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## TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN SOMALIA, 1940 - 1960

Trade Union movement is mostly identifiable with the forms of the working class struggle within the activities of the national, regional and international federations, confederations and organizations or in essence the day to day actions of the trade unions, that directly handle the problems of the professionals in the form of labour conflicts inside the working-place. As a consequence this might lead to a minor or major confrontation between two sides in various forms.

It is clear that the role and significance of the trade unions in all levels are receiving the world attention as promoters of development and especially in their struggle against exploitation and oppression of the toiling masses. Therefore, it is worth to keep pace with the actions, achievements and activities of such unions as important factors of history. The general trend of the process stems on labour - capital relations etc. and might bring on worsening government - union relations.

In the developing countries, the struggle and growth of the trade unions developed mostly alongside their national movements against colonialism. Their role was seen separate only in the post-independence era when the national states failed to suit the popular expectations of the toiling masses and when the relations of production were built upon exploitative lines. For instance in the African context, the vital role and progress of the respective African national trade unions movements can be jotted down by



developing the 'history' of their national movements for independence. This is because, Africa's colonial history was based on unique socio-economic structures and political tendencies emanating from different colonial legacies, experiences and actions.

Before 1939 the trade union activities that existed in a few countries for the African employees were mostly single working-place based, i.e. craft or plant, construction site, port premises etc. Yet, their role in the African trade union history in pre-independence period is remarkable, especially in their dual faced struggle against the colonizers, both for their rights as workers and for the national independence.

Therefore, the Somali trade union movement begins with the birth of the wage earners in Somalia which goes back to the evils of colonialism. Like other African and Arab working forces, the struggle of the Somali workers and their unions' movements contained the liberation struggle against colonialism in the years 1940 - 1960 which mark the national movement under the political parties. This research covers the pre-independence Somali trade unions movement as per the above mentioned period.

However, considering the character of the regimes in power and the sectors in function in the post-independence era, the operations and essence of the Somali trade union movement should be expected different. Not only Somalia, but in most of the Third World countries where the existing labour force and traders are less comparable to the situations in the developed countries, you often get the trade union activities associated in one way or the other with the government.

The establishment of the colonial administrative system in

Somalia with the objectives to exploit the resources and labour of the country, coincides with the emergence of wage labour and the shift of the gravity from the Somali cities to London, Paris, Rome etc. The colonial administration in order to commit its plunder on legal lines passed exploitative laws on the Somali people. To kill the local culture, their language and modes of living were taken official. The outcome of the colonial operations in different interested areas of development in the Somali territory gave rise to various trades and workers. The subsequent types of workers in the northern British colony were those of civil administration, infrastructure workers and personnel in government's social and technical departments, such as drivers, welders, linesmen, dressers, clerks, storekeepers, houseserfs, etc. Englishmen and Indian expatriates occupied the top administrative, managerial and technical posts. The Italian colony at the south of Somalia was particularly exploitative in mainly stressing to benefit from those riverine rich arable areas confiscated some times from the Somali poor peasants whose toil in the form of forced labour was also acquired to please the colonial requirements.

The responsibility of such a harsh system was vested upon companies and the Italian settlers who encouraged settler-oriented cash crop at riverine areas, thus, creating capitalistic agricultural plantations mostly pursued under forced labour. About 46.800 ha were tilled in the year between 1897 and 1909. The preparation, cultivation and canalization of such agricultural plantations and all that followed those colonial days were undertaken through forced labour that resulted in numerous Somali casualties. Infrastructure projects such as roads were also carried out under forced labour in both the south and north of Somalia.



The coolies who paved most of the northern and western Somali roads (while both were British colonies) were not at all paid more than dry rations like millet and other cereals. Those coolies were camped outside towns under the supervision of overseers and road-foremen who carried out the labour drive. The Italian agricultural company named "Societa Agricola Somalo (SAIS)" was established in 1920 and by 1923 the work of the Jowhar sugar plantations and the installations of the sugar factory were in progress under good equipment and dawn to dark toil of the Somali labour force. The regular workers for SAIS having now a subsidiary meat factory at Kismayu reached 280 workers by 1926. A system of daily paid workers was introduced for the acquisition of temporary labour as a result of the Somali workers resistance that turned out as a strike in 1920. The Italian settlers along the riverine areas of Shabelle and Juba developed commercial plantations growing bananas, cotton and other crops around Afgoy, Balad, Genale and in the Lower Juba areas. The product of the commercial plantations were shipped directly to Italy from such ports like Mogadishu, Merca and Kismayu. Those companies also extended their investments in other ends like power generation, bars, hotels and petty processing industries serving the colonial needs. The work of a salt extraction plant began at Ras Hafun in 1920 as a significant commercial venture financed by a group of Lombardy industrialists and although interrupted by the military campaigns in the area in 1925 - 1927, the plant was by 1933 producing 260.000 tons of high grade salt annually. The bulk of this was exported to East Africa, India and the Far East. The construction and production process of this plant were done under forced labour of the Somali workers. The colonial administration with its cunning policies and

coercive forces extended maximum support to those Italian companies, other exploiters and expatriates in all walks of life, i.e. costless grants of land and Somali labour force under their disposal. There were neither legal nor humanistic considerations. Forced labour which was normal in earlier and even later stages soon proved inhuman and exposed antagonistic production relations between the local population and the Italian exploiters. This instituted an initial stirring of colonial opposition and sense of organization to withstand the exploitative system. Their struggle took various forms, i.e. demonstrations, sabotage, partial stoppage, strikes, running away, etc. One form of workers' passive resistance is quoted as "Qawda maqashii waxna ha u qaban" (let them hear the bagging of the hammer but don't do any work). The town workers who were mostly engaged in all fields of the colonial administration, technical and other infrastructural services and even in the private establishments, in their part felt the Italian fascist laws and social sanctions, especially in the reign of the Italian fascist regime (prior to their defeat in 1941). The casual labour showed more militancy both in the south and north of Somaliland and reinforced the creation of labour organizations fighting for workers' rights. The port workers in Djibouti preceded in their sense of unionism and anti-colonial feeling. This was normal as that type of workers was in constant touch with the foreigners that often boarded or refueled in their ports above all other possible local factors. However, the Somali trade union movement starts with the awakening of the patriotic consciousness of the Somali working masses in the post Second World War era of the modern Somali liberation struggle under the political parties that established and consolidated the political mobilization of the masses and



encouraged the formation of workers organizations in agricultural plantations and other working places. Even prior than that, the construction workers of Hargeysa, the capital of ex-British Somaliland Protectorate and the chief city of the northwestern region of the Somali Democratic Republic, stopped the work by 1920 while a general strike took place also, in the sugar plantations at Jowhar in the ex-Italian southern portion at the same time.

Attempts of political organizations in all over the Somali territories were first seen in the form of Somali societies and clubs that soon transformed into tough political parties with identical objectives and similar tactics of struggle against colonialism. The first initiative in the north was the establishment of the first political clubs with limited mobilization in 1935 at Berbera, Hargeysa and Burao which developed in the prominent Somali National League (SNL) by 1940, after serious attempts at organization. In the south the most prominent Somali Youth Club (SYC), transformed to Somali Youth League (SYL), was founded on May 15, 1943 in Mogadishu by 13 founding members enshrined today as faithful patriotic heroes. May 15 is at present also commemorated as one of the great historic national days. The founding congress of the Somali Revolutionary Youth Union (SRYU) was held on May 15, 1977 in reminence of that date as the sound pivot for nationwide movement during the colonial times. In spite of the British military aggressions, the SYC secured not less than 25.000 adherent members by 1946 and by 1947 when reorganized as a strong political machine with branches all over Somalia changed its name into Somali Youth League thus embracing all forces and fighting for not less than full independence.

The liberation struggle carried on by those political parties all over the Somali territories soon fully generated

into a militant struggle as they united all forces into one front with the single objective of making the colonialists rid of the Somali soil. The vanguard of the liberation struggle was mainly the enlightened youth workers under the SYL and SNL in the south and north of Somalia respectively. There were other parties in the north like USP and NUF, having similar programs for independence.

The gradual growth of the working class organization into established trade unions paralleled, the political ferment in all over the Somali territories and for the realisation of the national independence. As mentioned in the preface the history of the national movements and trade union movements in the developing countries and particularly Africa are inseparable as all forces were in common front against the colonial exploitation. Therefore, the appearance of the trade unions in Somaliland during the colonial era opens with the "Seamen's Union" formed in Djibouti in 1931. Its range of interests proved immediately beyond pure sailors' affairs and rights and covered also other broader national desires such as Somali representation in the government and their share in the territory's economy. In 1949 the Port Workers Union was structured in Djibouti and above its activities produced the first workers journal named 'Workers' voice' which carried the reflections of their activities, ideas, outlooks and the news of the current issues.

In 1937 the Somali Official Union was set up in British Somaliland by the Somali civil servants who felt discontented against the colonial practices of appointing Somalis only to the lowest ranks of civil administration and the unjust mobility in the process for promotions and other merits. The middle and senior posts were reserved for the British expatriate Indian personnel who were more privileged



than their Somali counterparts in the government civil administration. The basic law up to 1960 in British Somaliland was the Indian penal code and the Indian personnel in the colony were provided separate Indian quarters. There was a separate Indian Union that acted for them as a defence of their rights and also as a club where they met and enjoyed indoor games as an amusement. The treatment given to the Indians was to incite in them the colonial policy of divide and rule. The Indian importance and their full engagement in the Somaliland administration could be even seen from this letter of June 26, 1960 by the first Minister for Communication and Works of British Somaliland, Ali Garad Jama, as quoted here:

"Superintendent of posts - Mr. Kon Subramanian - it is envisaged that, even with the integration of the postal services of this protectorate and of Somalia after the first July, the post of Superintendent of posts will still be required at least until the end of this year if not longer."

The Somali Officials' Union, besides its struggle for the rights and welfare of the Somali civil servants and for the independence of the protectorate also strived for the reinforcement of the Somalization process in the wake of independence, until penalties were imposed under general orders 560 and 561 for not passing the Somali language examination of all overseas officers employed by the protectorate. Such orders were suspended with their consent due to some exigencies on February 1960 as quoted in a letter (E.C. (60) 51) of May 5, 1960, by P. Carrel, Minister of Defence and External Affairs:

"... at the last meeting of the Whitley Council which took place on 6th and 8th February, 1960, the Somali Officials' Union supported by the other staff associations proposed the penalties previously

imposed for failure to pass the language examinations should be suspended as it is no longer necessary to force overseas officers to learn Somali because they were only expected to continue to serve for a short time ..."

The colonial representatives in the protectorate despite the resistance and struggle of the Somali Official Union for the rights and interests of the Somali officials, yet, favoured such sectional organizations that had lesser contacts and influences with the majority of the workers and the other masses so as the Indian Union and the European Association were treated not as workers but as superior elite and privileged groups. In their free time each group used to meet in their own center and enjoy playing cards and other indoor games as passtime.

In 1952 the temporary skilled workers of the construction project of the state house of Hargeysa staged a strike due to meagre payments, excessive working hours extending from 5.30/6.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. (13 hours) and heavy penalties for any delay from the service such as sacking or giving them day off without payment, regardless that the state house project was distant from the Somali residences and that they were not provided transport. That strike continued for 18 days until their grievances were accepted and their demands were met. Such acts of organizing strikes was spontaneous in both sides of Somalia by that time. In 1955 a major strike among the Jowhar factory and plantation workers was recorded. The development of such processes led to the gradual formation of workers' committees and trade unions especially in major working locations. Workers of health, construction, electricity, post, water and teachers instituted their separate mobilizations, though these organizations remained decentralized until later times, mostly falling on post-independence era.



In southern Somalia, a Government Workers Union emerged by 1948 and in an attempt to unite all workers, a Somali Workers Union was formed in 1956. The Italian colonisation continued to play its carrot and stick policy by repressing workers' efforts in some cases and by attempting to corrupt or coopt the leaders for their favour or to divide the workers organizations in other cases. As a result of such colonial instigations an Italian sponsored Confederazione Somalo dei Lavoratori (CSL) was opened in Mogadishu. CSL managed to pull in most of the Somali unions by 1955. It had relations with the International Federation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The CSL confined itself to economic pursuits only, thus, favouring the colonial and reactionary policies of keeping the masses away from the political consciousness that could peel the thin crust over the erupting volcano for independence. In its co-operation, the CSL leadership carried out some improvements in workers' conditions on economic ends. In 1963, after independence, the CSL negotiated the first collective contract for the 3000 workers with the manager of Jowhar sugar factory and plantations (which remained in the private sector under SAIS till 1970).

Benefiting from the weakness and mildness of the CSL leadership and with the colonial intention to lid the Somali workers' rights and struggle on legal basis, the Italian colonial administration passed the Labour Code no. 52 prohibiting the establishment of workers organizations. Due to such colonial oppressive policies on legal lines and the rise of the pro-Italian movement against the national movement under the SYL, the Somali labour movement split into two: Sindacato Lavoratori Dipendenti Agricoli (SLDA) for agricultural workers and Sindacato Lavoratori Dipendenti Industriali (SLDI) for industrial and other

allied trades workers. The Somali trade unions cooperated with the nationalist forces in their struggle for independence and unification till 1960, after which the above mentioned two trade unions united with the Dock Workers Organization in Mogadishu (Sindacato Lavoratori Uniti Porti della Somalia - SLUPS) forming the African Trade Union of Somalia (USAS) by 1961. The Somali trade unions had good credit in the struggle for independence, the political parties' concepts in the value of the labour movement was not too tough and even their programs did not include the formation of separate social organizations.

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