman canvasses, the production system is privately owned, profit is the key influence on

company policy and control over production is enforced down-wards by the owners' managerial agents (Salamon, pp. 31 & 36). From this perspective, the reality is that law is supportive of management's interests and positions rather than being an independent referee between competing interests. Further, the state is seen as a little more than a democratic icing atop a political system which irrespective of the political party in power, inherently supports the maintenance of the capitalist system and interests (Salamon, pp. 38 & 254)

Perhaps the concepts of class and conflict underscore Marxist perspective on trade unionism. Prandy, et al (cited in Salamon, p.162) have argued that all theories of trade unionism, whether Marxist or not, assume class ideological posture incorporating the concept of class based on the market position of labour in production and unionism as the pursuit of class interests. Marxist theory argues that class conflict is the source of societal change without which the society would stagnate. Class conflict arises primarily from the disparity in the distribution of, and access to economic power within the society: The disparity being between those who own capital and those who supply labour.

In other words, all conflict is believed to stem from the division within society between those who own or manage the means of production and those who have only their labour to sell which is continuous and inevitable. Industrial conflict therefore, is seen not only as synonymous with political and social conflict, not only as a reflection of organizational demands and tensions, but also as an inherent nature of the capitalist economic and social system. Thus, social and political conflict is merely an expression of the underlying economic conflict within the society and the nature of the society's social and political institutions is derived from the disparity which reinforces the dominant social class (Salamon, pp. 36 -37).

Conflict is a prelude to the development of a new social order because the expression of conflicting ideas and interests represents a direct challenge to the internal order and stability of the social system. Open expression of conflict is an important element in the maintenance of stability within the social system (Salamon, p. 375). But there is a point beyond which conflict becomes aberrant,

dysfunctional and pathological because it may destabilize and destroy the social structure. Conflict becomes dysfunctional when it involves violence, a major social disorganization of the society, civil disobedience or the extinction of either management or the union or the state. At which stage, it becomes revolutionary (Salamon, p. 40).

According to Wilzynski (p. 101) Lenin described trade unions as schools for communism and transmission belts for the party's economic programmes to the working masses. Although the power function of trade unions is a latent one manifest only in the exercise of its other functions, Hyman (cited in Salamon, p. 98) has argued that a trade union is first and foremost an agency and a medium of power. As agreed by Van del Vall (cited in Salamon, p. 106) political action has always provided the unions with latent macro-social functions and to Jackson (cited in Salamon), the unions' aim is to change the nature of society. In 'Civil War in France', Marx (cited in Bocock, et al. p. 232) had proposed the necessity of the working class to constitute itself not only into a union but a political party aimed at the conquest of political power, the national power of capital over labour and thereafter, institute its dictatorship of labour over capital.

Marxist ideology and Corporatism

Curran and Seaton (p. 28) have canvassed that since the collapse of Chartism in 19th century, trade unions have become more inward looking seeking to improve wages and working conditions rather than to change the structure of society. They are not more than a permanent opposition which neither seeks nor is able to be an alternative management controlling an organization. They are a little more than a political power vehicle used by a militant minority in order to subvert the existing and legitimate political, social and economic structure of society. They do not only enhance the collective industrial power of the working classes, they provide a focus for expression and protection of the interest of the working class (Salamon, pp. 32 & 37).

But the early political and revolutionary approach displayed by unions has given way to a more conservative approach based on evolution within the existing industrial and political system. The war between labour and

capital and the two industrial classes have gradually been succeeded by a system of labour-management accommodation. This is essentially corporatism which is the practice whereby wage settlements and collective bargaining are achieved by involvement in the negotiating process of the government or the state as well as unions and the firms. The state is thus no more a judge of private conflicts, but a party to it that has something to lose or to gain in the bargaining.

In addition, trade unions have become involved in the operation and even management of the capitalist system rather than a challenge to it and represent sectional rather than more general class interest. According to de Medeiros (2009), workers desire better working conditions and better wages rather than the end of capitalism. They are no longer against profit or the existence of industries or against their need for profit. What the worker wants and needs is participation in the profits. In other words, trade unions should get rid of ideology and managers and workers should not be enemies but partners. This is no less than participatory, industrial democracy and corporatism.

Conclusion

This study reviews the institution of trade unionism under capitalism and socialism particularly the long legal history of labour suppression under capitalism. While under socialism, the role of the trade union seems to be fully highlighted, there does not seem to be any spectacular role that the trade union performed in socialism that it did not in capitalism and vice versa. Rather, the partisanship of the trade union appeared to be fully enveloped by the communist and socialist parties making independent militant unionism even non-descript under capitalism resulting corporatism.

Suggestions for Future Research

At the conclusion of this research, the Authors were of the humble view that a complimentary area of further research could be to study ‘**Critique of Marxist Views on Trade Unionism**’.

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