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*CYCLES OF MOBILISATION, WAVES OF UNREST:
ETHIOPIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT HISTORY*

Abstract

The history of the Ethiopian labour movement appears in the shape of repeated cyclical movements in levels of mobilisation. In contrast with the static depiction dominating the literature on the movement, this article examines how Ethiopian wage-workers have, over the past six decades, acquired, relinquished and redeveloped the collective coherence and organisational capacities to engage in sustained collective action, the strategic orientation and willingness to do so, and the resilience to fend off sustained counter-mobilization. The article discusses how the history of the Ethiopian labour movement is deeply entangled with, and mutually constitutive of, historical shifts in wage labour relations, and the struggle over these relations. In doing so it suggests a reciprocal relationship between Ethiopian workers' achievements and strategic orientation. At the heart of the article is the notion of historical agency, which Ethiopian workers acting collectively have exhibited to a degree that is underappreciated in the literature.

KEYWORDS: WORKERS; LABOUR MOVEMENTS; TRADE UNIONS;
STRIKES; LABOUR RELATIONS

Introduction

The historiography of the movement of Ethiopian wage-workers is severely underdeveloped. Yet, when approaching this “field” – the quotation marks are warranted, because the body of literature remains too impoverished to thoroughly warrant the term – one encounters some curious general features.

One such curiosity is the tendency in the literature to deny organised wage-workers any degree of autonomy in establishing their strategic orientation and engaging in collective action. What workers have done collectively has been, through direct control or severe manipulation, viewed as being determined by exogenous political agents and events, including institutions of the state. The macro-political conjuncture has tended to become the sole lens through which workers' collective actions have been interpreted and explained. The conditions

of wage-workers, or the internal dynamics of the workers' movement, has not featured as factors propelling neither shifts in the strategic orientation of organised workers nor upswings in industrial contention.

Another particular feature, somewhat related to the above, pertains to state-centrism in the determination of labour relations, and the concomitant denial of agency to Ethiopian workers. Workers have been viewed as having been controlled, commanded, and deployed within given relations, at the inexplicable whims of rulers. Labour relations have seemingly been entirely derived from state policy, and insulated from pressures from below.

Workers have thus been portrayed as deprived of both autonomy and agency, and the historiography of the labour movement has tended to collapse into an analysis of the political conjuncture and the content of state power. As a corollary, the labour movement has been described as co-opted, dormant and inconsequential.

This article draws on research in the archives of, and interviews with participants in, the Ethiopian and international trade union movement to examine the history of the Ethiopian labour movement. Far from state manipulation alone, this entails the history of Ethiopian workers having developed and relinquished the collective solidarities, coherence and capacities required for meaningful industrial contention *within that contention itself*. Ethiopian labour movement history is, moreover, deeply entangled and mutually constituted with the history of shifting labour relations in Ethiopia's waged sector, and the struggle over these relations.

Theoretical considerations

The literature offers a number of general and theoretical notions relevant to the study of the history of the Ethiopian labour movement, the shifts in its strategic orientation, and its impact.

A suitable starting point is the discussion on the dual nature of trade unions. Trade unions are central components of labour movements – although the term labour movement broadens the scope. In addition to trade unions, it is here taken to include also other constellations organising wage-workers in the struggle for better conditions, as well as collective practices among wage-workers, aiming to improve those conditions. Following Richard Hyman's definition, a trade union can be conceived as "an agency and a medium of power" which permits workers to exercise a level of collective control over labour conditions which they would not have able to do acting individually¹. Unions, Hyman explains, engages in a two-way relationship with external agencies, where the former seeks to influence and pressure the latter and vice versa. But to be able to act coherently and make sure that established agreements and strategies are adhered to, unions must also

1. R. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, London, Macmillan, 1975.

exercise internal control *over* workers. This is what constitutes the dual nature of trade unions.

There is both tension and complementarity between the institutional aspect of labour movements – manifested in, for example, trade unions – as organised collectives, and labour movements as a set of practices, the principal example of which is the strike. With regards to this relationship, van der Linden has observed that while “unions cannot exist without (the ultimate threat of) the strike weapon, the converse is not true”². However, even if strikes do not require a union, some form of organised constellations is generally desirable as a vehicle that can articulate demands, coordinate efforts, negotiate agreements, and safeguard them. In the absence of any organisation it is unlikely that durable concessions can be extracted.

The broad general aims of labour and trade union movements are given by the definition: to improve or defend workers’ conditions. The precise nature of the goals and the means of achieving them, however, vary widely in reality. This is where the strategic orientation – which determines both the roles and potential impacts of movements – becomes important. Strategic orientation is generally established in contention, and subject to continuous challenge and successive shifts, whenever the balance of forces demands. As Gallas has aptly put it, “unions are not just organisations of struggle, but also fields of struggle between competing forces of labour with different strategies... and they can change over the life course of a single union”³.

Union officialdom – because of corporate interests, and functional, social and economic separation from the rank-and-file – tend to press for a moderation of aims and practices, and uphold industrial peace and legality. The preservation of tranquillity at all costs is usually grounded in the logics of “institutional needs” – to preserve the organisation, strengthen it, or defend its achievements – and the defence of the organisation itself is often conflated with and placed above the defence of the interests of the membership⁴. The growing clout of a separate layer of officialdom is known as bureaucratisation, and its effects are enhanced by the fact that subversive external pressures towards moderation generally focus on the leadership level of organisations⁵.

While this interaction between internal and external pressures has been viewed as a key source of moderation of strategic orientation, militancy has been

2. M. van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays Towards a Global Labor History*, Leiden, Brill, 2008.

3. A. Gallas, “Class Power and Union Capacities. A Research Note on the Power Resources Approach”, *Global Labour*, 9, 3, 2018, 351.

4. R. Brenner, “The Political Economy of the Rank-and-File Rebellion”, in A. Brenner, R. Brenner and C. Winslow, eds., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt From Below During the Long 1970s*, London, Verso, 2010, 37-76.

5. R. Darlington and M. Upchurch, “A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File Versus Bureaucracy Debate”, *Capital & Class*, 36, 2012, 77-95.

viewed as originating in the pressures from the rank-and-file⁶. According to Darlington and Upchurch “it is the exploitative social relations at the heart of capitalist society to which the mass of rank-and-file union members are subject that provides the material basis for collective workers struggles which distinguish them from [full-time officials]”⁷. But even so, certain factors more directly conditions – either in a conducive or restraining manner – the prevalence of militant practices. As Kelly has pointed out, “the conflict of interest that lies at the heart of the capitalist employment relationship does not necessarily give rise to conflict behaviour”⁸. Following Charles Tilly, Kelly argues that for collective action to be viable, a number of conditions need to be satisfied. These encompass the social construction and definition of collective interests; collective mobilisation which transforms individual workers into collective actors; collective organisation; and *opportunity*. The pivotal condition of opportunity includes considerations regarding the relative balance of power, the costs of repressions, and contingent opportunities available. Employers and the state generally undertake counter-mobilisation, which is “likely to target all of the dimensions of collectivism”⁹. In other words, attempts are made to restrict opportunities and impose higher costs on collective action, overturn goals and leaders, rearticulate interests, undermine organisations, and demobilise workers.

Generally, there appears to be a clear correlation between the militant energy of a labour movement, on the one hand, and its potential impact on labour relations on the other. Silver has provided a global historical account of how vibrant labour movements engaging in sustained strike activity have generally “succeeded in raising wages, improving working conditions, and strengthening workers’ rights”¹⁰. A number of scholarly accounts¹¹ largely corroborate these findings, although other accounts point to the contingent nature of this relationship, and the impact of broader political-economic and historical forces¹².

If militancy tends to result in greater potential impact of labour movements, there are also indications that such impact has reciprocal effects on movements’ strategic orientation. Screpanti has pointed to such a relationship between achievements and militancy. The notion that “there is a positive cumulative effect of past

6. Brenner, “The Political Economy”; S. Cohen *Ramparts of Resistance. Why Workers Lost Their Power, and How to Get It Back*, London, Pluto, 2006.

7. Darlington and Upchurch “A Reappraisal of”, 88.

8. J. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations. Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*, London, Routledge, 2002, 25.

9. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 128.

10. B. Silver, *Forces of Labor. Workers’ Movements and Globalization Since 1870*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 168.

11. See, for example, R. Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes. Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 344; S. Cohn, *When Strikes Make Sense – And Why. Lessons from Third Republic French Coal Miners*, New York and London, Plenum, 1993, 219.

12. See for example Brenner, Brenner and Winslow, eds., *Rebel Rank and File* on differing outcomes of successive strike waves in North America and Europe.

experience in relation to actual claims”¹³ leads to the possibility that a virtuous, and somewhat path-dependent, cycle of increasing militancy and achievements could be created. When sufficiently developed, this could result in the type of explosive surges of industrial unrest which Screpanti termed *proletarian insurgencies*. However, because “claims will change in time in the same direction as achievements”¹⁴, Screpanti also acknowledged that an equally vicious cycle of defeat and despondency can be generated.

The Ethiopian labour movement in the literature

The above notwithstanding, the manner in which the Ethiopian labour movement and trade unions have been treated in the scant literature does not exhibit much appreciation for neither the potentials, practice, nor the historical achievements of organised workers. The movement has tended to be treated as persistently co-opted, dormant, weak, and inconsequential. At times when the movement has exhibited militancy and autonomy, this has been attributed to external agents. When it has been characterised by energy and activity, this has been attributed to particularities in the political conjuncture. Where progress and victories have been recorded, this has almost unfailingly been attributed to shifts in the content or force of state power. The tendency is to disparage and attribute static qualities to the movement.

In Killion’s pioneering account¹⁵ of organised labour in Ethiopia and Eritrea, which remains unsurpassed in historical detail and analytical sophistication, this tendency constitutes the one objectionable attribute. Working-class formation in pre-revolution Ethiopia, according to Killion, was “incipient”, “incomplete”, and characterised by “false consciousness”¹⁶. “In contrast to workers in the European colonies”, Killion claimed, “Ethiopian workers’ organisations developed a nationalist political consciousness which frequently confused the interests of the state with their own economic interests”¹⁷. Partly as a result, Killion characterised the labour movement as persistently subordinated to the state. When workers staged successful strikes on the Djibouti-Ethiopian railway and in other foreign-owned enterprises, he interpreted these strikes as originating “in the contradictions between the interests of a non-capitalist ruling class and foreign capital”, rather than in the contradiction between labour and capital. Bluntly put, Ethiopian workers were being manipulated. Despite Killion acknowledging how, prior 1974

13. E. Screpanti, “Long Economic Cycles and Recurring Proletarian Insurgencies”, *Review*, 7, 3, 1984, 530.

14. Screpanti, “Long Economic Cycle”, 531.

15. T. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State in the Ethiopian Region”, PhD thesis, Stanford University, 1985

16. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State”, 2-12.

17. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State”, 12.

Ethiopian revolution, the labour movement had gained a degree of autonomy and had produced a growing militant strand, which permitted workers to have a “significant impact” on the unfolding process¹⁸, he insisted that subordination remained the salient feature.

Killion is far from alone in making such interpretations. In Markakis’ seminal work *Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, the labour movement appears only as a peripheral phenomenon, whose weakness is identified as one of the reasons for the depressed level of wages¹⁹. Other scholars have tended to agree. “The unions were far less significant than the local neighbourhood associations”, Clapham²⁰ opined, while Keller argued that the labour movement “was never able to present a serious militant challenge to the status quo in the industrial sector”²¹. According to Lefort, the labour movement was “apolitical, heterogeneous and atomised”²², while Bahru has written that prior to March 1974, the central trade union confederation “had been notable for its lethargy rather than its militancy”²³. Gebru, meanwhile, has dismissed the emerging working class *in toto* as “small, factional, and inconsequential, both qualitatively and quantitatively”²⁴.

Several other works have discussed the role of the labour movement in the context of the 1974 revolution. What these accounts have in common is that they subsume labour militancy under the broader revolutionary process and attribute the former to the latter. Gebru, for example, has claimed that the trade union movement was “relatively placid and dormant throughout the 1960s” and that its “torpor was shattered only amid the dramatic circumstances of the 1970s”²⁵. Marina Ottaway, meanwhile, was dismissive of the movement’s role, playing down its militancy as mere pretension. The labour movement, she claimed, functioned as a vehicle for petty-bourgeois and white-collar interests²⁶, and opposed the incoming military government from a conservative position dressed in radical rhetoric. This is a view that she and David Ottaway would reassert, criticising the trade union confederation – by that time in open conflict with the military regime – for being unable to compromise, and labelling its leadership incompetent, con-

18. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State”, 12.

19. J. Markakis, *Ethiopia, Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, 174-177.

20. C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 35.

21. E.J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia. From Empire to People’s Republic*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, 149.

22. R. Lefort, *Ethiopia. An Heretical Revolution?*, London, Zed Press, 1983, 27.

23. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1991*, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press, 2008, 231.

24. Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution. War in the Horn of Africa*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009, 23.

25. Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 23.

26. M. Ottaway, “Social Classes and Corporate Interests in the Ethiopian Revolution”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14, 3, 1976, 469-486.

fused and opportunist²⁷. They were not alone in treating the labour opposition as inauthentic and illegitimate. The process of radicalisation of the labour movement and the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions' (CELU) opposition to the incoming military government has often been characterised as the outcome of "infiltration" – denoting a mechanical and external form of control – by oppositional activists²⁸.

In more recent times, the key features of the depiction have persisted. A new round of conflict between the authorities and the trade union movement in the 1990s has been described by Praeg, who insisted that "one could not have expected a different fate" than the demise of what temporary autonomy the latter enjoyed²⁹. Melakou, meanwhile, has suggested that no independent unionism whatsoever has existed on a national level in the past four decades³⁰. The scholarly tendency to view the movement in disparaging terms has probably increased over time. Dessalegn Rahmato, writing in 2002, claimed that the trade union movement "has been kept as a docile instrument of state policy by successive governments since the 1960s". He described successive governments' persistent desire to exercise control over the movement as an irrationality which has given "the trade union movement a significance and power far beyond its actual potential"³¹. Ethiopian trade union history, he most tellingly summed up, has been "the result of false perceptions and an exaggerated sense of worth"³².

But as will be demonstrated, this literature only tells one part of the story. To be sure, there have been periods where the Ethiopian labour movement has indeed been co-opted, dormant and impotent – at least on a macro-level. But equally, there have been several periods in Ethiopian history where a relatively autonomous, militant and impactful movement has emerged.

Cyclical movements

If the historiography of the Ethiopian labour movement is characterised by a curious tendency to deny workers autonomy and agency and to describe the movement in disparaging and static terms, the actual history of the movement is

27. M. and D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia. Empire in Revolution*, New York, Africana, 1978, 101-107.

28. See for example Lefort, *Ethiopia*, 30; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian revolution, 1974-1987. A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 141, 175.

29. B. Praeg, *Ethiopia and Political Renaissance in Africa*, New York, Nova Science, 2006.

30. Melakou Tegegn, *State and Civil Society. Ethiopia's Developmental Challenges*, Los Angeles, Tsehai, 2013.

31. Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia", in Bahru Zewde and S. Pausewang, eds., *Ethiopia. The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2002, 114.

32. Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia", 114.

characterised by dynamism and displays a very different peculiarity: the appearance of cyclical movements of mobilisation, within which ebbs and flows in workers' autonomous activity and industrial-political contention, shifts in the movement's strategic orientation, and advances and retreats in the position of labour have occurred. At certain points of this cyclical movement, wave-like motions of labour unrest have emerged and crested, resulting in the type of *proletarian insurgencies* that Screpanti described, before having tailed out in a renewed period of dormancy and industrial tranquillity. Three such cycles can be identified: one lasting from the beginning of the 1960s to the mid-1980s; a second lasting from the late 1980s to the 2000s; and an emergent contemporary cycle beginning in the 2010s.

The first, and hitherto most substantive and protracted, cycle began as the Ethiopian labour movement emerged as a country-wide phenomenon. At the beginning of the 1960s, unions were not legally permitted, but workers' associations modelled in the shape of collective self-help organisations had appeared and turned into unions in all but name. Some of them were quite successful in pressing for improved conditions, and this propelled an intensified process where associations "sprouted up all over the empire"³³. As the associations multiplied, strikes became frequent. Meanwhile, a cooperative forum for workers associations was formed, and although not formally legal, it was cautiously tolerated by the government as the lesser of evils. The heightened activity among workers and "the growing number of industrial disputes"³⁴ led to the passing of the 1962 labour law, which permitted the registration of unions. As a result CELU was formed the year after.

But no sooner had CELU been founded than it came into conflict with the government – a conflict that would demarcate the tolerated limits to its autonomy. By forcing the original president of the confederation to resign and having him replaced with a more deferentially inclined successor, the government had re-set the organisation on a very pragmatic footing. There would be no ultimatums or offensive demands from the confederation in the decade to come, neither any forceful protests when the government engaged with workers and union representative in a heavy-handed manner, as it frequently did. But the pragmatism and lack of militant energy in the leadership of the confederation was not representative of the full movement.

Industrial contention and unrest on workplace and basic union level took place unabated throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In most cases activities were of an unsanctioned nature or organised by local unions, but in some cases central leaders supported strikes underhandedly³⁵. Yet, there were problems in the

33. Syoum Gebregziabher, *The Rise of CELU and the EFE Under Haile Selassie's Regime*, Mimeo, 1969, 27.

34. A.M. Zack, "Trade Unionism Develops in Ethiopia", in J. Butler and A.A. Castagno, eds., *Transition in African Politics*, New York, Praeger, 1967.

35. Interview with Beyene Solomon, Addis Ababa, 20 Feb, 2016.

relationship between the central leadership, local workers' representatives, and the rank-and-file.

Dissatisfaction with the central leadership's bureaucratic inclinations and the strategic orientation it pursued was widespread³⁶. It was accused of subverting internal democracy and showcasing excessive deferentialism, overturning General Assembly decisions to call general strikes and demonstrations on two occasions³⁷. The leadership itself had begun to voice concern about "being unable to cope with the demands of the workers", by the mid-1960s, which, it considered "often quite unrealistic"³⁸. It reported that there had been "much disagreements between CELU and its affiliates" – in fact "perpetual strife was admittedly taking place" – with "one of the major criticism [being] that [CELU] was not doing enough for its membership"³⁹. A representative of the international trade union movement based in Addis Ababa reported home that CELU's leadership, in turn, was "divided in different groups"⁴⁰. But such divisions and frictions, resulting from contention over strategic orientation, in fact prevailed throughout the structures of the movement.

By the early 1970s, an organised opposition had emerged within the labour movement. Spearheaded by 30 basic unions, it briefly attempted to disaffiliate from CELU to set up a parallel confederation, but was barred from doing so by the government⁴¹. The opposition instead embarked on a campaign to move the central confederation in a more militant direction by canvassing the rank-and-file and challenging the central leadership within CELU's institutions⁴². In addition to unions that had attempted to disaffiliate, it had a growing number of supporters within the rank-and-file and among representatives in CELU's ruling bodies. The resolution of this division would only come about as the result of an outbreak of a major wave of labour militancy in the period *preceding* the 1974 revolution.

In 1973 striking workers of the Diabaco Cotton factory and the Central Printing Press had been denied support from the central confederation⁴³. But when the

36. Emmanuel Fayessa Negassa, "The Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions and its First General Strike (March 7-11, 1974): Causes and Impact", MA thesis, Cornell University, 1977, 72.

37. Seleshi Sisaye, "Labor in Contemporary Ethiopian Politics. The Case of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions and Its First General Strike", paper presented at the 71st Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, 1976.

38. CELU, "Progress Report and Future Projected Activities of CELU", Oct. 22, 1965. ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

39. CELU "Progress Report and Future Projected Activities of CELU".

40. Lennart Kindström [Letter] to P.H. de Jonge, Feb. 2, 1966, ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

41. Beyene Solomon, *Fighter for Democracy. The Saga of an Ethiopian Labour Leader*, Baltimore, Publish America, 2010, 167.

42. Fayessa Negassa, "The Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions and its First General Strike".

43. Seleshi Sisaye, "Urban Migration and the Labor Movement in Ethiopia", in *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, University of Illinois, 1979, 698.

large union of the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia called another strike that same year, the opposition piled pressure on the central leadership to intervene. CELU's General Council vowed to take solidarity measures⁴⁴, and it was reinforced by an enthusiastic response from basic unions, several dozens of which sent letters to the CELU leadership expressing their determination and readiness to intervene⁴⁵. The labour movement had entered into a head-on conflict with the state, and it came out victorious: the government retreated and conceded to the bank workers' demands⁴⁶. This achievement put the deferential strategy the leadership had pursued in negative perspective, as it made apparent that workers were capable of extracting significant concessions. In doing so, it led to a sharp increase in militant self-confidence and in March 1974 the General Council called a country-wide general strike. Again, the strike forced the government to concede to CELU's demands.

Over the coming couple of years, workers from hundreds of workplaces would strike. Reports initially told of new strikes "almost daily"⁴⁷. Militancy also expressed itself in other forms of industrial contention. In the compound of the Labour Relations Board crowds of workers appeared daily, blocking the entrance, beating up employers' representatives, and even attempting to set the buildings on fire⁴⁸. General strikes were again attempted – with differing degrees of success – in the September months of 1974, 1975 and 1976. Primarily because of the severe repression – in response to the September 1975 strike attempt alone, it was reported that more than 100 people were shot and around 1600 people were arrested⁴⁹ – none of them could muster the same strength as the March 1974 strike, but each attempt saw dozens of workplaces emptied of workers.

After the imperial Ethiopian government was removed and replaced, industrial contention was reinforced by political strife. The deferential leadership of the labour movement was soon ousted, and in 1975 the radical oppositional labour movement took over control of the confederation. The confederation was outlawed shortly after, but that did not put an immediate end to strike activity and industrial contention. It was only with the coming of massive repression against

44. CELU, Addis Ababa.

[Resolution] 1973, CETU Archives.

45. See for example, letters from the unions of Ethiopian Petroleum Workers; Indo-Ethiopian Textile Factory; Michell Cotts Union; HVA Union; Ethiopian Airlines; Addis Ababa Bank; United Wood Workers; and Addis Ababa Hilton, in CETU archives.

46. Andu-alem Aragie, "A Short History of the Employees of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia from 1964 to 1997", BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1999, 48.

47. P.D Wyman, Apr. 17, 1974, PLUSD, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974ADDIS04184_b.html (accessed 5 June, 2017).

48. P.D. Wyman, "Labour Situation", Cable 1974ADDIS12489_b from the US Embassy in Addis Ababa, Oct. 18, 1974, PLUSD, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974ADDIS12489_b.html (accessed 6 June, 2017).

49. F.L. Luyimbazi, "Report on the Main Activities of ICFTU Research Office and General Labour Situation in Ethiopia, From October 1974 to date, January 9", 1976, ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

the labour movement that strikes began to peter out. By late 1978, hundreds, probably thousands, of workers and workers' representatives had been killed or imprisoned⁵⁰. Industrial tranquillity had been re-established, together with a new, deferential, central confederation – the All-Ethiopian Trade Union (AETU). The first cyclical movement had tailed out and come to an end.

The larger part of the 1980s was a period of severely curtailed autonomy, low levels of mobilisation and little activity. The 1983 strike at the Barottolo Textile Factory in Asmara constitutes the single notable exception – which tellingly resulted in harsh repression⁵¹. By the end of the 1980s, however, a number of events signalled the re-emergence of some degree of autonomy and militancy, and the onset of a new cyclical movement. In 1989, for example, 400 textile workers in Addis Ababa walked off the job protesting workplace transfers⁵². According to CELU's former president, the following years saw the beginning of a workers' "uprising" that spread from workplace to workplace in the industrial corridor stretching southwards from Addis Ababa⁵³. The uprising was allegedly set off by the arrest of workers and union representatives who had protested against poor pay and conditions. Eventually, it came to include workers from diverse sectors, such as transportation, construction, trading, beverage and textile manufacturing, as well as fibre and sugar plantations. Evidence from the archives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Addis Ababa also testifies to a re-emerging volatility in industrial relations during this period. In April 1991, for example, fuel workers at Total Mer Rouge declared their resolution to strike should their demands for a better collective agreement not be met, and threatened management with "bloodshed" should their rights not be respected⁵⁴. Workers also directed their ire against the trade union bureaucracy. In the industrial district of Akaki, demonstrating workers attacked the residence of the president of the central confederation – now re-baptised the Ethiopian Trade Union (ETU) – in early 1991⁵⁵.

50. See J. Wiebel & S.A. Admasie "Rethinking the Ethiopian 'Red Terror': Approaches to Political Violence in Revolutionary Ethiopia", [forthcoming article], for a detailed discussion on this.

51. Goitom, "Important dates in the history of Eritrean workers". [Translation from 180, 15 May 1985: 3-7], 1985, Tom Killion Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University; Committee of the High Authority in the Region of Eritrea, 22.6.75
26.6.75

, 1983, CETU Archives, Addis Ababa.

52. ETU, . [Minutes, Sept. 21, 1989], CETU Archives, Addis Ababa.

53. Beyene Solomon, : , Addis Ababa, S.n, 2012.

54. P. Graf [Letter] to Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Apr. 23, 1991, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Archives, Addis Ababa; Tadesse Tamrat [Letter] to Total Mer Rouge, Mar. 29, 1991, MoLSA Archives, Addis Ababa; Kedeme Teshome [Letter] to Total Mer Rouge, May 7, 1991, MoLSA Archives, Addis Ababa.

55. Interview with Hailu Ourgessa, Geneva, May 28, 2017.

As the manifestations of re-emergent workers' militancy grew in numbers, the macro-political setting again changed when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) marched into Addis Ababa in May 1991 and established a new government. ETU was abolished by fiat, and local unions were ordered to elect new leaderships. This did not put an end to unrest.

In the coming months, several strikes occurred, including in mines, printing presses, factories, and freight corporations⁵⁶. This was followed by two large strikes from workers in the strategically important Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and Ethiopian Airlines. Meanwhile protests occurred among factory, dock, plantation, construction, trade and care workers, among others, while "numerous actions" were reported from entrenched workers⁵⁷.

The early years of EPRDF rule saw liberalisation measures that included retrenchments of several thousand workers⁵⁸, deterioration of employment conditions, and sharply increasing living costs. In tandem with this, unions that refused to fall in line with the new dispensation faced renewed repression⁵⁹ and workers' representatives across the country faced another wave of dismissals – in the two years 1991 and 1992 more workers' representatives were dismissed from their jobs than the prior 9 years combined⁶⁰. In response, workers attempted to construct defensive barriers against the pressures they faced. This had two aspects. The first consisted of strikes, petitions and protests at a workplace level. The second consisted of an attempt to re-establish a central confederation to coordinate workers' efforts. To this end, workers networked in impromptu constellations and pressure groups, eventually convincing the government of the necessity to permit the reestablishment of a central confederation⁶¹. However, the government remained intent on steering the process in a direction that would see it retain influence over such a confederation.

In November 1993, the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) was established. At the founding congress, workers' representatives had managed to counter the government's efforts to create a wholly co-opted organisation⁶², but this came with its own hazards, as it created suspicion of the motives of the new

56. *Ethiopian Herald* Aug. 2, Oct. 16, Nov. 23, Dec. 5, 1991

57. *Ethiopian Herald* Oct. 16, 1991; US Department of State, "Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1993", Washington DC, 1994.

58. Hishe Hailu, "An Assessment of the Process of Privatization in Ethiopia", MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2005.

59. The unions of the Akaki Textile Factor and the Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority are two examples.

60. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 1982-1993. 3 Archival boxes, Addis Ababa. MoLSA Archives.

61. Interview with Hailu Ourgessa; CETU, "The Legal Aspect of the Dispute Between the Two Factions of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) and the Position of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in this Respect", [Memorandum], 1995, MoLSA, Addis Ababa, MoLSA.

62. CETU, "Trade Union Situation in Ethiopia: Factual Documentation", [Memorandum], 1995 MoLSA, Addis Ababa; R.H. Sikazwe, "Report on the Inaugural Congress of the Restructured

confederation. Within nine months, when CETU felt compelled to voice its opposition to the increasingly harsh effects of the government's structural adjustment programmes⁶³, the stage was set for a showdown. Despite strong signals coming from the basic unions and workers' representatives that they were ready to defend the confederation through a general strike, this alternative was not seriously entertained by CETU's central leadership⁶⁴. Instead of a strategy based on mobilising the rank-and-file, it decided to pursue a strategy based on defending the confederation in courts. This proved to be deleterious. Within three months the courts had frozen the confederation's assets and operations, and banned its president from entering his offices. Two years of legal wrangling later, CETU was altogether dissolved by law and a new confederation with the same name was established – this time under the control of deferential government loyalists who would openly refute the notion that strikes could ever resolve industrial disputes⁶⁵. In the meantime, control over basic unions and industrial federation had progressively shifted to the same group of government-aligned moderates. Two decades of inertia and despondency followed.

In 2017, however, industrial tranquillity came to an abrupt end, when a wave of strikes tore through the economy⁶⁶. Over the Ethiopian year that ended in September 2018, at least a dozen major strikes occurred, involving more striking workers than in any other year since the 1970s. It also involved CETU re-emerging as a combative defender of workers' interest, threatening to call a general strike should a harsh labour bill proposed not be amended. While this wave is still ongoing at the time of writing, it does appear that a third cyclical movement is in its initial stages. Judging by the force of energies released, it holds the potential of becoming a most substantial movement, surpassing, at the very least, the second cycle.

Summing up the discussion on the cyclical movements, it is noteworthy how aggregate levels of industrial contention on the micro-level has, broadly speaking, concurred with macro-level combativity of central institutions of the labour movement to form three cycles. A periodisation of relative levels of labour unrest, based on a measurement of the number of recorded strikes and expressions of unrest in Ethiopia over the past 50 years, reveals a cyclical pattern of mobilisation similar to that described above. The shifting general level of unrest is illustrated in the schematic periodisation below.

Ethiopian Trade Union Movement, Addis Ababa, 26-29 November, 1993", ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

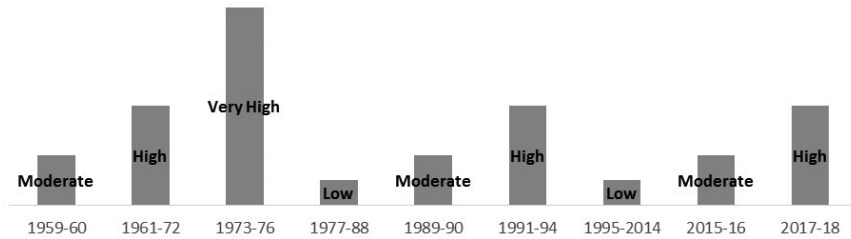
63. CETU, " ", 1,3, 1994.

64. Interview with Dawi Ibrahim, Amsterdam, May 20, 2015; Interview with Hailu Ourgesa.

65. John W., "An Opponent of Strikes in Charge of a Labour Union", *Reporter*, 5, 241, 18 Apr. 2001, 11.

66. See S.A. Admasie, "Amidst Political Recalibrations. Strike Wave Hits Ethiopia", *Labor and Society*, 21, 2018, 431-435.

Figure 1: Schematic periodisation of general levels of unrest.

Source: author's compilation.⁶⁷

Factors at work

Within the outlines of the cycles described, a number of factors and dynamics that have generated the shifting trends can be identified. To begin with, and on a quite basic level, the propelling force behind militant practices and positional advances has generally been the pressure emanating from the rank-and-file. This can be illustrated with a number of examples, beginning in the foundation of legal trade unionism in Ethiopia. The legalisation of trade unionism was not – unlike what has been conveyed in the literature⁶⁸ – so much the outcome of the work of liberals in the government or international pressure as of the disruption created and acute threats posed by workers engaged in wildcat unrest. There is evidence of senior government officials acknowledging as much to visiting representatives of the international trade union movement in 1962. One official expressly worried about “growing agitations among the workers who had staged several down-tools and walk-out actions recently”, noting that a good number of workers’ associations had begun to create trouble with employers. Another official stated that “the existing workers organisations were now growing into restless movements”, and that because the government “was worried about the possible consequences of illegal and ‘unwarranted’ actions”, it would table a bill regulating the formation and operation of trade unions, hoping that this would stem the growing restiveness⁶⁹. The legalisation of trade unionism in Ethiopia was thus precipitated by urgent pressures asserted by the emergent labour movement.

67. Based on unrest data on national and workplace levels which was compiled and presented in S.A. Admasie “Dynamics of Assertive Labour Movementism in Ethiopia. Organised Labour, Unrest and Wages in a Socio Historical Perspective”, PhD dissertation, University of Pavia and University of Basel, 2018, with records for the years 2010-2018 added.

68. See, for example, T. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State”.

69. S. Claverie, “Report on my Visit to Ethiopia”, 1962, ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

Workers have furthermore been found having perceived great injustices in their relations with employers, driving the development of industrial militancy and the type of collective strategic orientation required to engage in contestation. Morehous' research on workers' attitudes in the 1960s, for example, found that "unwillingness to give a wage increase is viewed only as an attempt by the employer to squeeze more of an already *outrageous* profit from the workers' toil"⁷⁰. This resulted in recurrent wildcat action. Throughout its early history, CELU's President at the time has affirmed, rank-and-file pressure often compelled union leaders to call strikes whether they found it prudent or not⁷¹. Union leaders, Morehous discovered, accepted frequent strikes as a concession to "the militancy of the mass of union members"⁷². "CELU has always been a restraining force, because usually the workers would want to use force", former CELU top official Fissehatsion Tekie has stated corroborating this view⁷³.

Rank-and-file pressure in favour of a more militant strategic orientation was not, however, confined to the first cycle. The second cyclical movement also emerged from localised, illegal wildcat action unsanctioned by any central institution. For the larger part of the cycle, there was in fact no central coordination or leadership, and once such a leadership had been founded it did not encourage militant practices. Yet, that leadership remained subject to pressures, and its drift into conflict with the government was partly the result of such pressure⁷⁴. Moreover, once the conflict had begun, it was basic union representatives that called on the reluctant leadership to organise a general strike⁷⁵. With regards to the emergent third cycle, what can be stated at this stage is that it has hitherto consisted, almost exclusively, of the form of localised wildcat activity that also marked the opening stages of the first two cycles.

Some factors have intermittently checked and reversed workers' mobilisation. One such factor has been the internal control mechanisms associated with the institutionalisation of trade unionism and the dynamics of bureaucratisation. The dual role of trade unionism has often been on vivid display in Ethiopia, as exemplified by a bakery union leader speaking to CELU's newspaper *Voice of Labour* in 1970:

Your union has tied our hands and feet. Before you organised us we used to get substantial concessions from employers by merely threatening a walkout. The employers knew that we did not kid when we threatened – the work, the flour even the equipment was not safe. Yet, now you have advised us that through the union we have first to di-

70. L.G. Morehous, "Ethiopian Labour Relations: Attitudes, Practice and Law", Northwestern University, 1969, 70-71.

71. Beyene Solomon, *Fighter for Democracy*, 109.

72. Morehous, "Ethiopian Labour Relations", 71.

73. Interview with Fissehatsion Tekie [recording], 1983, Tom Killion Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

74. Interview with Hailu Ourgessa.

75. Interview with Hailu Ourgessa.

scuss with our employers, then if we are not satisfied we have to submit our grievance to the [labour department] and that if we are not reconciled by the section we have to lodge our dispute with the Labour Relations Board. The case does not stop there, either employers or employees can appeal to the Supreme Imperial Court [or even] be petitioned to His Majesty's [court]. Yes, your union has weakened our unity. We neither have the money, the time nor the manpower to follow up our disputes through these channels. Your union has only tied us to the benefit of our employers⁷⁶.

Through much of the first cycle, the confederation leadership and parts of the basic union officialdom worked hard to contain and subvert militant pressure. In the second cycle too, wildcat action – advertently or inadvertently – was short-circuited once a confederation was established. While rank-and-file pressures have repeatedly moved the central leadership into confrontations that were not of its choosing, the institutionalisation of formal trade unionism has tended to result in the diversion of pressures, and the containment and diminishment of industrial conflict.

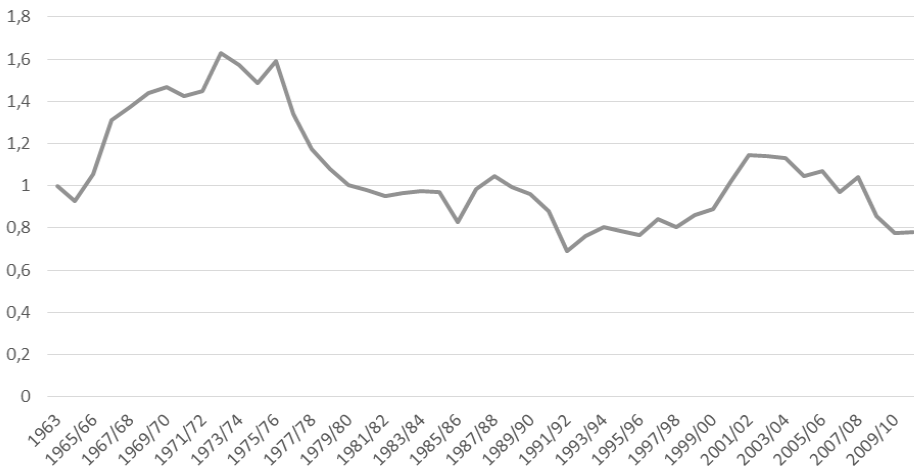
While its importance has frequently been exaggerated, another factor that has checked the movement's momentum has been that of external subversion and repression. Employers and state institutions attempting to exercise close control over the labour movement has hardly, as Dessalegn has suggested, been irrational. On the contrary: a militant and assertive labour movement has repeatedly shown that it is capable of serious disruption. At times, subversion and repression has been highly effective, at other times, however, it has not, as can be demonstrated by the appearance and reappearance of labour militancy. In other words, external agencies have not mechanically determined the boundaries of the cycles of mobilisation. This fact also relates to the idea of “infiltration” as a factor driving the development of militancy. The political conjuncture has neither generated nor unleashed cycles. As argued in the above, the conflict of interest between employers and wage labourers is the fundamental cause of collective industrial action. Moreover, as suggested by Kelly, a number of conditions needs to be considered prior to the opportunity factor in explaining collective action – including the social construction and definition of collective interests, the emergence of collective coherence, and organisation. That being said, contextual factor, such as the political conjuncture, have indeed been important by varyingly enhancing or limiting the opportunity factor open to workers. When, for example, the state has been embroiled in broader socio-political crises, that has curtailed its power to displace and subvert militant pressure from workers, and to repress its expressions. However, the relationship between opportunity factors and outcomes is neither causative nor mechanical, but complementary. The notion of a mechanical relation between external factors and the strategic orientation of the labour movement can also be refuted on an empirical level in the Ethiopian case. To begin with, the sequence does not add up. In the cycles described, labour militancy has manifested itself in longer arches, reaching deeper into the past than

76. *Voice of Labour*, “The Ethiopian Labour Movement: The Aftermath of Birth”, Special issue, 1970, 11.

neither the subsumption of strategic orientation to the political conjuncture nor the idea of infiltration permit. The fundamental dynamics that have propelled the cycles must be found elsewhere.

Growing labour militancy has tended to have a ratchet effect in Ethiopia, and strike waves, when unleashed, have created their own internal logic arching forward. But what have the dynamics of this process been? At this stage, the shifting conditions of Ethiopian labour require mention. These are not unrelated to workers' mobilisation, since, to begin with, the purpose of the latter is indeed to affect the former, but also because the literature has indicated how achievements can affect strategic orientation. To what degree workers have been successful in affecting change, however, requires closer examination. Taking average real wages – that is, nominal wages deflated with the rate of the rise of the general price index – as the principal determinant of the position of labour, the following figure charts their development since the early 1960s.

Figure 2: Deflated Real Wage Index 1963-2010.



Source: Compiled by author from CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

The period between 1963 and 1975 saw both sustained labour mobilisation and rapid improvements in wages. This, by itself, does not conclusively demonstrate any causal relationship between workers' mobilisation, on the one hand, and wage outcomes (achievements) on the other. To establish this, it must be shown that successful contention led to better conditions in concrete cases, generating the aggregate movement. As it turns out, there are plenty of examples that do precisely this. Strike resolutions and collective bargain agreement at workplaces such as the Dire Dawa Textile Factory in 1963; the HVA sugar factory in Wonji between 1954 and 1964; the St George Brewery, Ethio-Synthetic Textiles

and Chandris Meat Canning Factory in 1972 are among the many examples where the outcome of contention had been high wage increments⁷⁷. It is telling that an ILO report written in 1972 contended that union pressures had resulted in a situation where near-excessive wages had come to prevail, warning that this situation needed “to be monitored carefully”, to avert the danger that “collectively bargained wage spills over into the non-unionised sectors”⁷⁸.

The relationship between strategic orientation and achievement is not necessarily unidirectional. The possibility that a reciprocal relationship can prevail has been noted in the literature. In the history of the Ethiopian labour movement, readily identifiable achievements and militancy have played into and fuelled one another. In the course of the late 1950s, the 1960s, and the early 1970s, a string of major achievements were recorded as outcomes of workers’ struggles. This began with the establishment of the first workers’ associations and the organisation of the first successful strikes; proceeded with the legal recognition of trade unionism and the establishment of a confederation; the emergence of collective bargaining; a progressive shift in workplace balance of forces; and the emergence of the labour movement as a social force capable of extracting heavy concessions from capital and the state. Through each step of this process, achievements only appear to have further reenergised the movement and ratcheted up its force and demands. The best and most direct example is probably the manner in which, first, the successful bank strike of 1973 demonstrated conflict feasibility and released energies that resulted in the 1974 general strike, and, second, the successful general strike triggered a strike wave through the spring, and generated a proletarian insurgency that lasted through the following couple of years

But it is not only in hindsight that the relationship between the strategic orientation of workers and achievements becomes evident. This was also, in fact, how representatives of Ethiopian employers of the time understood the process they were facing. In 1966, the Federation of Ethiopian Employers (FEE) President Prakken complained over a high number of strikes, and speculated that this was “a consequence of previous illegal labour actions having remained unpunished”. “It is regrettable”, Prakken wrote, “that apparently no action was taken against the offending strikers concerned who infringed the law, as this seems to have encouraged others, considering numerous strikes and slow-downs that erupted in various industries during the past few weeks”⁷⁹. Seven years later, however, the situation had not significantly improved, and new achievements were feeding into new unrest, and vice versa. The FEE president of the time,

77. Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State”, 505-506; Bahru Zewde “Environment and Capital: Notes for a History of the Wonji-Shoa Sugar Estate”, in *Society, State and History. Selected Essays*, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press, 134-136; CELU 3

, Addis Ababa: CELU, 1972..

78. ILO, “Employment and Unemployment in Ethiopia”, Geneva, ILO, 1972, 53-54.

79. J.M.J. Prakken, “Memorandum on Labour Developments”, ICFTU Archives, Amsterdam, IISH.

Bekele Beshah, echoed his predecessor in lamenting how unpunished unrest led to growing boldness, and increasing wages. “Industrial relations developments in Ethiopia seem to have taken a turn for the worse”, he wrote, continuing to outline his view of the causal relationship:

The most recent spate of illegal strikes... are in our view a cause for concern... It is obvious that there has been a growing misuse of union power which, unless checked by law ... will jeopardise the future of collective bargaining... Very important issues here, are... the vulnerability they show of business in general and of the government and public at large to industrial action in key sectors... If no immediate legal remedies are implemented the chain of events very likely to be created could without any doubt jeopardise economic stability⁸⁰.

But as important as it is to point out the reciprocity of cause and effect in having driven gains and further militancy, the reverse has evidently also been on display. Following the repression of the labour movement in the 1970s, demobilisation followed. The movement, consequently, lost all clout and leverage. As a result, wages collapsed and the position of labour slumped, generating a vicious cycle of passivity and defeat. In the tail end of the cycle, there was only resignation and docility. It would take a decade before new stirrings appeared. During the resultant second cyclical movement, collective efforts were generally limited to rear-guards attempt to establish defensive barriers, and few of those barriers held when facing stress. The strikes organised, as important as they were, tended to end in few concessions from employers. Moreover, there was only limited initial progress in acquiring organisational autonomy, which was subsequently reversed relatively expediently. But most important, perhaps, there were no readily identifiable achievements – no significant improvements for the rank-and-file, nor any major concessions extracted from employers or the state. In contrast, Ethiopian wage-workers saw their conditions and position progressively deteriorate. Resistance was dispersed, and would eventually be defeated in separation. In other words, the momentum could only just begin to build before it was halted and reversed. Instead, and only a year after the establishment of the confederation, the labour movement was on a path of successive defeats, further curtailments, demobilisation, and declining levels of activity – all within a context of worsening conditions, mass retrenchments, and hollowing of rights.

With regards to an emerging third cycle, there are already indications that there have been achievements recorded as the outcome of specific strikes⁸¹. Whether this will translate into aggregate achievements and reciprocal momentum remains an open question.

80. Bekele Beshah, 1973, “Speech by Ato Bekele Beshah at the Annual General Meeting of the Federation of Employers of Ethiopia – September 13, 1973”, CETU Archives, Addis Ababa.

81. S.A. Admasie, “Amidst Political Recalibrations”.

Conclusions

The history of the Ethiopian labour movement, far from the static impression conveyed in the literature, is actually one of dynamism. It is the history of a movement that has repeatedly developed, relinquished and redeveloped the collective coherence and capacities required for meaningful industrial contention, and the militant willingness to do so. It is also the history of a movement that has, at times, had significant impact on labour relations, revealing the historical agency of Ethiopian workers, which has been forged in contention with subversive and antagonistic counteragents.

The strategic orientation of Ethiopian workers acting collectively has developed within and been shaped by that contention itself, affirming Screpanti's notion of the "positive cumulative effect of past experience in relation to actual claims". Virtuous cycles of achievements and mobilisation and vicious cycles of despondency and defeat have intermittently prevailed. There have been ebbs and flows, waves and troughs in levels of mobilisation, militancy and industrial contention.

What the literature has tended to describe, however, has at most been confined to the periods in between the crests of the cyclical movement – to the troughs and the ebbs. Scholars have tended to assume that the ebb is the default state, and the flow is the extraordinary phenomena – attributing the latter to external sources in general, and the political conjuncture in particular. But this ignores the fact that it is the same dialectic that has driven the full cyclical movement: crests as well as troughs. This dialectic has pitted the corporate needs of moderate labour officialdom against the material needs of the rank-and-file, and the requirements of state and employers for cheap and malleable labour against the trade union logic of pushing in the other direction. Both aspects have crystallised in the struggle over the strategic orientation of the labour movement – producing great shifts, cyclical movements, and repeated waves, rather than static tranquillity.