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Mobilisation of administrative, technical and manual staff at the University of Kisangani

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Abstract

This study was prompted by the observation that the Administrative, Technical and Manual Staff Union (PATO) at the University of Kisangani provides only limited protection of its members' rights. It is with this in mind that we set out to identify and analyse the factors underlying this limited capacity for trade union protection. To this end, the methodological approach drew on Robert King Merton's functional analysis, supplemented by documentary research, detached direct observation, semi-structured interviews and content analysis. The results revealed that interference from the supervisory authority, a lack of financial resources, and internal conflicts and disagreements amongst members all undermine the cohesion and smooth functioning of the trade union structure. In the same vein, the study highlighted the importance of regular contact with the Management Committee, raising awareness amongst members and using the press as levers for trade union mobilisation and revitalisation. It is thus evident that trade union representatives and staff are the primary actors responsible for mobilising PATO members.

Keywords: PATO, Member mobilisation, University of Kisangani.

1. Introduction

In the professional and labour world, the growing importance and influence of trade unions are an undeniable reality in terms of the process of developing and implementing a company's labour policies. Indeed, for some fifty years, interest groups have constituted a distinct field of research and have gradually gained increasing political significance and social recognition amongst influential social actors across the public administration sector.

As regards the functioning of a company, it is fair to say that trade unionism is not a recent phenomenon. It emerged in Western Europe in the wake of the modern industrial revolution, which led to the creation of numerous factories and the mobilisation of the industrial working class. Within this class, two divergent interest groups emerged: that of employers and that of employees. The former sought to maximise profit, whilst the latter focused solely on wages and working conditions; it was here that the group took precedence over the individual, , prompting reflection and action, with the primary aim of improving working conditions and living standards (SYLVESTRE, 1973) .

As regards working conditions and living standards, the world's poor countries in general, and those in Africa in particular, have been striving to improve the quality of their

institutions in order to comply with ‘global standards’ of labour, which include reducing unemployment rates, providing access to drinking water and healthcare, paying a decent wage sufficient to make ends meet, and ensuring education for all, etc. Failure to meet these standards has prompted administrative staff at several higher education and university institutions to organise a strike through their trade union from 5 to 12 July.

It is in this context that Kabudri Legi (Legi, 2011, pp.154.) argues that the world of work and trade unionism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been reduced to one of destitution for workers, as their situation has progressively deteriorated, turning them into pitiable figures. The root cause of this destitution lies in the poor governance and political instability that characterise the country.

It is deplorable to note the government’s lack of interest in the demands of administrative staff, as voiced through their trade union. It is with this in mind that, as part of this study, we analyse the actual state of trade unionism amongst administrative, technical and manual staff in Higher and University Education (ESU) at the University of Kisangani in particular; in order to identify the underlying causes of their inefficiencies and actions.

In the majority of cases, administrative, technical and manual staff at higher education and university institutions in the DRC are unable, through their trade unions, to exert pressure on their employer. The University of Kisangani is no exception to this phenomenon. This state of affairs leads us to ask the following questions:

- How does the union in question organise itself to defend the rights and interests of its members?
- Why is the PATO trade union at the University of Kisangani failing to mobilise its members effectively?

We assume that the PATO Trade Union at the University of Kisangani is unable to mobilise its members because it faces interference from the supervisory authority— —a lack of financial resources, and internal conflicts (or disagreements amongst members).

The union mobilises to advocate for and defend the rights and interests of its members through various strategies, including liaising with the Management Committee and raising awareness amongst its members via the print media.

2. Methodological framework

To test the hypotheses and achieve the objectives, we employed the functional approach based on Robert King Merton’s framework (Amani, 2023, pp.145-146) . Within the framework of this study, the defence of members’ rights and interests, awareness-raising, assistance to members, and the organisation of strikes constitute the manifest function. Furthermore, the conflict of personal interest amongst members of the executive committee, corruption, and the diversion of objectives by the members’ representative constitute the latent function. Consequently, the paralysis of activities related to the defence of members and the internal crisis within the PATO trade union are indicative of dysfunction. Indeed, this period is characterised by an atmosphere of demands aimed at pressuring the employer to meet the workers’ grievances rather than going on strike (Braeks, 1983, p.11) . Establishing a functional alternative involving functional equivalents and functional substitutes—that is, alternatives to the functional deficiencies of a social system that is becoming unable to fulfil certain functions. Here, we remain focused on the efforts of administrative staff to get involved and demonstrate their commitment to their work; thus, the PATO trade unions must fulfil their remit within their remit in order to sufficiently enhance their capacity to defend workers.

This approach was supported by data collection techniques as well as data processing methods. The technique of detached direct observation enabled direct contact with various members of the PATO to gain a first-hand understanding of the realities on the ground, using an observation grid. The semi-structured interview technique enabled interaction with staff members from the various departments that make up the PATO. This technique was facilitated by an interview guide, which served as a framework for addressing the various topics during the interviews. Similarly, this study drew on data from legislation, administrative reports and archives using the documentary analysis technique.

For this study, simple random probability sampling was used. A sample is considered probabilistic if the researcher is able to determine the probabilities and criteria that each element possesses for inclusion in the population under study. In other words, whether the units in the population have an equal chance of being selected or not. This is the case with a simple random sample. The choice of this technique stems from the nature of the defined and/or finite study population. This comprises the administrative, technical and manual staff of the University of Kisangani.

3. Results of the study

3.1. Causes of Ineffective Mobilisation

This section comprises three sub-sections. The first concerns interference by the supervisory authority, whilst the second focuses on internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members, and the third on the lack of financial resources.

It is true that we seek to demonstrate the interference, the lack of financial resources and the internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members.

In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding interference by the supervisory authority.

3.2. Interference by the supervisory authority

Trade unions representing administrative, technical and manual staff are not well regarded by the political and administrative authorities. Whenever they defend staff members' rights, or when seeking to resolve a member's problem, trade unionists are subjected to intimidation, bullying, demands for explanations or disciplinary action. In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding interference by the supervisory authority.

Table 1. Interference by the supervisory authority

Respondents' views	f	%
Yes	40	80
No	6	12
No answer	3	6
Perhaps	1	2
Total	50	100

In light of this table, it is clear that 40 respondents, or 80 per cent of those surveyed, believed that interference by the supervisory authority in the division of members is the main obstacle to mobilising members; 6 respondents, or 12 per cent, disagreed with this view on the supervisory authority's interference, arguing that the authority is seeking to have its case upheld by the supervisory body; 3 respondents, or 6 per cent, considered that this might be one of the difficulties in mobilisation; and 1 respondent, or 2 per cent, did not express an opinion on this issue.

Allow us to explain the reasoning behind each group's position regarding the interference of the supervisory authority as a challenge to the mobilisation of PATO members.

Thus, the majority of our respondents indicated that interference by the supervisory authority is a necessary measure for all staff, whether administrative or manual workers. It helps to ensure that workers focus on the tasks they are required to perform. Consequently, every member of staff must be made aware of their duties to avoid confusion, as not knowing what one is supposed to do poses a risk within the institution or department.

Having gathered our respondents' views on interference by the supervisory authority, we also sought to gather their views on the issue of a lack of financial resources.

3.3. The lack of financial resources

As mentioned above, the salaries of administrative, technical and manual staff are very low and are always paid with a significant delay, at the end of the following month or even two months later. This is why staff refer to it as '60-day AIDS' – meaning an insufficient salary, hard-won after 60 days. This prevents staff, who have sought a solution from the authorities, from making their monthly contributions regularly.

This situation is also due to the fact that staff members – including administrative, technical and manual workers – spend their bonus little by little on a day-to-day basis, and by the end of the month they find they have already spent it all. Almost all members – over seventy per cent – are at least eight months behind with their contributions. Under these circumstances, the union's provincial account – the structure adopted in the city of Kisangani – is experiencing significant difficulties in its day-to-day operations and in covering the costs of support staff.

In the table below, we present the findings from our respondents regarding the lack of financial resources.

Table 2. Lack of financial resources

Respondents' views	f	%
Agree	15	30
Unfavourable	35	70
Total	50	100

A review of this table shows that, out of the 50 respondents we surveyed, 35 respondents – or 70 per cent – stated that within the PATO Union, the lack of financial resources is a genuine obstacle preventing members or the team from justifying the contribution of staff – specifically the labourers and technical staff at the University of Kisangani – whilst 15 respondents, or 30 per cent, attributed the issue to the lack of financial resources, with members either being unable to contribute or refusing to do so during meetings.

Thus, a lack of discipline within PATO also constitutes a problem. When staff members commit breaches, they deserve to be sanctioned in a way that helps them understand their mistakes so that they can be corrected.

Having analysed PATO's lack of financial resources at the University of Kisangani, we wished to discuss internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members.

3.4. Internal conflicts

Any negotiation is characterised by conflicts or disagreements amongst members. We sought to ascertain whether conflicts within the PATO union were one of the obstacles to mobilising its members.

In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding internal conflicts.

Table 3. Internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members

Respondents' views	f	%
Favourable	49	98
Unfavourable	1	2
Total	50	100

This table shows that 49 respondents, or 98 per cent of those surveyed, stated that internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members are one of the difficulties in mobilising PATO members.

Indeed, geopolitics – that is to say, tribalism – is the primary factor within the Union of Administrative and Manual Staff. It is therefore necessary to resolve disputes amongst members.

Furthermore, one respondent, or 2 per cent, rejected this view. In their opinion, conflicts and disagreements do not constitute a challenge in raising awareness amongst PATO members at the University of Kisangani. The reasons lie elsewhere. In fact, administrative, technical and manual staff have nothing

to do with these conflicts. What needs to be prioritised is the quality of the union's delegates.

Having gathered the views of our respondents on internal conflicts or disagreements amongst members, we moved on to strategies for mobilising members through the various possible means.

4. Mobilisation strategies for the campaign

In his book **The Logic of Collective Action**, M. Olson (Olson, 1978, p.95), he refutes the notion that groups behave as agents guided by the same rationality as individuals; it is not enough for a group to have a common interest and the means to achieve it for all the informed and aware individuals within it to participate spontaneously in the pursuit of that objective.

4.1. Contact with the Management Committee

Contact, as one of the strategies for mobilising PATO members.

Given the growing importance of interest groups, particularly trade unions, and their influence both politically and in contemporary society, their involvement appears significant in relation to the process of policy formulation and implementation.

In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding internal conflicts.

Table 4. Internal conflicts

Respondents' views	F	%
Favourable	9	18
Unfavourable	41	82
Total	50	100

This table shows that the majority of our respondents – 41 people, or 82 per cent – did not agree that contact with the Management Committee is not a strategy for mobilising its members. Meanwhile, 9 people, or 18 per cent, agreed that contact with the Management Committee of the University of Kisangani is a strategy for mobilising its members.

Those who supported this view stated that contact with the Management Committee is not a strategy for raising awareness amongst its members, as it does not enable executive committee members to perform their duties more effectively; there is a lack of representation; and there is a

‘divide and rule’ policy. When these members are lost, it spells failure for PATO. Consequently, this represents a loss of members and yet another missed opportunity for PATO.

4.2. Raising awareness amongst members

On this point, as we have stated above, raising awareness amongst administrative, technical and manual staff is crucial for maintaining constant contact with staff and organising meetings and general assemblies to build a mobilisation force.

In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding member awareness.

Table 5. Member awareness.

Respondents' views	f	%
Favourable	49	98
Unfavourable	1	2
Total	50	100

This table shows that 49 respondents, or 98 per cent of those surveyed, confirmed that raising awareness amongst members is one of the strategies that enables all PATO members to participate whenever there is a meeting or gathering.

Indeed, raising awareness is the primary focus of the PATO Union. It therefore organises its activities by homogeneous groups and by department, organised by the constituent units of the faculties and Batam, alongside other external units such as the Faculty of Science.

4.3. Use of the press

The press is a recognised source of information, but also a major medium for advertising; during wars, the print media has been an important tool for propaganda (Pierre, 2008, pp. 27-32) .

It also serves to transmit knowledge by disseminating the ever-changing information of our world. Through knowledge, it also helps to maintain the learning acquired from school to university by playing a role in ‘lifelong learning’.

On the one hand, the government needed to address the public; on the other, the press helped to convey citizens’ demands to political leaders. It is true that the economy plays a role in society that is just as important as politics. Institutions, businesses and consumers all seek to account for their choices and the economic developments they represent. Finally,

advertising plays an indispensable role in this context and for the financial health of newspapers.

In the table below, we present the results obtained from our respondents regarding their use of the print media.

Table 6. The press as a PATO strategy in Kisangani

Respondents' views	f	%
Favourable	1	2
Unfavourable	49	98
Total	50	100

This table shows that 49 respondents, or 98 per cent of those surveyed, cited the press as one of the strategies that is not conducive to mobilising PATO members. Indeed, when the executive committee observes low member participation, it will work through the local branches to rally its members. For the minority of our respondents, the press is one of the strategies for raising awareness amongst members.

We would like to point out here that the Union of Administrative, Technical and Manual Workers has always been sensitive to the plight of the most vulnerable sections of society, particularly in the world of work – namely the working classes and administrative staff. It is for this reason that it has carried out so many actions in the collective interest, including those undertaken in a concerted manner across all the towns where it is represented. One of the main reasons for the protests by the Administrative, Technical and Manual Workers’ Union is also the permanent appointment of some of its members who have already accumulated several years of service without having been granted permanent status, and who are treated as new recruits. There are some who have ten years’ service without having been mechanised, and there is also the issue of the dismissal of certain delegates or the intimidation of PATO trade union delegates. The failure to take demands into account, particularly as the wages of administrative, technical and manual staff do not allow them to make ends meet each month or to meet their families’ basic needs; furthermore, there is a low level of mobilisation amongst members.

Conclusion

We have now reached the conclusion of our research, which focused on the functioning of the trade union at the University of Kisangani: the case of the Administrative, Technical and Manual Staff (PATO) from 2008 to 2013 in Kisangani. We

began with the observation that, despite the mobilisation of staff and workers at the University of Kisangani, their participation in the trade union movement remains low. Based on this observation, our research is structured around the following questions: why does the PATO trade union at the University of Kisangani fail to mobilise its members? How does the PATO trade union at the University mobilise to assert its rights? Through contact with the management committee, raising awareness amongst its members and engaging with the press as mobilisation strategies.

In response to the questions posed, the following answers were proposed: interference from the supervisory authority prevents the trade union from functioning effectively. A lack of financial resources slows down the union's operations and leads to conflicts or disagreements amongst members. Engaging with the Management Committee, raising awareness amongst members and working with the press are the strategies that can be employed in terms of mobilisation and operations, whilst representatives and staff are primarily responsible for mobilising PATO members.

This research comprised two main areas. The first focused on the causes of the ineffective mobilisation of PATO members, and the second on the means by which the union has mobilised itself through liaison with the Management Committee, raising awareness amongst its members, and engaging with the press.

To test our hypotheses, we used Robert King Merton's functionalist method. This method was supplemented by various techniques. For data collection, we employed the following techniques: documentary analysis, questionnaires and unobtrusive direct observation. For data analysis, we utilised both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques.

As all human endeavours are imperfect, we acknowledge the shortcomings of this research and admit that we have not covered every aspect of a study on trade unionism. We therefore invite readers and other researchers to explore further aspects of the concept of trade unionism, such as the position of the Kisangani University Teachers' Association in relation to public opinion in the city of Kisangani.

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