

# The Evolution and Future of Trade Unionism: A Focus on Sudan's Labor Movement

DR. OSAMA MOHAMMED ELMARDI SULEIMAN KHAYAL

*Associate Professor at Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Nile Valley University, Atbara – Sudan and Elsheikh Abdallah Elbadri University, Berber – Sudan*

**Abstract-** Trade unions have historically served as vital institutions in advocating workers' rights, enhancing labor conditions, and securing fair wages. This paper explores the historical development of trade unions globally, emphasizing their legal foundations, diverse types, and the unique challenges they face, particularly in Africa and the Arab world. Special attention is given to Sudan's labor movement, tracing its origins, political repression, and the prospects following the 2019 revolution. The analysis underscores the importance of legal reforms and union independence in shaping the future of trade unionism in Sudan. Ultimately, the paper highlights the critical role of trade unions in fostering social justice, economic development, and political stability in transitional societies.

**Keywords:** Trade Unionism; Labor Rights; Sudan; Political Repression; Social Justice.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Trade unions are essential organizations established by workers within specific economic sectors to serve as collective representatives in negotiations with their employers. These organizations primarily focus on advocating fair wages, reasonable working hours, and improved labor conditions, aiming to protect workers' rights and promote equitable treatment in the workplace. The origins of trade unions can be traced back to the transformative period of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, a time characterized by rapid technological advancements and mass industrialization. During this era, workers faced increasingly harsh exploitation, unsafe working environments, and unfair wages, which underscored the urgent need for collective action and solidarity among workers. As a response, workers began to organize themselves into trade unions to collectively bargain for better conditions and to resist oppressive labor practices.

Despite facing significant opposition from employers and often hostile government policies, trade unions gradually gained legal recognition and legitimacy

over time. Their perseverance contributed to the establishment of fundamental labor rights that are recognized and protected across many countries today. These rights include the freedom to organize, the right to strike, and the right to bargain collectively, which have become cornerstones of modern labor law and workers' protections worldwide.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of trade unions by exploring their historical origins and subsequent evolution over the centuries. It will also analyze the various international and regional legal frameworks that safeguard union rights, highlighting the importance of legal protections in enabling unions to operate effectively. Furthermore, the discussion will categorize different types of trade unions, such as professional unions, industrial or labor unions, and independent or autonomous unions, each serving unique roles within the broader labor movement.

In addition to their structural and legal aspects, the paper will delve into the specific challenges faced by trade unions, particularly in contexts such as Africa and the Arab world, where political, economic, and social factors often complicate union activities. These challenges include government repression, economic instability, and restrictions on workers' rights, which hinder the growth and effectiveness of unions in these regions.

Finally, the paper will turn its focus to Sudan, especially in the aftermath of the 2019 revolution, to analyze the evolving role and potential future of trade unions within the country. It will explore how unions can contribute to the ongoing process of national transformation, social justice, and economic development in Sudan, considering the unique political and socio-economic landscape post-revolution, [1], [2], [3], [4], and [5].

## II. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONS

The historical development of trade unions is a complex and significant chapter in the evolution of workers' rights and labor movements worldwide. Its origins can be traced back to Europe, particularly during the tumultuous period of the Industrial Revolution, which spanned roughly from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. During this era, rapid industrialization transformed economies and societies, but it also brought about severe hardships for the working class. Workers endured grueling conditions characterized by low wages, long working hours, and unsafe environments. These oppressive conditions galvanize workers to organize collectively in an effort to improve their circumstances. The earliest recognized trade unions emerged in Britain, a country at the forefront of industrial change. One pivotal milestone in their legal recognition was the passing of the Trade Union Act of 1871, which formally granted legal status to labor organizations, allowing them to operate with legal protections and rights. Despite this progress, early trade unions faced intense repression from authorities, who often viewed them as subversive or conspiratorial entities. Union leaders and members were frequently prosecuted under laws that labeled their activities as "conspiracy" against the state, reflecting the hostile environment in which these organizations struggled to establish themselves.

As the trade union movement expanded beyond Europe, international recognition of workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively gained momentum. A landmark development in this regard was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, specifically Article 23, which explicitly recognizes the right of everyone to form and join trade unions for the protection of their interests. This global acknowledgment underscored the importance of trade unions as fundamental to the realization of human rights and social justice. Additionally, the International Labor Organization (ILO), a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to promoting decent work conditions, played a crucial role in formalizing the rights of workers through conventions. Notably, ILO Convention No. 87, also adopted in 1948, guarantees the right to freedom of association and safeguards workers and employers from undue government interference in union activities. Following this, ILO

Convention No. 98, enacted in 1949, further reinforced these protections by explicitly addressing anti-union discrimination and emphasizing the importance of collective bargaining as a means for workers to negotiate fair wages and working conditions. These international instruments have helped to solidify the legal and moral basis for trade unions worldwide, fostering a global movement dedicated to defending workers' rights and promoting social equity, [6], [7], [8], [9], and [10].

## III. TYPES OF TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions can be broadly categorized into several types, each serving distinct roles within the labor landscape. One prominent category is professional unions, which are established by law to represent individuals within specific professions such as medicine, engineering, or law. Membership in these professional bodies is typically mandatory for individuals practicing in the respective fields, ensuring that all practitioners adhere to established standards and regulations. These unions play a crucial role in regulating professional standards, overseeing disciplinary actions, and managing benefits such as pensions. Their primary aim is to uphold the integrity and quality of the profession while providing a structured support system for their members.

Another significant category is labor unions, which are formed on a voluntary basis and are generally organized around specific employment sectors. Membership in these unions depends on the workers' choice, and they often focus on advocating better wages, improving working conditions, and enhanced social benefits for their members. Unlike professional unions, labor unions do not have the legal authority to prevent non-members from working; their influence is primarily exercised through collective bargaining, strikes, and other forms of industrial action aimed at pressuring employers and policymakers to meet workers' demands.

In addition to these, there are independent unions that have emerged as alternatives to government-controlled or state-sponsored unions. These independent unions often advocate for broader labor rights beyond the traditional scope of union activities, emphasizing issues such as political freedoms, social justice, and comprehensive workers' rights. Due to their independent stance and often more radical

positions, these unions frequently face legal and political challenges, including restrictions on their activities, suppression, or attempts to limit their influence. Despite these obstacles, independent unions continue to play a vital role in representing workers' interests and pushing for reforms within the broader labor movement, [1], [2], [3], [4], and [11].

#### IV. TRADE UNIONS IN AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD

Trade Unions in Africa and the Arab World have played a significant role in shaping the socio-political landscape of their respective regions, reflecting both the struggles against colonial domination and the ongoing quest for workers' rights and social justice. In Africa, the history of trade unions dates to the early 20th century, with some of the earliest formations emerging in West Africa. For instance, Sierra Leone's Railway Workers' Union, established in the 1920s, marked one of the initial efforts by African workers to organize and advocate for better working conditions. However, during the colonial period, these early unions faced severe repression, as colonial authorities often viewed organized labor as a threat to their control and economic interests. Consequently, many unions were suppressed, their activities curtailed, and their leaders subjected to persecution, which stunted the growth of organized labor in the region during these formative years.

Following the end of World War II, the landscape of trade unionism in Africa began to shift significantly. The post-war era witnessed a surge in anti-colonial sentiment across the continent, and trade unions became vital instruments in these struggles for independence and self-determination. They served not only as platforms for workers' economic demands but also as rallying points for broader political movements challenging colonial rule. In South Africa, for example, the apartheid regime imposed strict restrictions on trade unions, banning mixed-race unions until 1957, when some limited forms of multiracial organizing were finally permitted. Nonetheless, the repression persisted, and unions often found themselves at the forefront of resistance against racial segregation and discrimination, playing a crucial role in the fight for equality and social justice.

Turning to the Arab World, the emergence of trade unions was closely linked to anti-colonial movements

and the broader struggle for national independence. During the mid-20th century, as countries in the Arab region sought to free themselves from colonial and foreign domination, trade unions emerged as important agents of social mobilization. Initially, these unions enjoyed considerable influence and were instrumental in advocating workers' rights, social reforms, and national sovereignty. However, many of these organizations faced co-optation or suppression once newly independent regimes consolidated power. In some cases, governments sought to control labor movements by integrating them into state structures or restricting their independence, thereby reducing their capacity to challenge authoritarian policies or advocating for genuine workers' interests.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and other Arab states, trade unions and workers' organizations often operate under restrictive legal frameworks. These restrictions are particularly severe for migrant workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force, especially in sectors like construction, domestic work, and hospitality. These workers frequently face limited rights to organize or bargain collectively, making their exploitation and marginalization more pronounced.

Despite these challenges, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of labor activism and demands for independent unions, especially amid widespread social and political upheavals. Notably, the uprisings in countries such as Sudan and Lebanon have rekindled hopes for greater workers' rights and democratic freedoms. In these contexts, workers and activists have called for the establishment of independent unions that are free from government interference, aiming to strengthen their bargaining power and improve labor conditions. These movements reflect a broader aspiration within the region for social justice, economic reform, and genuine political change, emphasizing the critical role that independent and autonomous trade unions can play in fostering more equitable societies.

Overall, the histories of trade unions in Africa and the Arab World reveal complex dynamics shaped by colonial legacies, authoritarian regimes, and ongoing struggles for social justice. While facing repression and legal constraints, unions in both regions continue to serve as vital platforms for workers' rights and

social activism, adapting to changing political landscapes and inspiring new generations of activists committed to the cause of economic and social equality, [12], [13], [14], [15], and [16].

Table 1 provides an overview of trade unions in Africa and the Arab World, highlighting their origins, challenges, and recent developments. In Africa, unions emerged in the early 20th century, played key roles in anti-colonial struggles, and faced repression

under colonial and racial regimes, yet remained vital for social activism. In the Arab World, unions arose alongside anti-colonial movements, often suppressed by governments post-independence, but recent activism seeks to re-establish independent unions. In the Gulf states, union activities are highly restricted, especially for migrant workers, leading to limited rights and ongoing exploitation. Overall, trade unions have historically influenced social and political change but continue to face complex obstacles.

Table 1: Trade Unions in Africa and the Arab World

Region	Historical Context & Key Examples	Major Challenges	Recent Developments & Role
Africa	Emerg ed in the early 20th century (e.g., Sierra Leone's Railway Workers' Union in the 1920s). Post-WWII, became vital instruments in anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles.	Faced severe repression during the colonial period. Under apartheid South Africa, unions were banned or restricted based on race.	Served as platforms for workers' economic demands and broader political movements. Continue to be vital for social activism.
Arab World	Emerg ed closely linked to mid-20th century anti-colonial movements. Initially influential in advocating workers' rights and national sovereignty.	Co-optation or suppression by post-independence regimes. Governments integrated unions into state structures to control them.	A resurgence of activism is linked to broader social uprisings (e.g., Sudan, Lebanon), with calls for independent unions free from government interference.
GCC States	Not detailed in early history, but modern unions operate under highly restrictive frameworks.	Severe restrictions on organizing, especially for migrant workers who have limited rights to collective bargaining.	Exploitation and marginalization of a large migrant workforce remain pronounced due to legal constraints.

## V. TRADE UNIONS IN SUDAN

Trade unions in Sudan have played a pivotal role in the country's socio-political landscape, evolving through various phases marked by resilience and ongoing challenges. The roots of organized labor in Sudan can be traced back to the early 20th century, with the first recorded strike by forestry workers taking place in 1908. This initial act of collective action marked the beginning of a burgeoning labor movement, even in the face of limited formal structures. The period following World War II saw significant developments, notably the establishment of the Sudanese Workers' Union in Atbara in 1946, a city renowned for its railway industry and industrial activity. This union symbolized a growing awareness among workers of their collective power and the potential to advocate for their rights. Two years later, in 1948, the government introduced its first labor laws, which were notably modeled on British

legislation, reflecting Sudan's colonial legacy and the influence of British legal frameworks on its labor policies.

However, the journey of trade unions in Sudan has been fraught with challenges, particularly after the country gained independence in 1956. Post-independence, many governments sought to suppress independent labor movements by dissolving unions and curbing their activities, viewing them as threats to political stability. During the long authoritarian rule of Omar al-Bashir, which lasted from 1989 until his ousting in 2019, trade unions faced severe repression. Under Bashir's regime, independent unions were systematically replaced with state-controlled structures designed to serve the interests of the ruling authorities, effectively limiting workers' ability to organize freely and advocate for their rights.

The most recent chapter in Sudan's labor history has been shaped by the 2019 revolution that ousted Bashir and sparked hopes for democratic reforms and greater workers' rights. The revolution revived long-standing demands for independent unions and greater freedom of association. Since then, there has been a growing recognition of the need for legal reforms to dismantle the restrictive laws that have historically constrained union activity in Sudan. These laws, such as those allowing for enterprise-specific unions, have often been used to limit the scope and influence of workers' collective representation. Moving forward, Sudan's prospects for strengthening its labor movement hinge on the implementation of comprehensive legal reforms that guarantee the independence and autonomy of trade unions, thereby empowering workers and ensuring their voices are heard in the country's ongoing political and

economic transformation, [17], [18], [19], [20], and [21].

In Table 2 the history of trade unions in Sudan shows a complex journey of growth, repression, and ongoing struggle for workers' rights. Early milestones include the 1908 forestry workers' strike and the 1946 formation of the Sudanese Workers' Union. Labor laws introduced in 1948 aimed to formalize workers' rights but offered limited protection. Post-independence, the government suppressed independent unions, especially under Omar al-Bashir's regime (1989–2019), which enforced repression and limited workers' organization. After the 2019 revolution, there is renewed effort to establish independent unions and amend restrictive laws, with future progress dependent on legal reforms that ensure union autonomy and strengthen workers' representation.

Table 2: Trade Unions in Sudan: Evolution and Challenges

Era / Period	Key Developments & Events	Major Challenges & Repression	Current Status & Prospects
Early 20th Century (Origins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- First recorded strike by forestry workers in 1908.</li> <li>- Establishment of the Sudanese Workers' Union in Atbara (1946).</li> <li>- First labor laws introduced (1948), modeled on British legislation.</li> </ul>	Limited formal structures in the early days.	Laid the foundation for a burgeoning labor movement and collective worker awareness.
Post-Independence (1956 onwards)		Governments sought to suppress independent labor movements, dissolving unions and curbing activities viewed as threats to stability.	
Omar al-Bashir's Regime (1989-2019)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Severe repression of trade unions.</li> <li>- Independent unions were systematically replaced with state-controlled structures.</li> </ul>	Workers' ability to organize freely and advocate for their rights was effectively limited.
Post-2019 Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The 2019 revolution ousted Bashir, reviving demands for independent unions and freedom of association.</li> <li>- Growing recognition of the need for legal reforms.</li> </ul>	Restrictive laws (e.g., those allowing only enterprise-specific unions) continue to constrain union activity and limit collective representation.	Prospects hinge on comprehensive legal reforms to guarantee union independence and autonomy, empowering workers in Sudan's ongoing transformation.

## VI. THE FUTURE OF TRADE UNIONS IN SUDAN

The future of trade unions in Sudan hinges on their ability to effectively reclaim and redefine their role within the country's socio-economic landscape. To achieve this, Sudanese unions must undertake comprehensive reforms that dismantle the current state-controlled structures which have historically limited their autonomy and effectiveness. Abolishing these government-dominated union frameworks is a critical first step, as it will pave the way for the establishment of independent and genuinely representative labor organizations.

Furthermore, the government and relevant legislative bodies should enact new laws that explicitly guarantee union independence, ensuring that unions can operate freely from political interference and undue influence. Such legal protections are essential for fostering an environment where workers feel empowered to organize, negotiate, and advocate for their rights without fear of repression or retaliation.

In addition to legal reforms, strengthening the capacity of unions to engage in robust collective bargaining is vital. This involves providing unions with the necessary resources, training, and legal support to effectively negotiate fair wages, improved working conditions, and social protection on behalf of their members. Promoting a culture of worker solidarity is equally important; unions must focus on building unity among workers across different sectors and regions to present a formidable collective voice.

By taking these steps i.e. abolishing state-controlled structures, enacting laws that guarantee independence, and bolstering collective bargaining and solidarity Sudanese trade unions can revitalize their role as champions of workers' rights and catalysts for social and economic justice in the country. This comprehensive approach will enable unions to better serve their members and contribute meaningfully to Sudan's broader development goals, [22], [23], [24], [25], and [26].

## CONCLUSION

Trade unions remain essential pillars in the pursuit of workers' rights and social justice, demonstrating

resilience amid political and economic challenges. In Sudan, the legacy of repression and the ongoing efforts for legal reforms underscore the importance of independent, strong trade unions in fostering equitable labor practices and social stability. The future of Sudan's labor movement depends on comprehensive legal and institutional reforms that guarantee union independence, empower workers, and promote collective bargaining. Strengthening trade unions will not only enhance workers' livelihoods but also contribute to broader social and political progress, emphasizing their vital role in building a just and equitable society in the post-revolution era.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Hyman, R. (2001). *Understanding European trade unionism: Between market, class and society*. SAGE Publications.
- [2]. Frege, C., & Kelly, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Comparative employment relations in the global economy*. Routledge.
- [3]. Visser, J. (2019). *Trade unions in the balance: ILO ACTRAV global survey*. International Labor Organization (ILO).
- [4]. Beinin, J. (2015). *Workers and thieves: Labor movements and popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*. Stanford University Press.
- [5]. Bieler, A., & Nowak, J. (2021). *labor and transnational action in times of crisis*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [6]. Webb, S., & Webb, B. (1894). *The history of trade unionism*. Longmans, Green & Co.
- [7]. Hobsbawm, E. J. (1964). *Labouring men: Studies in the history of labor*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- [8]. International Labor Organization (ILO). (1948). *Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention (No. 87)*.
- [9]. Ewing, K. D. (2005). The right to strike. *International Labor Review*, 144(3), 271-302.
- [10]. van der Linden, M. (2003). *Transnational labor history: Explorations*. Ashgate.
- [11]. Gumbrell-McCormick, R., & Hyman, R. (2013). *Trade unions in Western Europe: Hard times, hard choices*. Oxford University Press.
- [12]. Cooper, F. (1996). *Decolonization and African society: The labor question in French*

- and British Africa. Cambridge University Press.
- [13]. Beinin, J., & Lockman, Z. (1987). *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, communism, Islam, and the Egyptian working class, 1882–1954*. Princeton University Press.
- [14]. Barchiesi, F. (2011). *Precarious liberation: Workers, the state, and contested social citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa*. SUNY Press.
- [15]. Longva, A. N. (1997). *Walls built on sand: Migration, exclusion, and society in Kuwait*. Westview Press.
- [16]. Bassiouni, M. C., & Ben Achour, S. (2007). The Arab Spring: The failure of the state and the rise of civil society. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39(4), 579–604.
- [17]. Ali, T. M. (2020). Trade unions and political change in Sudan. *Journal of Labor and Society*, 23 (1), 45–62.
- [18]. Gallab, A. A. (2008). *The first Islamist republic: Development and disintegration of Islamism in Sudan*. Ashgate.
- [19]. Sikainga, A. A. (2002). "We are employees of the government, not slaves": Labor and protest in Sudan's railway industry, 1899–1956. *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, \*35\*(1), 59–78.
- [20]. Berridge, W. J. (2015). *Civil uprisings in modern Sudan: The 'Khartoum Springs' of 1964 and 1985*. Bloomsbury.
- [21]. International Labor Organization (ILO). (2021). *\*Trade union rights in Sudan: A review of legal frameworks post-2019*. ILO.
- [22]. Ali, T. M. (2023). Reconstructing workers' power: Trade unions and Sudan's transitional justice process. *Review of African Political Economy*, 50 (176), 245–263.
- [23]. El-Battahani, A. (2022). From revolution to reconstruction: Labor movements in Sudan's fragile transition. *African Affairs*, 121 (483), 145–168.
- [24]. International labor Organization (ILO). (2022). *Strengthening social dialogue in Sudan: A roadmap for trade union reform*. ILO.
- [25]. Berridge, W. J. (2021). *Sudan's unfinished democracy: The promise and peril of people's power*. Hurst & Co.
- [26]. Hashim, N. (2020). *Mobilizing dissent: Labor movements and the 2019 Sudanese revolution*. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 58 (4), 537–561.