

Challenges Experienced by Retail Trade Unions in Lesotho

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ABSTRAK

Throughout the world, there are numerous challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector. The current study aimed to examine the challenges experienced by retail trade unions in Lesotho. A qualitative study was adopted where 10 union officials and 10 store managers were interviewed. The study found that the retail sector unions face challenges including inadequate resources, lack of employer support, lack of education, union leadership quality and union officials' behaviour. The study emphasises that the survival of a trade union depends on its ability to attract members and that the retail sector is not immune to the changes happening in the retail space. The study concludes that the challenges identified can become opportunities for trade unions

INTRODUCTION

In the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain and other industrialized countries, the early trade unions were formed to fight against the exploitation of employees and to also secure improved wages and working conditions of their members (Okolie & Agbefe, 2020). This advancement enabled the modern industrial relations scene to be dominated by the trade unions and employers' organizations (Okolie & Agbefe, 2020). Trade unions have historically been an anchorage for employees, mandated to fight for and promote fair labour practices in the workplace. They arose due to the industrial revolution which resulted in the development of industrial capitalism (Adefolaju, 2013). However, in the modern times especially in the developing countries, trade unionism has become a tool that ensures and guarantees industrial harmony between workers and employers (Okolie & Agbefe, 2020). There is high unemployment rate and tight labour markets than has been the case in many years back and inflation has severely increased after a long period of price stability (Visser, 2023). In most countries including Lesotho, there is a current upward trend in work stoppages and most workers take part in strikes (Visser, 2023). At the same time, it is essential to note that when a society goes through a process of transformation, the role of trade unions also changes (Monyatsi, 2013). In Lesotho, there were very few trade union movements as most of the workers were mostly not aware of the significance of joining such labour organizations (The Reporter, 2024). Actually, not much was said about the labour movements and their benefits, but after some time, there was a significant increase in the number of labour associations formed (The Reporter, 2024).

Regardless of the plethora of development and human or labour rights studies on the trade unions, there is no study focusing on the challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector in Lesotho. Similarly, there are no consensual explanations among scholars of these fields of study of the implications of challenges facing retail workers. As a result, labour rights researchers have shifted their intellectual engagement from finding shared conceptions and explanations of trade unions and state-led industrialization to explaining the historic track records of countries concerning these two topical development agendas (Ali, 2021). Thus, the significance of this study is to examine the challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector of Lesotho. Furthermore, it will provide trade unions with valuable insights about the perceptions of unionist employee's view of trade union's role in addressing unfair labour practices in their workplace. There has been a lot of research conducted in the textile industry of Lesotho but ever since the advent of major retail corporations in Lesotho there has been little to no research conducted in the retail sector of Lesotho. Therefore, this study will offer crucial insight into the conditions prevailing in this sector.

Across the world, the influence of trade unions is declining whereas in Lesotho trade union presence and influence is still very high (McQuinn, 2017). Despite the presence of trade unions, there are still challenges facing the retail sector in Lesotho. In a report on human rights practices in Lesotho, conducted by the (United States department of State, 2011) it was discovered that according to the Labour commissioner, employers in the retail sector were the worst violators.

The most common allegations involved ignoring labour regulations for ordinary work hours, overtime and public holidays. A report by the United States department of State (2022) found that the retail sectors working conditions continue to deteriorate despite the presence of trade unions. There is vast research on employment relations in the textile industry of Lesotho. Jeppesen and Buzuidenhout (2019) discovered that the main concern for unions is the deplorable working conditions and insufficient wages in the textile industry. Also, research on trade union effectiveness in the informal sector, where Sehapi-Kulehile (2013) asserts that street vendors are not at liberty to join trade unions of their own choosing, as this exposes them to acts of anti-unionism. Research in the retail sector of Lesotho is very imperceptible, hence the need for the current study to highlight the conditions of employment affecting Lesotho's retail sector. The differences in findings from different studies emphasise the need to conduct studies on challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector in Lesotho as there is a dearth of studies in this domain. Also, the findings obtained by prior studies (Gwasupika, 2021; Ncube & Olabanji, 2020) in other countries might differ and not be applicable in the context of Lesotho. Consequently, by examining in-depth the experiences of part-time lecturers in Lesotho, the present study will not only enhance the existing literature by providing information from a new context but will also unearth some of these disparities on studies conducted on trade unions in the retail sector. The findings of the study will be vital in shedding light on how to improve the trade unions in the retail sector and in other sectors. Hence, this study aims to examine the challenges experienced by retail trade unions in Lesotho.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Trade Unions

Trade union is defined as a voluntary organisation of workers formed to protect and promote their interests through collective action. It may be formed on the following: plant, industry, firm, regional or national basis (Dhamodharan & Alagumalai, 2016). According to Lester (2015), a trade union is an association of employees designed primarily to maintain or improve the conditions of employment of its members. Despite the many benefits derived from trade unions, there are some who still have a negative perception of trade unions. Bell (2021) states that trade unions are organisations whose members are in most cases employees. Their main purpose is to protect the interests of their members by negotiating for better wages, they also negotiate with employers on behalf of their members in a process called collective bargaining. Historically, trade unions were strong and enjoying high levels of membership amongst the working class (Ringqvist, 2021). In recent times, there is a general dissatisfaction towards trade unions, it is clear that common disaffection with formal trade unionism is a prevalent feature of contemporary labour politics. Since the 1970s, the membership and political influence of trade unions has decreased in the Global North (Keskula & Sanchez, 2019). Furthermore, many have suggested that the weakness and ineffective state of trade unions is brought about by corruption and or acquiescence to the demands of capitalists. Sanchez (2016) posits that popular assumptions of trade union failure may well be accurate, and

institutional corruption may be an integral reason to trade unions dysfunction and weakness. The continued relevance of trade unions seems to be in question especially during this era of digitalization. According to Visser (2019), artificial intelligence and robots have the potential to create and destroy jobs, because of the digital revolution, jobs in the middle, crafts-related jobs and semi-skilled jobs have been declining. These are jobs that have provided trade unions with their core membership and clout in labour relations. Therefore, the digitalization of employment might lead to the extinction of trade unionism as we know it.

Challenges of Trade Unions

Trade unions have been facing serious challenges which negatively affect their numbers. Among them is the decrease in worker involvement in union affairs, demobilization of union members, lack of organizational capacity, lack of a clear vision of changing society, and the fact that most unionists are now being driven by individualism and a quest for upward mobility (Monyatsi, 2013). Most union leaders who failed to deal with such problems have caused many of their members to join new competing unions (Monyatsi, 2013). Other studies (Gupta, 2023; Rowland, 2023) also added that challenges that hinder the effectiveness of trade unions, trade unions include: inadequate enforcement of labor laws, fragmentation, anti-union practices by employers, changing nature of work, limited social security coverage, public perception technological displacement and inequality. Gupta (2023) further showed that unfair labor practices and intimidation by employers, can become obstacles to workers seeking to become members of trade unions. In many developing countries, financial incapacity is one of the factors which limit functioning of trade unions (Adefolaju, 2013; Milanzi, 1996). For instance, in Tanzania trade unions encounter the financial challenge that makes them fail to achieve their objectives, as trade unions' operations such as payment conducted meetings and provide financial support to the members rely on the financial support they get from their members' monthly subscriptions (Milanzi, 1996). The high unemployment rate restricts the fighting spirit of workers, results in worsening working conditions and the decrease of worker rights are tolerated without any help over a long period of time (Ramadhani, 2015). Workers become afraid to take part in trade union activities and are exposed to management control due because of losing their job (Schillinger, 2005). Unemployment and poverty are some of the reasons trade unions lose their members.

Theoretical Framework

Industrial Democracy Theory

The term industrial democracy has evolved throughout time, the first attempt to define industrial democracy was made by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1897. Niewinska (2016) argues that the phenomenon of industrial democracy was connected with trade unions and their ability to negotiate collective agreement which were later called collective labour agreements. While on the other hand (Poole, 1992) asserts that industrial democracy has six different components, namely workers' self-management, producer co-operatives, co-determination, work councils, trade union action and shop-floor programmes.

Thus, industrial democracy as a theory advocates for employees or their representatives' ability to exercise power and making decisions in the workplace. Industrial democracy must provide mechanisms for protecting the rights and safeguarding the interest of industrial workers. Apart from trade unions, there is simply no effective alternative to collective bargaining as a means of protecting the interests and rights of workers (Walther, 2008). This theory is grounded on the idea of democracy, which means giving voice and power to the working class. In developing countries where political democracy is far from being a reality, it seems very inconceivable that industrial democracy can be a possibility. In Lesotho, those who seek to exercise their basic democratic rights such as free speech are still met with torture or murder (United States department of State, 2022). Therefore, industrial democracy might seem impossible to achieve. Furthermore, it is limited in scope as it does not provide solutions to the immediate practical problems faced by many retail workers especially in developing countries like Lesotho.

METHODOLOGY

The current used a single case study approach of the retail industry, with employees from three retail stores and officials from three trade unions in Maseru. The case study method explores a real-life phenomenon through detailed in-depth data collection that involves various sources of information and reports case explanations and themes (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected through purposive sampling where 20 participants were identified. Of these 20 respondents, 10 were store managers who were members of unions and 10 were officials of three trade unions in Maseru, Lesotho. Union officials from the three trade unions consisted of the Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary. The selection criterion of participants focused on the fact that they are the people who have the confidence of workers, and have a thorough knowledge of the needs of fellow workers and the policies of trade unions. Data was collected through focus group discussions with union officials and store managers. This enabled the researcher to explore thoughts and feelings of a union officials and store managers. In this study, this method was used because it saves time and it enabled the researcher to talk to all respondents at the same time. Bless and Higson-Smith (1995) also indicated that focus group discussions enables members of a group to exchange ideas with one another on the topic being studied and reach some common understanding about the topic. Before the focus group discussion session, respondents were given three weeks' notice to allow them to arrange their schedules and a venue comfortable to all parties was also agreed upon by all parties involved. Four focus group sessions were held for both union officials and store managers from the three trade unions in Maseru which lasted for two hours. Thematic analysis was used where themes were identified. These were then used as themes to address issues regarding challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector in Lesotho (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Data was then tested where coding, and interpretation was done (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid & Redwood, 2013). Major themes identified were considered challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following themes identified include inadequate resources, lack of employer support, lack of education, union leadership quality and union officials' behaviour.

Inadequate Resources

Inadequate resources are one of the challenges pointed by the union executives in the retail sector in Lesotho. They said:

"...Lack of resources is a big problem we're facing right now. For us to reach out to retail out there, we have to empower them, for us to have printed material for visibility it needs money. We even find it difficult to convince our old members to stay because they do not receive benefits as promised they initially joined the unions."

"For us to conduct awareness campaigns for our retail people, we need money and other resources and at the moment we don't have those resources. We currently make money through member subscriptions and it is also not enough to help achieve our union needs."

"Money is not the only problem we have. We also have a challenge of not having our own building and offices. That is a major setback for us that it makes us look unreliable hence why most people are reluctant to join our union."

Union officials from various unions mentioned that their union capacity was compromised by lack of resources. This is caused by the fact most unions have been relying mostly on union members' subscriptions as their main source of income. Subscription as a source of revenue only benefits the union when trade union membership is rapidly growing. From the views above, it is clear that the unions union lack resources to support the activities that can be carried to help them grow. Respondents explained that failure to have resources mainly, financial resources, was making it difficult to reach out to new members and or even retain old members. They explained that some employees in the sector were leaving the union because of their failure to get the benefit promised to them by unions. Participant 3 also mentioned that not have an office space is a major setback for their union as it renders them unreliable and makes people hesitant to join their union. The similar findings were obtained by Herry and Simms (2008), who are of the view that the survival of the union shows a great relationship between union strategies, resources under the union control, historical circumstances and union members who might be an obstacle to union membership renewal. Therefore, unions need resources in order to mobilize and incentivize members to actively take part in union activities.

Lack of Employer Support

Another challenge noted by trade unions is the lack of employer support and their disrupting tactic on the union members. Trade unions officials shared their stories as follows:

"...I feel that most employers want to destroy our reputation as unions. Our rules and regulations clearly state when all deductions should be paid to us on a monthly basis. However, our challenge is that in most cases most employers forget that they have dues from our members".

"Some of the employers do not cooperate with us. They do not act we agreed with them. They forget that they have dues from our members."

"Some managers intimidate our members and threaten workers who are union members. That in itself is challenge to the union and also destroys the image of the union".

The existence of any trade union mostly depends on the cooperation with and recognition by employers. Trade union leaders observed lack of employer support as one of the key challenges affecting the union's survival in the retail industry. The union leaders indicated out that although they admitted low union membership, employers were further destroying their woes due to non-submission of union dues after they deduct from their members. Respondent 7 mentioned that they had a challenge with some employers who threaten their members. Prior studies (Benassi, Dirigatti and Panini, 2018; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Clibborn, Lansbury & Wright, 2016) suggested the need for the unions to work together with employers instead of fighting them. Working together with employers aligns with the findings of Clibborn et al. (2016) who found that trade unions in the Australian automotive industry gained respect after working together with employers and saved many motors retailers from shutting down. The following Union revitalization strategies were also found to effectively secure good relationships between trade unions and employers in various industries: coalition building, organizing, union structure, partnership, international networking and political action (Benassi et al. 2018; Ibsen & Tapia, 2017).

Lack of Education

Union representatives also mentioned lack of education its members and potential members on the importance of joining and participating in unions. Union officials said:

"...In a union, we negotiate long term issues and in most cases, workers appreciate our efforts when they retire. For example, the battle for pensions which people enjoy after employment. We have also handled cases of giving employees a break on public holidays as well as delayed payments in retail".

"Lack of education influences our ability to recruit new members and the new members' ability to commit to the union."

Participants indicated that lack of education affected members' recruitment and member commitment to the union. Respondents said that most employees, especially those with contracts, needed to be educated on unions. With education, the respondents feel that employees in the retail sector would appreciate the significance of unions. Okolie and Agbefe (2020) also indicated

that educating union members can help the union leaders to eliminate the apathetic attitude and ignorance. This will also help union members to be well informed and conscious of their rights (Okolie and Agbefe, 2020).

Casual Work

Casual work is one of the challenges pointed out by the store managers and union representatives in the retail sector in Lesotho. They said:

“... Given the current level of business instability in Lesotho, we only employ when necessary. We survive through cutting costs and managing labor costs.”

“Our unions are affected by adopting new forms of employment which include casual employees who are usually given short term contracts less than 6 months. This affects us a lot especially these when life seems to be more difficult day by day. Such workers do not see any benefit of being part of the union because they say they will not stay long and in one company but want to move around to exploit other opportunities awaiting them.”

Managers and union representatives indicated that the unions are affected by casual employees who are on short term contract less than 6 months. They explained that adopting casual employment of employees on short term contracts reduced the possibility of attracting new members. From the interviews conducted, casual work influenced the union's ability to attract new members into the union especially considering the fact that in most cases casual workers have a negative perception about unions caused by the nature of their contracts, which are usually short of less than 6 months. Participants explained that such workers see any benefit of joining the unions because they will not stay long in one company but move around to exploit other opportunities awaiting them.

Respondents also explained that some employers were threatening to not renew the contracts of casual employees.

“There have been cases where some employers did renew the contracts of their employees who were our members and threatened those employees to not renew their contracts if they did not join unions.”

“The biggest problem is that casual work has had many distortions in the retail industry. Given the level of desperation, casual employees are paid salaries far below the specified rates.”

The views above indicate that the trade union challenge with casual employment was distortions in the retail industry. Given the level of desperation, casual employees were given salaries far below the agreed rates.

Union Officials' Behaviour

Union officials' behaviour was also noted as one of the challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector. They narrated their stories as follows:

“It seems some union officials are turning trade unions into personal projects. This is giving us a bad name as trade unions and also affects the membership in the unions.”

“Some union executives become too attached in trade union practices which often results in them turning the unions as their own. This is a problem for us because even when they have to step down they feel they have ownership of the union”

The views participants above show that the fact that some union officials turn unions they lead into personal projects. They indicated that this causes problems for them because the union leaders tend to be hesitant when their time to step down approaches.

Union Leadership Quality

Union leadership quality was also identified by store managers and union executives. They expressed their views as follows:

“Experience needs to be paired with academic achievements because it helps to increase the skills of performance. Education is needed to combine the level of knowledge in the labour movement”.

“Union leaders need to be well equipped with knowledge and skills to understand their role in labour related cases and disputes. Through proper training workshops and experience acquired in that regard over time, leaders may gather the knowledge and capability needed to stand for workers”.

“Few years ago, there was once a leader who was not at all educated but was able to represent and fight for his members at all times. He did his job very well regardless of the fact that he did not even complete his high school education.”

“In one case in point, one trade union leader could hardly reach a dispute settlement with any company representative as he could not fully understand the issues at hand and the dispute settlement collapsed.”

Views of participants above indicate that trade union leaders need to be knowledgeable and skillful enough to defend and represent workers. They also indicated that one of their leaders did not complete high school but is able to represent workers in labour disputes. Also, they indicated that there are some union leaders who, in some instances cannot efficiently represent their members as they may not be so conversant with labour related issues due to the low level of their school education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The current study aimed to examine challenges facing trade unions in the retail sector in Lesotho. The main focus was on different retail stores in Lesotho. The following themes were identified: inadequate resources, lack of employer support, lack of education, union leadership quality and union officials' behaviour. The current study concludes that the challenges identified in trade unions in Lesotho are real and need to be addressed. For the survival of trade unions in the retail sector in Lesotho, a lot can be done to ensure that members benefit from joining unions. This will help to make sure that the challenges identified can be turned into opportunities for the growth of trade unions in the retail sector. By addressing the challenges, trade unions can play an important role in shaping the future of work and improving the lives of retail workers in Lesotho.

Recomendation

The paper recommends the following: trade unions can overcome their challenges by engaging in a genuine social dialogue with employers in different the retail sector of Lesotho as well as government through the ministry of labor as a way to prove that the union is important. Secondly, the unions can engage in improving its image through positive act primarily to their immediate stakeholder. To extend its influence, the union can also partner with other social movement groups. It is a fact that the mandate of a trade union is to its members who are equally part and parcel of the society. Thirdly, the paper also recommends that the unions must engage in fund raising programs for them not to rely on subscriptions, to finance their activities and programs on the ground. In addition, the unions can also engage in advertising through targeting students while they are still in school for instance those doing hotel and catering. These will know the union's existence and understand the union benefits. Furthermore, the study also recommends that the unions while remaining subservient to the labor center always remain focused and principled in managing their mandate to their members through effectively bargaining with the employers.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The research has been conducted over a limited timeframe, therefore time constraints posted as a major limitation of the study. Thus, the developments that could transpire over time of the effectiveness of trade unions in the retail sector cannot not be captured. The current research provides valuable insights into the challenges facing trade unions in retail sector in Maseru, Lesotho, it focused on the challenges faced by Maseru district which is highly urbanised compared to other districts. These challenges could differ in other districts. As such, a similar research can be conducted in semi urban and rural areas of Lesotho. Additionally, a similar study can be conducted focusing on what could be done to improve trade unionism in other districts of Lesotho.

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