

Trade Union Revitalization in Kenya: Acquisition and Utilization of Power Resources

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Theme Two: Trade Union Organization and Strategies

Abstract

A consensus has emerged in trade union research that trade unions are not solely at the mercy of major societal trends, but always have the option of making strategic choice(s) to revitalize and ensure improvement in the socio-economic welfare of their members. The key question is, which power resources and means of exerting such power are available to trade unions in the different context they face to reposition and revitalize themselves? This paper uses the power resources approach to identify the power resources and capabilities that were acquired, developed and utilized by the Kenya National Private Security Workers Union to revitalize.

The role of security as an anchor of good governance, social welfare and economic development cannot be gainsaid. Security is key to achieving rapid and sustained economic growth, national productivity and competitiveness, and the socio-economic and political transformations that Kenya aspires to. The private security industry in Kenya has grown in size and importance, particularly since 2009 when Kenya started to become a target of terror groups, especially Somali Islamist extremists, due to its international engagement in the restoration of security in Somalia. Kenya has a large and growing private security industry, with employment level estimated at over 500,000 employees and 2,000 registered companies. The industry has a burgeoning informal economy, triangular forms of employment such as labour brokerage, subcontracting and outsourcing, and a segmented market pitting big, medium, small and micro-sized firms against each other. All these characteristics and practices increase the vulnerability of private security industry employees.

A constant in Kenya's private security industry since 1960 was ineffective organization and representation of industry employees with regard to their trade union and collective bargaining rights. Industry employees suffered weak representation manifested in multiple trade unions within the sector; leadership wrangles; coup d'états in union leadership; and demarcation conflicts in regard to union membership organizational boundaries. As a consequence, working conditions in the sector deteriorated. The year 2011 marked a turnaround for the private security industry employees in Kenya. The turnaround was mainly attributed to the strategic acquisition, development and utilization of power resources by the Kenya National Private Security Workers' Union.

Labour revitalization studies emphasize the ability of trade unions to act. Critical to this line of thinking is the question as to which possible actions and means of exerting power the trade unions have available to them in the different contexts they face to reposition and revitalize themselves as organisations. The power resources approach is based on the premise that workers, inclusive of their trade unions can successfully defend their interests by collective mobilisation of power resources. This study seeks to explore the power resources and capabilities that the Kenya National Private Security Workers' Union acquired and developed, and how they have been used to build the union and improve the welfare of its members.

Based on the analysis, the revitalization of the Union reinforced the fact that associational power is best sustained through institutional power. The process also saw a double framing function by allowing the union to gain more sympathy and relevance from members of the public, while internally presenting it with articulation capabilities to bring together national officials, shop stewards and rank-and-file members. These changes made the union to increase its density by

almost tenfold between 2011 and 2017. It also enabled the union to emerge as a strong, cohesive and vibrant union capable of turning challenges into opportunities.