



TRADE UNIONS AND PARTY POLITICS

The PSA shall never compromise its independence

2014

Introduction

The strength of any trade union lies in its capacity to advance and protect the interests of its members. These interests can be affected positively or negatively by the factors beyond the shop-floor. Politics is one big factor.

Politics affects the social and economic lives of people on a daily basis. One does not need to be a political party heck to be affected by it. Politics determine taxes; it affects the price of bread; it determines access to healthcare or education; and affects the fortunes of a whole nation. Thomas Mann, the German novelist, was indeed correct when he asserted that “there is nothing that is not political. Everything is politics.”¹

Political parties, pressure groups and individuals seek to influence policy in their favour. Unions, too, wish to have the power to determine the allocation of resources to their advantage. But is it necessary for unions to be actively involved in party politics?

Having surveyed union-party nexus in Western Europe, the African continent and here in South Africa, the PSA argues that union-party alliances compromise union independence and erode the right of individuals to make political choices. As we point out in this paper, evidence supports our belief that union-party associations do not guarantee that the voice of workers shall prevail. Political parties and some individual union leaders are the major beneficiaries from such relations at the expense of workers. This is why this paper reinforces our age-old position of independence.

Trade union-political party nexus

Why do trade unions get involved in party politics? The general justification is that unions involve themselves in party politics in order to influence policy formulation in government. Thus, political parties can be viewed as a means through which unions attain their ends.

All unions wish to influence institutions that regulate labour relations and to determine the price of labour. They would prefer the election into office of public office bearers who believe in their cause. In order to gain this influence, unions either enter into alliances with political parties or deploy their representatives to serve in the leadership structures of political parties, especially governing parties. In some countries unions engage actively in the formation of pro-labour parties to contest political power.

Yet, maintaining political influence while at the same time retaining independence is a test many unions seldom pass. The independence of unions from political manipulation is a crucial ingredient in the maintenance of union legitimacy. Union leaders who sacrifice their members' interests on the altar of political expedience risk eroding the legitimacy of their unions.

While in many countries union leaders have earned political clout, many have been unable to turn political clout into fortunes for union members. Proximity to political parties has not yielded labour friendly outcomes. Some union leaders use their access to political power to pursue selfish interests.

Union closeness to a governing party, especially in the public service, can be compromising to the integrity and independence of unions. It can be viewed as selling out and going to bed with the enemy – the employer. This was the case in Namibia, where the union's proximity to political power spelled the loss of its autonomy as well as its capacity to pursue an alternative agenda.²

What of political parties? Why do they seek proximity to unions?

It would be naïve to think that political parties are passive organisations waiting for unions to influence them. They too, seek to exert their influence over unions. When they enter into alliances with trade unions, political parties are motivated by the same desire to hold sway in the trade union movement.

There are several advantages – political and economic – for a political party to have a harmonious relationship with a trade union. It is even better if the trade union is dominant in the public service.

Politically, it is advantageous for a political party – especially a governing party – to be aligned with a trade union. Unions are better organised structurally and this can be useful for electoral campaigning purposes. With the increasing role that unions play in society as the sword of justice³ and a voice of reason, political parties seek endorsements from unions to boost their gravitas in civil society.

Unions are training grounds for leadership and hotbed for ideas. It is true that “the political power of labour does not lie only in its strategic location in the workplace and its capacity to organise, but also in the power of its ideas.”⁴ This is another reason why political parties actively seek association with unions.

Trade unions can hold economies to a grinding halt. In most countries, individual unions or federations of unions are the single largest membership organisations, surpassing political parties. It is risky for a governing party not to enjoy the support of dominant trade unions. In such instances, the risk of ‘sabotage,’ either through strike action or other means, is always high. It is worse if the governing party does not enjoy the support of the dominant unions in the public service. As Bargo observes, public sector unions have the potential to become a “shadow political party”⁵ in opposition to the governing party. Political parties are alive to this reality. It is for this reason that all governing parties desire to have greater control of the trade union movement.

Political parties expect unions to exert discipline over their rank and file members, to guarantee stability in the economy. To achieve this, political parties have adopted different strategies to placate unions and their leaders. In some cases, union leaders are co-opted into the leadership of the political parties or into positions in government.

It is also economically beneficial for a political party to have the support of trade union. Trade unions are self-sustainable organisations with capacity for fundraising. The subscription fees and pension schemes that they own are to political parties cash cows waiting to be milked. In some countries, political parties look to trade unions for funding for their political campaigns. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, when political parties battle to capture and control trade unions.

The relationship between unions and political parties is a two way affair. It is a relationship driven by the mutual desire to influence each other. From this relationship, unions hope to achieve one thing – labour friendly outcomes in government and the economy. On their part, political parties expect many things – assurance of economic stability, electoral support as well as financial benefits.

The European experience

Europe has an established tradition of union-party proximity. Not only are unions in alliances with political parties, they are instrumental towards the formation of political parties, especially social democratic parties. In some situations, as in the case of Britain, unions have voting rights in the National Congress of the Labour Party. In other cases, political parties reserve parliamentary seats for aligned unions, as in the case of former Poland and Britain for example.

Generally in Europe, the union-party nexus is harmonious and complementary. Where the social democratic parties advance their ideology through state instruments, trade unions do the same in civil society, ensuring the hegemony of the political party within civil society and among the working class. As Upchurch *et al* observes, “The principal objective of the social democratic trade union vis-à-vis the party was winning of elections in order to facilitate the development of electoral programmes that would augment industrial power and influence of trade union.”⁶ In this context, the union and the party are two side of the same ideological coin.

Broadly, there are four variations of union-party relations in Western Europe, as we discuss below.

Sweden

In Sweden, unions enjoyed what Upchurch *et al* call “unparalleled intimacy” with the Social Democratic and Labour Party. In this relationship, members of the largest union the Swedish Trade Union Confederation automatically become members of the Social Democratic and Labour Party.⁷ The unions also provided funding to the political party and support during elections. In doing so unions sought to exert influence over policy and sway

it in favour of their members. This they were able to do until 1987, when the union divorced the party as a result of dissatisfaction over the party's failure to protect the interests of workers.

United Kingdom

The other model is the formal-affiliation stance, which is practiced predominately in the UK. In this context, trade unions are formally affiliated to a political party – mainly the Labour Party. Unions affiliate directly and not through the national federation of unions, the Trade Union Centre. By affiliating to the party, unions also pledge financial support to the party and campaign for the party during elections. As Alderman and Carter put it, “the party has been reliant on the unions as its main source of finance through membership affiliation fees, sponsorship of Members of Parliament and additional ad hoc contributions for elections.”⁸

Having affiliated, the unions get direct representation in all levels and structures of the party, including the National Executive Committee. They also have voting rights at Party Conferences.⁹ But the failure of the labour party to deliver on the expectations of unions over time and dismal performance in elections led to the rethink of this relationship. Ultimately, the Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Lord Mandelson, Third Way adopted a different style and posture towards the unions and reduced links between the unions and the Labour Party. Ed Miliband, new leader of the Labour Party, is also taking the union-party relations reform further, with the intention to reduce union grip on Labour Party.¹⁰ Unlike in other countries, it is the party that wants minimal control of the union over the party and not vice versa.

Germany

In Germany, the general practice has been that of informal alignment between the union and the political party – Social Democratic Party. Although the ideological posture of unions resonates with the socialist parties, their relations with the parties remain informal. The largest union, the German Confederation of Trade Unions (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund - GDB) is open to all workers regardless of political and ideological orientation. The union considers itself a unified trade union as is not affiliated to or financed by any political party. It does not, however, restrict its members or leaders from joining political parties of their choice. While the majority of leaders of the GDB are also members of the Social Democratic Party, some were members of the Alliance 90, also known as the Greens party. This is neither formally endorsed nor regulated by union policy. The informality of the arrangements makes German unions to enjoy greater autonomy from the political parties. They do not contribute towards the funding of the party and have not taken formal position to support political parties during an election. The informal arrangements between the party and union leave space for both to act independently of one another. The party enjoys a degree of flexibility on policy issues, and is not beholden to the union when it makes policy decisions in government.

But the alliance or association with the political parties have not prevented governing parties from implementing policies that undermine workers' interests. Despite the fact that the majority of union leaders in Germany are members of the party's leadership hierarchy, the party in government implemented massive cuts in unemployment benefits in 2003.¹¹ Compounded by outsourcing and the casualization of jobs, these actions by federal government further strained relations between the trade union and the political party.

France

The French model is that of fragmentation. Although in the past there were unions that were aligned to the Communist Party, for example the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), there has not been mutual embrace between the Socialist Party and unions in the recent past. The Force Ouvrière (FO) the second largest federation of unions remains non-aligned. The other federation, the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), has also exuded a non-partisan political orientation.

The above experience shows us that there are divergent models of union-party relations in Europe. While unions have historically been disposed towards social democratic parties, they have been evaluating their fortunes and revising their relations with the political parties. This has come about as a result of their dissatisfaction with the performance of parties in government. Meanwhile in the UK, where union-party relation is highly formalised, it is the Labour Party and not the unions that are agitating for the revision of the relations. While the fate that will befall this relationship is unknown, one thing is clear though: proximity with the governing party is no guarantee for the voice and interests of unions to prevail.

The African experience

On the African continent, trade unions have been involved in both party and national politics. During the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, trade unions aligned themselves with liberation movements in the quest for independence and social justice.¹²

The involvement of trade unions in politics, especially liberation politics, was as a result of the prevailing consciousness among workers that labour relations are susceptible to influence by matters beyond the shop floor. There could never have been a just system in the workplace under an unjust political system. As Beckman and Sachikonye rightfully observed, "civil liberties are essential preconditions for converting the economic interests of workers into rights and entitlements."¹³ In many ways, workers in Africa experienced a double oppression, both as members of society and as workers in the workplace. The involvement of unions in politics was therefore inevitable.

The approach of many unions in Africa has been that of social unionism. They perceive their role to be broader than parochial shop-floor struggles. This strand of social unionism is predicated on the idea that the advancement of workers' struggles cannot be achieved solely through collective bargaining on the shop-floor, but by engaging in broader politics outside the workplace. They believe that better working conditions can only be achieved in a political environment that upholds and respect human rights, social justice and democracy. The liberation movement became a natural ally to unions as it was pursuing the same objectives. This is the understanding that has undergirded union relations with liberation movements in Africa back then.

Post-colonial Africa is a different environment. There are four categories in which union-party relations can be classified after colonialism.

Bonding with the liberation movement

The first category of union-party relations is where the bond between unions and liberation movements continued after independence. In this regard, unions maintain the relationships they had with the national liberation movement. In this model, the political party continues to play a big brother role; it dominates and dictates activities of the union. The unions enjoy no degree of autonomy from the party. It is treated like a branch of the political party. This has been the case in such countries as Namibia, Senegal and Egypt.¹⁴ In Senegal the stranglehold of the Socialist Party on the unions was only broken when the party lost the polls in 2000. Before then, the party has always prevailed on the union. After the 2000 elections, unions started to enjoy some degree of autonomy and have sought new ways to influence government policy while remaining independent from the political party. The same has been true for Egypt.¹⁵ Until the Arab spring, unions enjoyed no autonomy and were incorporated into the authoritarian structures of the ruling party and its government.

Delinking from liberation movement

The second type of union-party nexus has been that of divorce, leading to the formation of new labour parties.¹⁶ Here unions have delinked from the party of liberation. This has been a direct result of unions' dissatisfaction with the performance of the liberation movement in government. The failure of political parties to address the plight of the workers and to transform the economy to the advantage of the working class has been cited as the reason for the break away. In countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia and Nigeria, trade unions broke away to form their own political parties to contest state power. For example, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) was instrumental in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In Zambia unions helped to form the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD).

These initiatives have been met with serious hostility by the political parties (liberation parties) in these countries. For example, the members of the ZCTU and MDC have been harassed and vilified by the ruling ZANU-PF. In Nigeria, attempts to form a labour party were made, albeit without success.

Abstinence

The third example is abstinence from party politics. After failing to exert influence on the state, the Ghanaian trade unions opted to abstain from politics.¹⁷ Trade unions in Ghana have explicitly disengaged from party politics. The largest trade union, Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) decided in 1992 to abstain from party

politics.¹⁸ Instead, the union has been engaging civil society and currently enjoys popular public support. The decision to abstain from party politics has largely been motivated by the desire to retain their independence in a political environment that is predominantly a two-party state.

Unhappy alliance

The last example is that of an unhappy alliance with the governing party. This model is predominately in practice in South Africa, where the largest trade union federation Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), is in alliance with the ruling ANC, but unhappy with some of its policies. Further details of this model are sketched out later in the section on South Africa.

Message from the continent

Have these initiatives succeeded to champion the interests of the workers? No! In Zambia, unions learnt a big lesson. After they contributed to its formation and its capturing of state power, the MMD dumped the trade unions. The National Union of Namibian Workers also failed to influence any radical transformation in the state, despite its close relationship with the governing party – the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO).¹⁹ In Senegal, unions also suffered the same fate. After playing a significant role in bringing multiparty democracy and Abdoulaye Wade’s party to power, the latter turned against the unions and entrenched streaks of authoritarianism in the state.²⁰

The messages are loud and clear. The first is that political parties cannot be trusted once they are in power. Forming a party and letting it go without full control over it is a waste of time. Secondly, there is no guarantee that once in power the political party will pursue the interests of workers. Thirdly, it is not impossible for former comrades to become modern-day oppressors. Lastly, if they seek political power and influence unions must establish their own political parties and have full control over them to realise their vested interests.

The South African experience

Like their counterparts on the African continent, trade unions in South Africa have played a significant role in the struggles against colonialism and apartheid. In fact, the history of trade unionism in South Africa is inseparable from the broader political struggles for social justice and freedom. From back then, the trade union movement has been as interested in the vested interests of workers as it has been in the struggles of the poor and the oppressed.

Through boycotts, strike actions and campaigns, the trade union movement was immersed in national politics. Its involvement towards the democratisation process is also well documented. It is not a stretch to suggest that many of the transformation gains and nation-building advancements are literally and figuratively the fruits of their labour.

In the democratic dispensation, politically aligned unions have found themselves in a dilemma, having to serve two masters. On the one hand is the rank and file who correctly expect their unions to champion their interests, and on the other is the governing party, filled with expectations for the unions to “assist with national development.” Essentially, what they expect is that the unions will be less confrontational and more complementary in their attitude towards the new government. The dilemma of serving two masters is that it is difficult to please both of them without compromising the other.

This dualistic role has been tricky for the unions. They have been chastised for criticising economic and public policies implemented by the democratic government. Their stances on issues have oftentimes been viewed as “oppositional” or acting on behalf of the opposition.²¹ This attitude suggests an expectation from the governing party for the unions to prioritise political considerations over the interests of their members.

There are three major strands of unions in South Africa. There are those that are affiliated to a national federation of unions and, ipso facto, aligned to a political party by virtue of affiliation to a federation. The second category comprises unions that are affiliated to a federation that is non-politically aligned, and in the third category are unions that are not affiliated to a federation and not politically aligned.

Unlike in the UK and elsewhere, where the unions directly enter into formal relations with a political party, unions in South Africa do so through the national federation of union to which they are affiliated. For example, the formal union-party relations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) are not between individual unions and the political party. Nonetheless, by affiliating to COSATU, affiliated unions bind themselves to be part of the alliance, and are by virtue of affiliation to COSATU expected to make financial contributions to a political fund to support ANC courses and electoral campaigns.

Among the unions that are affiliated to COSATU are unions operating in the public service, viz. the South African Democratic Nurses' Union (SADNU), the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), the South African State and Allied Workers' Union (SASAWU), and the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU).

The second category of unions is made up of unions that are not affiliated to political parties, but affiliated to the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) and National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). FEDUSA's constitution explicitly states the requirement for affiliation as "not being party politically aligned" and says it strives to "maintain its political independence at all times."²² NACTU, too, has adopted a principle of non-political affiliation. While it does not bar its office bearers from belonging to political parties, NACTU took a resolution at its 1990 Congress to prevent its office bearers from holding leadership position in a political party.²³ The principle of independence from political parties is highly respected.

Among the non-aligned unions there are those that are affiliated to national federations of unions and those that are independent from either political parties or union federations. The PSA falls under the latter category. It is neither politically aligned nor affiliated to any federation.

Lessons from the unhappy affair

South African unions aligned to the governing party have failed to learn from the experiences of trade unions on the African continent. All political parties are the same; once in power, they cannot be trusted.

While the labour movement can claim to have made significant strides towards the foundation of democratic South Africa, such gains are being reversed. At an economic level, the government has oftentimes, used the trade union movement as a voting fodder without delivering on worker demands.

Apart from the co-option of former union leaders into government structures and parliament, the unions seem to have failed to turn political clout into fortunes for the workers.. Three years after much work done by COSATU towards the adoption of the Reconstruction and Development Policy (RDP), the ANC government adopted a new economic policy: the Growth Employment and Redistributive (GEAR) – a policy that has failed to create the much promised jobs. The ministerial portfolio responsible for the RDP was also disbanded.

Having restored its influence in the governing party at the Polokwane Conference in 2007, COSATU pushed for the adoption of a New Growth Path. This policy has been overtaken by a new National Development Plan (NDP), which some of COSATU affiliates have criticised, labelling it neo-liberal. These critical unions suggest that the NDP is an old wine in new bottle - a repackaged GEAR with a new name.

When the aligned unions demanded the banning of labour brokers, the ANC vacillated and reneged on a resolution the unions had sponsored at the 2007 ANC National Conference. The youth wage subsidy is another example. It has been implemented despite serious concerns from COSATU and other unions.

The unions have been left with a battered ego, with little to show as the dividends of being in an alliance with the governing party. It is the governing party's stance on economic policy, labour brokers and youth wage subsidy that has pushed some unions within the federation to the edge. The union-party relationship is weakening and some unions within COSATU are starting to raise questions about whether the governing party is the appropriate vehicle to safeguard the interests of workers.

What is happening in South Africa is not new; the country is following in the footsteps of other post-liberation societies. Eddie Webster's observation that unions are "rethinking their approach to politics, reducing their reliance on their alliance with ruling parties and renewing links with civil society movement"²⁴ is as true about experiences on the African continent as it is for South Africa. The 2010 Civil Society conference organised by COSATU and the recently mooted idea of a Labour Party are in line with the rethink in the rest of the continent. Examples of failed and successful attempts by unions to form or instigate the formation of alternative political parties are prevalent in Africa.

But the lesson from the unhappy affair is brutal. Rubbing shoulders with the political elite does not guarantee political influence over policy. Neither does co-optation. If political parties cannot be trusted, why, then, should the Public Servants Association immerse itself in party politics?

The PSA's perspective

Individuals must shape their own destiny

Freedom of association and political rights are enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Of the political rights, the Constitution proclaims in section 19 of the Bill of Rights that "Every citizen is free to make political choices, which includes the right – (a) to form a political party; (b) to participate in activities of, or recruit members for, a political party; and (c) to campaign for a political party or cause." Members of the Public Servants' Association do not surrender these freedoms the time they sign our membership form. They continue to enjoy this right during their affiliation as members of the PSA. But, whatever the political choices of our members, such choices cannot be associated with the PSA; they are individual choices.

It is our conviction as the PSA that union-party relations can erode the right of members freely to make political choices. When a union enters into a relationship with a political party, it imposes its will on the members. Political choice is a decision individuals should make without being dictated to by group thinking. The PSA firmly believes that engaging in party politics would limit the political rights of its members as enshrined in our country's Constitution.

The PSA is not a herd organisation; we will never treat our members like a political herd, directed where and when to graze by a herd boy. We allow our members freely to exercise their democratic right to make political choices.

Reviving NEDLAC

The PSA believes that there are other alternative ways through which to influence public policies, rather than formal alliance with political parties. Our view is that such institutions as National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) need to be revisited, strengthened and repositioned as the locus of social dialogue on public policy.

Despite its weaknesses, NEDLAC has a record of facilitating policy dialogue among social partners, viz. Labour, Government and Business. It has provided space for labour in policy making processes and remains a crucial platform for social dialogue. It needs to be revitalised to guarantee its relevance into the future.

Our view is that it is through the force of our ideas that we can influence decision making in government rather than by rubbing shoulders with political elites. The lessons from the country, the continent and beyond suggest to us that affiliation with a political party is no guarantee of success. Our preference is rather to lobby government in the appropriate forums created for social dialogue.

Following the Ghanaian example

We believe in the prevailing model in Ghana, where unions abstain from party politics. We believe that union-party alliance jeopardise unions' capacity to serve the interests of their members. The experiences we have cited – from Europe to Africa – show that union-party alliances limit union autonomy and erode legitimacy. It can be worse in the public service, where the governing party is de facto the employer. By forming alliances with the governing party, the union is ipso facto in bed with the employer. As Beckman and Sachikonye observe, there is a high risk of "built-in conflict between being part of government ... and negotiating a collective agreement on

behalf of your members.”²⁵ For this conflict to be resolved, either the interests of the governing party will be fulfilled at the expense of members of the union or vice versa. It is impossible to serve two masters with different expectations. The Ghanaian route is the safest route for unions in the public service. This is why the PSA prefers it.

Conclusion

Union-party relations have been fraught with contradictions. The relationship has, to an extent, been an abusive one, with unions on the receiving end. Unions have given their all; they have funded political parties, campaigned for them and endorsed their leaders. But they have received little in return; and lost their independence along the way.

The co-option strategy has not benefited workers either. Instead of transforming the party and state to serve the interests of the workers, co-opted union leaders got themselves transformed by state power and patronage. Some have become spokespersons for the oppression of workers. In the end, it is the unions that have suffered a serious legitimacy crisis. The credibility of the leaders and legitimacy of the union have been eroded. This is the fate the PSA has avoided by remaining independent from political parties. This stance we are not prepared to change.

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