

Trade Union Movement in Somalia 1960-1969

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The beginning of Trade Union's Movement in Somalia coincides with the emergence of wage labour during the colonial days. The first portion of this study from 1940 to 1960 was presented in the 2nd Congress of the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) held at Hamburg 1983, and this portion from 1960 to 1969 is just a continuation of that effort.

The year 1960 marks when the Somalis under the British and Italian colonies took their destinies in their own hands and achieved independence and subsequently united into a single nation. The programmes of the Somali Youth League (SYL) and the Somali National League (SNL) parties being the two major political parties that succeeded in the independence of the two respective colonies were confined in the limits of the political independence, hence the infiltration of reactionary and opportunist elements in the power appeared as an odd concrete example for the struggled masses that expected proper and just mobility. The Somali Government that followed the Colonial Administration unfortunately was unable to cement solid foundations for the Somali people that had lust for all round emancipation from the inherent socio-economic evils. No vital steps were taken in the field of employment and no strategic occupation were created for the idle working forces. Even the payments for the workers of certain development projects and the routine services were not paid for months. Job assurance, labour insurance and other terminal rights suffered drawbacks as there were no effective local labour organs for the improvement of those factors. The International Labour bodies proposals such as those of the International Labour Organization (ILO) for an extension of workers' rights were not taken seriously. Besides this, the Somali Trade Unions Movement is honored to have remained firmly in its class position and to have cooperated with the masses even when the principles upon which the political independence was achieved were abandoned and as a consequence clan based interest group appeared in the ruling circles.

The 2nd portion of the Somali Trade Unions Movement which covers the post independence era between 1960 and 1969, is an attempt to study that period in which two National Centres existed: the Confederazione Somala dei Lavoratori (CSL) and the Somali Federation of Labour (SFL) based in Mogadishu and Hargeisa respectively. Discussions for merger began by the 1960s. Each federation though struggled separately with the post independence regime and achieved separate gains. Both Federations had also independent international relations.

Trade unionism in Somalia was developed in this period by the general unrest

in the post independence era in almost all aspects of life. Moreover, a number of trade unions existed at the time of independence of the Somali Republic such as CSL, an affiliate of the International Federation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) that offered CSL financial subsidiary and political support. Other trade unions operated along side CSL in both the South and North of Somalia. The remnants of the cold war are observed even today within the African trade union movement as those who favour Pan-Africanism and those left and right or in between WAFTU and ICFTU.

In the North the post independence development projects and organs saw the growing labour force engaged in the construction, services and commercial enterprises. As a result the following trade unions were opened at Hargeisa in the year 1963:

- Commercial and allied Workers' Union
- Electric Energy and Water Workers Union
- Hotels and Bars Workers Union
- Teachers Union.

(By this time the Somali Youth Union (SYU) having close relations with the trade unions was also opened in Hargeisa).

In 1964, the Somali Workers' Union (SWU) was formed in Burao, that affiliated to WFTU. SWU drew support from the workers of Laskorei Fish Factory, Berbera dock-workers and building and construction workers from various parties of the former northern regions. SFL with its headquarters in Hargeisa was opened as a centralizing body for all unions in the north. A West German Federation of labour promptly decided to extend financial support to SFL which was a loose affiliate of CSL in Mogadishu. SFL had even once quarreled with CSL about its share of the financial subsidiary from ICFTU. SFL received about 2000/-shillings as house-rent from the ICFTU offer to CSL and later, when its leadership requested for a better share, the two labour organizations severed their relations and dealt their problems separately.

In 1964 the workers of the Grindlays' Bank Ltd. staged a strike demanding an increase in their salaries. This strike had lasted for a month when the bank authorities accepted an increase of hundred shillings for the clerks and fifty shillings for the subordinate staff. The Commercial and Allied Workers Union was responsible for this strike and had also the support of SFL. In 1965, the SWU called a strike due to the ordinary salaries of the Berbera port workers which had not been paid for 7 months.

In 1969 the SFL and its affiliate Trade Unions reached an agreement to call a general strike all over the northern regions of Somalia. In reaction to this general strike by the ruling regime, the Secretary General of SFL and other unions' officers were sentenced to 9 months on the 23rd of September 1969, without taking them to Court under an emergency law issued during the Somalis-Ethiopian War of 1964. Another 86 Workers were sentenced to one month imprisonment or 200/-shillings fine under that same law at 11.30 pm the same date without taking them to court either. Though these workers had been unpaid for over 6 months, they paid the fine through arrangements by relatives who were persuaded by other local elements. The General Secretary of SFL was released after a serious lobbying on the 9th of October 1969.

In 1962 with the advice of WFTU and the Italian Communist party, different Somaly Workers Union attempted to unite and form the General Confederation

of Somali Workers (GCSW). Affiliates of this newly organized GCSW included the USAS (Unione Sindacato Africano della Somalia), SFL, The Somali Teachers' Union, Union of Taxi-drivers, Health Services' Employees, Post and Telecommunication Workers etc. The GCSW was formally founded on the 16th of April, 1961 in Mogadishu on progressive lines and principles. The structure of GCSW has its congress as the highest organ in which the Central Council and the Executive Committee were elected by the representatives (two each) of the affiliate member unions. The Executive Committee of the Confederation, that was tough and serious in conforming with the contents of the Confederation documents and the defence of the workers' rights and affairs, consisted of:

1. The president of the confederation
2. Vice president of the confederation
3. General Secretary of the confederation
4. Assistant General Secretary
5. Secretary for foreign relations
6. Secretary of finance
7. Secretary of information
8. Two members of the Inspection Committee

The activities initiated by this Confederation were intensified when GCSW organized a major national strike in 1964 after which the offices of the Confederation were closed and its leaders were labelled communist-inspired and imprisoned. However, this government reaction only raised the popularity of the Confederation. The Confederation soon recovered and organized other strikes and demonstrations between 1965 and 1968.

The support and confidence that the Confederation enjoyed at home reflected also abroad as the officers of the Confederation participated in international and regional conferences on labour and workers' affairs. Despite the refusal and resistance of the Government, the Confederation succeeded in attaining membership in ILO in 1967. It also sent some unionists and other active workers to seminars and scholarships, mostly to the Socialist countries. The Confederation established good relations with the national labour bodies and attracted their staffs to its support.

The strike movement and other forms of struggle waged by this Confederation at last compelled the Government to come to terms. However, the Government failed to abide by its promises and to fulfill the contents of the jointly drawn up agreements. This naturally precipitated the reaction of the working class in the form of a general strike in 1968. In this general strike 18 of the 22 unions affiliate to GCSW participated in full scale for four days. Their demands were betterment in the standard of living, insurance, workers' health, compensation of pension benefits etc. Government reactions were immediately translated into practical vindicative actions such as:

1. GCSW office to be closed
2. GCSW leaders to be arrested
3. 36 government employees to be suspended
4. Active government employees in GCSW to be given compulsory transfer to remote regions.

But due to the militancy and organizational position of this Confederation

the workers' voice was heard by the Government which repealed those actions and accepted most of the workers' demands. This Confederation continued its struggle and was operational until the 21st of October, 1969, when the new Revolutionary Government came to power.

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