

The colonial authorities' practice of paternalism concentrated on the material well-being of the masses and the provision of primary education

Congolese Trade Unionism: The Colonial Heritage

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Introduction

The idea that workers should organise trade unions to defend their collective interests first reached the Belgian Congo about eighty years ago. Except for a brief decade - 1957 to 1967 - the development of an effective labour movement was stifled first by colonial paternalism, then by twenty-three years of crushing, centralised authority under the Mobutu dictatorship which reduced trade unionism to the status of a political party section. Since 1991, with the slow collapse of Mobutu's regime followed by the more recent institutional instability which has enveloped the country, the movement further fragmented. The struggle for freedom of association has cost the lives of many Congolese, countless others have suffered beatings, jailing and dismissal from employment at the hands of the colonial officials and their own political leaders. Today, the movement is again divided and weak, but is attempting to defend the workers and their families in the wreckage of social and economic structures, destroyed by years of political neglect and

corruption. Understanding past mistakes could be useful in restoring viable trade union structures. These, in turn, could play a crucial role in building a more solid civil society in the Congo.

This article is not a comprehensive history of Congolese trade unionism but a contribution for better understanding the impact of events which helped shape the movement in its formative years. The period covered includes the introduction of trade unionism to the Belgian Congo from its beginnings in the economic ferment of the early 1920s through the granting of freedom of association to all workers during the massive social upheavals just prior to independence. It then looks briefly at the troubled 1960 to 1967 era when the experiment with democracy failed, examining the role of the trade unions. The story ends with General Mobutu's coup d'état and the creation of controlled unionism. Over two decades of centralised single party rule and labour movement stagnation followed.

Names of places - as well as people - in the Congo have shifted over the years according to

political changes. The Congo Free State became the Belgian Congo which, after independence, was called Democratic Republic of the Congo, then Republic of Zaïre and, in recent years, returned to Democratic Republic of the Congo. Geographic names also lost their colonial flavour. In this text place names employed correspond to usage at the period under discussion. Thus, in general, the colonial versions of cities are used: Léopoldville/ Kinshasa, Stanleyville/Kisangani, Coquilhatville/ Mbandaka, Jadotville/Likasi and Elisabethville/Lubumbashi. People's names are treated in the same manner with pre-'authenticity' Christian names generally used for individuals. To avoid confusion organisational titles are not translated but left in the original French. Source materials and further readings are listed in an appendix.

The Congo Free State and Early Colonial Rule

Before the introduction of colonialism, the concept of working for a cash wage was unknown in Africa. The traditional economy was largely dominated by village-based agricultural subsistence, supplemented by hunting and fishing. Societal organisation centered on family and clan structures with economic activities focused generally within these units. Any form of trade unionism was, obviously, absent in such a system which organised work according to strictly local needs and hierarchies. It was only towards the end of the last century that European interest suddenly turned to the African continent in a frenzied quest for raw materials. Belgium's King Leopold II was caught up in this drive to acquire colonies but was unable to interest his country in bearing the cost of such a venture. The King personally took up

the challenge and created the enormous Congo Free State using investments from chartered colonial companies. The Congo Company for Commerce and Industry (1886), the Katanga Company (1891) and the Lakes Company (1901) received economic monopolies over vast areas and began to systematically exploit the Congo's extensive resources, first opening up the necessary means of communication and transportation. In addition, new towns were created to base facilities for processing agricultural and mineral exports, to sell imported goods to the local population and to govern the extensive territory. Ambitious infrastructure projects - railroads, river transport, ports, roads, administrative centres, plantations, mines - were designed by Europeans but required hundreds of thousands of African labourers to put it in place. The introduction of an entirely new system of work was introduced, forcing large numbers of men and some women to leave their villages, weakening their ties with those social structures which had long governed traditional life, and into jobs created by the colonial economy.

At first, this ambitious undertaking was accomplished largely by requisitioning peasant workers and obliging them to work, often under the most harsh, repressive conditions. Gradually, new towns and cities grew up, industries were created, vast agricultural tracts cleared, a civil service organised, taxes requiring monetary payment imposed on the population and a growing number of persons became caught up in the new cash economy.

It was only in 1908, forced by a rising tide of international protest over the brutality involved in exploiting of the Congo's riches, that Belgium assumed full responsibility for the administration of the colony. This brought an even larger flow of European administrators, entrepreneurs and missionaries who transformed

the socio-economic structure of Congolese society. The new system introduced a market economy with production quotas for many rural farmers. Harsh penalties were imposed on those who failed to produce enough, encouraging even greater exploitation of local manpower through employing forced labour. There were frequent popular revolts in various parts of the colony but they remained localised and, in the absence of any widely-based structures, were easily repressed by the colonial troops of the Force Publique. In the predominantly rural setting of the early 1900s, clan and family continued to dominate society and all attempts by anyone to create any more formal organisations in either rural or urban settings were quickly discouraged.

Paternalism was the predominant theme in Belgian colonial policy. There was no intention, at least in the 1920s and 1930s, of ever achieving "equality" between blacks and whites. It was repeatedly made clear that the only relationship possible between Europeans and Africans was that of benefactor and recipient.

During the two decades between the wars, this paternalism produced practical results remarkable in Africa. The great concessionary companies - Union minière du Haut-Katanga, Forminière, Huileries du Congo Belge - succeeded in concentrating thousands of men around the mines and plantations, tearing them away from traditional villages. It was good business to give them food, clothing, medical care and social amenities, the religious comfort of a Catholic mission and an education system for their children. However, the Belgian Congo slowly became a black country, supervised by a restricted group of whites who received detailed instructions from Brussels. The African population received minimal technical knowledge but no leadership skills and was discouraged from taking responsibilities or initiatives.

The colonial authorities' practice of paternalism was as practical as that of the industrialists. It concentrated on the material well-being of the masses and the provision of primary education, with the idea that this would be more likely to assure contentment among the population than the granting of political rights and the creation of an elite class. Apart from the training of priests, secondary education was strictly adapted to the colony's indirect needs: producing clerks, nurses, mechanics, drivers and other lower echelon staff. Gradually an African middle class did develop which had stable jobs, relatively good salaries (although far less than what Europeans earned) and were, at least during the period between the wars, relatively content with their situation.

As far as possible, the emergence of a poor white class was discouraged. Europeans, like Africans, enjoyed no political rights. The basic assumption of the paternalism policy was that, given fair material prosperity, minimal discrimination and religious training, Africans would be content if the colonial regime continued indefinitely. What was not foreseen is that the Congo could not remain indefinitely isolated. The Second World War shattered this neatly designed plan.

European Trade Unions Launched

By the 1920s exploitation of the Congo's natural resources was underway. Cotton, palm oil and rubber were the principal agricultural exports while diamonds, gold and copper deposits were the principal source of mineral wealth. However, the socio-economic upheaval resulting from the 1914-1918 war produced a profound malaise among the colony's workers. Both Europeans and Africans saw a sharp drop in their purchasing power. Real wages, undermined by inflation, declined by over half. A

PROLÉTAIRES / DE TOUS / LES / PAYS / UNIS / ÉCOUTEZ-VOUS /

LE FRONT DU TRAVAIL

ORGANE DE LA CONFÉDÉRATION GÉNÉRALE DE CONGO BELGE SYNDICALE DU

CGS

1947

PREMIER MAI



Gansch de wereld zal dit jaar een dag van de arbeid vieren die een wapenwacht moet zijn.

Overal wil het kapitalisme het syndicalisme verstikken. Geen dag gaat voorbij zonder machtsmisbruik der werkgevers heit dikwijls geholpen door de Regeringen.

De proletariërs vertegenwoordigen de grootste massa der volkeren en betalen met hun bloed de oorlogen niet al hun ellende. Eens de oorlog gedaan is het nogmaals op hen, dat de financiële lasten en het stijgen van de levensduurte wegen.

De oorlogspanning wordt in de U.S.A. beloofd met de verstikking van het syndicalisme.

De oorlogspanning in Congo werd op dezelfde manier beloofd. De huidige wereldwijde overlasten met schulden en oorlogsoverwinstingen werkt. om de winsten te betalen aan de bezitters en kan niet meer degelijk de arbeid van den menschen betalen.

In de kaders van het kapitalisme steekt men de koppen bijeen.

Zij willen op politiek gebied hun gezag behouden. Zij willen wetten in wege brengen die tegen de belangen van den werkevan indruischen.

In België (de handelaars zullen U vertellen dat de verkoop vermindert) vergrooten de stocks. Binnenkort zal in sommige afdelingen de productie vertraagd worden. Werkloosheid zal ontstaan. Gedurende een periode van werkloosheid zijn er minder koopers en de kringloop begint! Wij hebben de oorlog gewonnen zij hebben zoveel inspanning gedaan, wij hebben zoetering der levensvoorwaarden en per slot van rekening zijn we nu armer dan te voren.

1 Mei, een feestdag? Neen — **WAPENWACHT!** Wij, C.G.S. gesyndiceerden, moeten ons afvragen of we onze plecht van kameraad volbracht hebben!

Velen van de onzen zijn niet heraangekomen geweest omdat ze voor hun verlof voor het syndicalisme hadden gestreden. Hebben we gestemd voor een actie tot het innerste toe om hun toe te laten hun koloniale loopbaan te eindigen en hun pensioen te bekomen?

De jongeren worden aangeneven voor een hangloon en voor een termijn die zonder belofte voor de toekomst is. Hebben zij voor een actie tot het teekmen van collectieve conventies te bekomen? Hoeveel weduwen en wezen van onze overleden kameraden weten niet van welk hout pijlen maken en kunnen nauwelijks hun ellende verbergen.

Hebben we gestemd voor een krachtig syndicalisme actie die alleen bekwaam is deze menschen te redden?

De mijnwerkers worden nog uitgebuit als lastdieven.

Hebben we gestemd voor een actie die hun gezondheid zal redden en voor den mijnwerker een statuut zal bekomen die wat menscheeliker is.

1 Mei een feestdag? **NEEN — EEN WAPENWACHT!** Syndicalisten, die deze naam waardig zijn, moeten dag in dag uit hun syndicaal geweten onderzoeken en de strijd staken enkel na volledige eindeverdringing.

Alleen dan maar, zal 1 Mei een feestdag zijn.





JOREZ

Imp. — L. Avenir Colonial Belge.

wave of discontent arose, resulting in a strike by white civil servants and agents in the administrative capital, Léopoldville, and in Katanga, the colony's economic heart. In addition to the colonial administration, large companies such as Union minière and the Katanga Transport Company (BCK) were directly affected by this first major industrial action. In May 1919 the administration was totally paralysed by a strike of white civil servants. The colonial authorities tried, in vain, to block protests and to prevent employees from organising. However, on 30 May 1920, the Union Générale des Ouvriers du Congo (UGOC) registered its constitution at the Elisabethville tribunal. Limited to white workers, this initial attempt to unionise the private sector lacked a secure legal status and did not flourish due to employer pressure. A renewed private sector strike on 1 September 1920 was followed 100% at Union minière and half the BCK workers. Negotiations with the employers brought increased wages and benefits for the European staff.

Discontent unleashed during the May 1919 strikes also encouraged the white colonial civil servants and agents to organise in seeking to improve their economic situation. Under legislation permitting the creation of professional associations, these workers created the Association des Fonctionnaires et Agents de la Colonie (AFAC) at a 18 January 1920 congress in Boma. AFAC can hardly be considered as a true trade union and functioned as a strictly white association with no links with the working class. On the contrary, AFAC opposed the creation of all trade unions, especially those for African workers. Both AFAC and UGOC sought to improve working conditions and wages only for white workers while keeping Africans from higher-level jobs. Seven months later, AFAC leaders presented a list of griev-

ances to the Belgian Minister of Colonies, including a legal status for their association. Article 2 of this new legislation, the 23 March 1921 Decree, explicitly denied membership to all African workers without prior authorisation from the authorities. Such permission was not forthcoming. An ephemeral group, the Union Civique Belge (UCB), existed in the 1920s and 1930s which, manipulated by employers, acted to discourage strikes by Europeans.

Africans Denied the Right to Organise

The demand for more manpower needed to exploit the Congo's resources and to staff the lower ranks of its administration increasingly led to the recruitment of new African workers to the ranks of wage earners. Leaving rural villages, they took up employment in the colony's growing industrial centres and cities. Informal, locally-based associations emerged, often along ethnic lines, to serve as mutual aid societies but were never allowed to take on the functions of trade unions. There was no legislation governing African associations and any attempts to organise in formal groups was looked on suspiciously by the colonial authorities and permission was generally denied.

The Ordinance of 11 February 1926 was the first attempt to regulate Africans' associational rights. This legislation, modified on 25 August 1937, was concerned mainly with secret associations or groups threatening public order. Prior authorisation was required from the authorities who closely supervised any new Congolese organisation. Trade unions for local workers remained forbidden as the colonial government maintained "*that blacks had not yet acquired sufficient maturity needed for trade unionism.*"

Worker Protests Crushed

During the 1939-1945 war, the Congo was isolated from occupied Belgium. European employees in the private sector took advantage of this new situation to organise. Before 1939 such initiatives would have been impossible. Companies simply sent home any employees who showed signs of "making trouble." White workers were especially concerned about their future and began demanding pension rights to assure their economic security once they returned to Belgium. In Katanga, the Union minière management immediately took action, disciplining a number of (white) leaders of the protest movement identified as trouble makers at the Jadotville mines. This victimisation resulted in a strike on 18 October 1941, resolved only after the direct intervention of the provincial governor. The industrial climate remained unsettled and, the following year, a renewed seventeen-day strike resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of two (white) worker leaders, MM. Heynen and Dutron.

On 16 April 1942 continued social unrest finally forced the authorities to grant legal recognition to professional trade unions for white workers. Two years later, in a 21 June 1944 decree, the colonial government granted freedom of association for Europeans but expressly excluded Congolese workers from this right. Further strikes and protest movements by Africans, followed by often violent repression from employers and the authorities, did bring limited change in 1946.

African wage earners suffered far more than their European counterparts from economic injustice but were powerless to react. Many thousands of rural men had been pressed into arduous compulsory labour during the war years. A growing number had moved to urban areas to escape. The population of Léopoldville,

40,000 in 1939, had inflated to almost 100,000 by 1945. In the towns and cities, African discontent grew even faster than in the isolated villages. The refusal to accept the traditional paternalistic attitude in industrial relations was reinforced by the slow emergence of Congolese who had received an education. This middle class, known as évolués, increased pressure for equality. Alongside the desire for higher education was the hope that new qualifications acquired would also bring salaries comparable to those of the Europeans. The wide gap between the standard of living between white and black workers in the Congo was the primary cause of the évolués resentment. For example, African medical assistants with years of experience and considerable responsibility began to compare their salaries (about 37,500 francs yearly) with the far greater amounts (about 137,000 francs) received by white medical technicians with six months preparatory training in Antwerp.

A serious incident occurred at the Union minière mines of Panda and Shituru (Katanga) on 4 December 1941. Congolese workers assembled in front of the headquarters building to demand higher wages. Management panicked, called in the Force Publique and, in the ensuing confusion, soldiers opened fire, killing a worker. Protests for increased wages spread to Elisabethville where a strike broke out on 8 December. At a gathering of workers and their families the following day soldiers again fired on the crowd killing at least sixty and wounding over one hundred. The shock from this savage repression shamed the company into granting a meagre wage rise but even this totalled 5 times the workers' initial request.

Beginning in October 1945, a new wave of strikes erupted in Léopoldville and was spread to the port city of Matadi by railway employees. Workers denounced the paternalistic practice

of distributing individual food rations and asked that this be made in cash. Several arrests followed. In November, more serious incidents were reported among Congolese seamen in Matadi. These degenerated into a general strike, paralysing the colony's crucial transport sector. This time workers demanded a 100% wage rise. Again, police attacked the strikers killing at least seven. Others were jailed and their leader received a ten-year prison sentence.

Timid Start for Trade Unions

The 1941 protest strikes organised by European workers in the Congo led to the creation of enterprise-level trade unions. These scattered groups realised the urgent need to establish regional federations better able to represent workers' grievances on a larger scale. Demands included improved working conditions, higher wages, paid vacations and retirement pensions. By 1944 thirty-seven separate associations existed, grouped in four large federations: Katanga, West, Stanleyville and Rwanda-Kivu. On 1 July 1944 the first colony-wide trade union congress convened in Elisabethville to create a single body: the Confédération Générale des Syndicats du Congo-Belge (CGS). Heynen and Dutron, martyrs of the Jadotville strike, were blocked from leading the new union because of their jailing. Dr. Toussaint became General Secretary until he was expelled from the colony. The CGS' ideology was progressive and its newspaper, *Front du Travail*, was subtitled *workers of the world unite*. The union took a militant stand against both the colonial authorities and expatriate employers. It organised a series of strikes between 1944 and 1946 to press these demands. CGS attended the World Federation of Trade Unions' (WFTU) pan-African congress held in Dakar

(Senegal) in April 1947. General Secretary André Wynant announced that his union represented 3500 workers.

Predictably, the CGS' position was quickly undermined by hostile employers, the administration and competition from rivals. Following the war a large number of younger workers who had little interest in trade unionism arrived from Belgium. In addition, Belgian unions decided to organise workers in the colony by creating sections of the metropolitan labour movement. The Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens (CSC) founded a Congolese branch which sharply undermined the position of the CGS. In 1947 CGS applied for affiliation with the Fédération Générale des Travailleurs de Belgique (FGTB).

It was late in 1945 that the CGS realised that, based on the recently organised strikes, worker solidarity between Africans and Europeans was the key to success. Steps were taken to create a separate trade union for the more highly skilled Congolese workers. On 27 February 1946, the Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes Congolais Spécialisés (STICS) was born. Restricted to an elite of workers fluent in the French language, it excluded at least 90% of the African work force. STICS grievances focused far more on improving the social and living conditions of its own members than on improving conditions of work for all Congolese workers. Along with the CGS, it joined with the FGTB in 1947.

During this period of intense trade union activity, Congolese civil servants, demanding the same rights of their European counterparts to form professional associations, were threatened with dismissal and sanctions. Finally, the promulgation of Ordinance 82/AIMO on 17 March 1946 provided a framework for Congolese professional organisations. This legislation opened the door to the creation of trade unions for Africans. At least initially, an attempt was

made to restrict the level of organisation to local committees with a minimum of one hundred members. Federations were forbidden without express authorisation. The right to strike was limited and subject to an obligatory conciliation and arbitration process. Administrative formalities were rigorous, highly restrictive and complex. Members had to be at least twenty-five years of age, have worked at least five years and possess a middle-level diploma or a senior professional certificate. The colonial administration had the right to attend all meetings, closely monitor union finances and to veto any decision in the case of an emergency.

Congolese Civil Servants Organise

Local civil servants seized the opportunity offered by the 1946 ordinance and created the Association du Personnel Indigène de la Colonie (APIC) at a Léopoldville founding congress in 1946. APIC quickly adopted a nationalistic stand, rejecting all western influence and limited its membership to black workers. By 1953 it claimed 2000 members. Clearly stated in the union's objectives was a bold (for the time) demand for the "*independence of the African trade union movement and the representation of African workers in all regional and international organisations and institutions.*" It also called for a massive Africanisation of leadership positions in the civil administration and army, a single status for all civil servants and a struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism as well as all forms of exploitation and oppression.

This sharp contrast between Belgians and Congolese was more pronounced than in most other parts of Africa as the European standard of living was exceptionally high. Faced with such blatant double standard the évolués

reacted demanding "*Equal pay for equal work.*" Their major grievance, especially in the civil service, was for a single category with the same salaries and conditions for all. This was discussed intermittently since 1948 but, ten years later, with Congolese university graduates, the problem became more urgent.

Prior to 1957 each branch of APIC was required to maintain local autonomy but the union's strength was considerably increased in 1955 when, under the leadership of Arthur Pinzi, a single federation was launched. By 1956, after a lengthy series of protests, significant progress was made in integrating Congolese and Europeans in the senior civil service grades. In 1958 a single status was granted for all administrative agents as well as more trade union rights.

With the granting of independence in 1960, many APIC leaders received senior political and administrative posts. This resulted in a sharp decline in the union's activities. Subsequent disintegration of the Congo's provincial structure and civil service discipline further eroded APIC's effectiveness. Politics had entered the union's ranks well before 1960. After returning from Belgium in 1956, labour leaders Arthur Pinzi and Maximilian Liongo assumed increasingly political roles. This was confirmed by the election of Pinzi and another APIC leader, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, as burgomasters during the first communal elections in 1957.

APIC's second congress in 1961 agreed to merger with the Syndicat National des Travailleurs du Congo (SNTC). Which included private sector workers and teachers. However, internal dissension provoked by some APIC leaders seeking greater autonomy soon provoked divisions which helped to destroy this aborted attempt at labour unity.

Beginning of Christian Trade Unionism

The Belgian CSC union began taking an interest in the Congo immediately following the war. It created a local section, the Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens du Congo (CSCC), during the visit of H. Pauwels to the colony in May 1946. CSCC proceeded to vigorously challenge the CGS because of that union's perceived communist sympathies. At first, it organised European employees but a short time later, once authorisation was granted, extensive efforts were concentrated on Congolese workers. Robert Lecoq and Walter Gillard were initial organisers, respectively in Léopoldville and Elisabethville. Four enterprise-level unions were created exclusively for African members. Given substantial support by the powerful local Catholic missions, the CSCC grew quickly and soon eclipsed the CGS and STICS unions throughout the colony. After merely one year of organising, it had eighteen active Christian trade unions. By 1950, the number of branches had grown to fifty and were present in practically all provinces.

The CSCC took a mildly progressive policy position on colonial issues. It sought to expand freedom of association while improving working conditions and benefits for both European and African members. Significantly, the union created an ambitious network of trade union schools, mutual aid societies and co-operatives to train a number of highly skilled Congolese cadres and organisers while providing members with valuable services. This investment in human resources guaranteed Christian dominance within the Congolese union movement for the next half century.

By 1956, the union grouped 8500 members in three sections: employees (private sector Europeans), labourers (private sector Africans) and government employees (public sector

mixed). With the exception of Victor Beleke, senior officers were all Belgians.

The first CSCC congress took place in February 1957 and was chaired by Belgian CSC President Auguste Cool. CSC policy favoured gradual decentralisation of authority to the colonial branch. At this occasion it granted CSCC autonomy with a promise of continued solidarity assistance. The union affiliated directly with the Christian international group, today known as the World Confederation of Labour (WCL). Structures were reformed, dismantling unions created in the mid-1940s solely for Africans and merging them as normal, mixed-race sections of the CSCC.

Socialist Trade Unionism Introduced

The Belgian socialist trade union, FGTB, began activities in the Congo section in July 1947 when it accepted the CGS and STICS as affiliated organisations. These loose ties were formally consolidated with the visit of an FGTB mission to the colony in April 1951 which fully integrated FGTB and CGS structures at the enterprise level. André Wyant, the CGS leader, was elected president of the FGTB's Belgian Congo/ Rwanda-Urundi federation. The following year, the union opened training schools for Congolese labour leaders in Léopoldville, Stanleyville and Elisabethville. FGTB remained an active defender of improved social and working conditions for workers in the colony and lobbied both in Brussels and in the Congo itself. However, unlike the CSCC, the FGTB insisted on the continuation of close links with its Congolese branch. Initially, the white leadership opposed the integration of African and European workers, claiming that Congolese were not yet prepared for trade unionism. Gradually, FGTB cadres accepted mergers



Marriage of Cyrille Adoula, leader of the FGTK (collectie J. De Cock)

across racial lines.

The FGTB local union remained small with some 3200 members in 1953. Leadership posts were exclusively held by Belgians. Identical to the CSCC, it had two private sector sections (African and European) and a mixed public sector union in the mid-1950s. Belgian dominance continued even in the late 1950s. At an ICFTU African conference, held during January 1957 in Accra (Ghana), FGTB leader Louis Major, representing the colonial union, was sharply criticised by the Nigerians who declared they would "*prefer the Congo delegates to be Africans in the future.*"

Trade Unionism Expands

In every possible way the Belgian colonial authorities continued to maintain absolute control over Congolese workers. Wages and working conditions were determined by centralised legislation, not through collective bargaining. Labour and local administrators retained power of intervention in disputes. The few existing trade unions, constrained by complex administrative requirements, had very little freedom of action. The movement's total membership was a mere 7000 to 7500 during the mid-1950s, growing to 11,200 in 1956. This represented a minuscule 1% of the total wage-earning population.

During the late 1950s, Belgian trade unions were increasingly critical of the continued restraint on freedom of association. It was Louis Major, serving in the Belgian Parliament as well as General Secretary of the FGTB, who proposed a decree (23 January 1957) which:

- granted trade union rights to both white and black workers in the Congo in both the public and private sectors;
- provided special trade union structures to black

and white civil servants but continued to deny their right to strike; and

- gave the freedom to join or organise trade unions, initially reserved to white workers, to their black counterparts.

This revision of the colonial restrictions on freedom of association ended racial discrimination, at least in theory, but it was not progressive when compared with the rest of Africa. The inhabitants of the Congo received the right to associate in order to defend their professional interests. However, this decree eased restrictions on trade unionism but failed to remove all barriers. To become a union member a worker had to have at least six years at school, had to be over eighteen years of age and have worked for at least three years. All political activities were banned. Government authorisation was required for a union to operate. Extremely elaborate procedures were instituted for collective bargaining and wage agreements. Strikes were permitted in the private sector but only after negotiations were exhausted. Government employees were forbidden to strike.

It should be noted that in Brazzaville, just across the Congo River from Léopoldville, African workers had enjoyed relatively complete freedom of association, granted by France some twelve years earlier. Inhabitants of the French colonies had also sent locally elected deputies to the National Assembly in Paris since 1945 as well as electing local territorial assemblies.

In industrial relations, as in politics, Belgium realised too late that it was necessary to prepare Africans for the future exercise of democratic responsibilities. A beginning had been made in 1946, immediately after the war, with the creation of consultative councils of African workers aimed at facilitating contacts between Africans and their employers and between the government and the workers. As in government, the existence of these consultative bodies only

aroused a desire for a more decisive voice in affairs that directly touched on workers' lives. The logical result was a demand for trade unions but this logical step was denied.

Three phases might be identified as characterising Congolese trade unionism prior to independence. At first the labour movement was merely a projection of Belgian unionism. Then, during 1955-1956, a desire for local autonomy arose and, at the end of the colonial system, began to penetrate the movement. Finally, once autonomy was won, trade unions expanded and began to take increased interest in pan-African activities.

Trade Unionism Transformed as Independence Nears

The January 1959 urban riots came as a complete surprise. An immediate reaction on the industrial relations front was the convocation of a 20 May 1959 national labour conference to consider a social pact. Until then, wage policy was tightly regulated. This meeting included mainly Belgian trade unions and major colonial employers. It was only at this late date that expatriate private industry even recognised the rights of local unions to organise and represent workers. Conference objectives included:

- recognition of the existence of trade unions by employers,
- an expression of this presence in social structures and institutions, and
- granting of Congolese employers autonomy from Belgium.

No Africans were asked to sign this ambiguous protocol. Even on the eve of independence, Europeans sought to maintain the paternalistic structures that had shaped four decades of colonial rule. A major accomplishment of this meeting was to finally shame Belgian unions

into granting long overdue full responsibility to Congolese labour leaders.

The African civil servant group, APIC, changed its name into Alliance des Prolétaires Indigènes du Congo, keeping the APIC initials. It was one of the most active and influential labour groups in the late 1950s. However, its action became increasingly politicised as union leaders were drawn into senior political and administrative leadership posts and dropped out of union responsibilities.

In November 1959, the CSCC met in Léopoldville to elect Jean Bruck as its General Secretary and André Bo-Boliko as Administrative Secretary. Congolese cadres were named as the union's provincial secretaries. European members were grouped in a special section, the Union des Cadres et Agents Métropolitains (UCAM). Finally, on 6 April 1960, the union took the name Union des Travailleurs Congolais (UTC) with Bo-Boliko as General Secretary. In the early 1960s, the UTC was clearly the largest and most dynamic Congolese trade union with some 65,369 dues-paying members and 300,000 sympathisers. Its leaders were generally well trained and effective organisers. The union had deep roots throughout the country and distributed 90,000 copies of its multi-language bulletin.

FGTB's leadership became more responsive to the needs of local workers as the date of independence neared. At the union's November 1959 congress in Belgium, there was heated criticism of continued total control of the labour movement from Brussels. Congolese delegate, Cyrille Adoula, attacked excess centralisation and claimed that this organic dependence on the Belgian FGTB was harmed union organising in the Congo. Adoula asked that FGTB shift control of the colonial branch into African hands. This proposal received strong support. An autonomous union, the Fédération Générale

Table: Congelese workers and Trade Unionists

	POPULATION (MILLIONS)	WAGE EARNERS*	UNION MEMBERS	WORKERS ORGANISED
1915		37,368		
1920		125,120		
1925		292,000		
1930		399,144		
1935	9.6	377,531		<1 %
1940		536,055		
1945	10.7 (1946)	701,101	3500 (1948)	<1 %
1950	11.1	862,515 (1949)	5179	<1 %
1955	12.6	1,183,000	6160	<1 %
1958	13.5	831,600	11,200 (1956)	1.5%
1960	14.0	770,000	74,500 (1961)	10 %
1964	16.3	700,000	151,445	22 %
1967		796,800	250,000	32 %
1970	20.7	760,000	722,890	95 %

* wage earners: civil service, para-state and private enterprises

des Travailleurs du Kongo (FGTK) emerged linking two geographic federations, changing its name just four days after the CSCC. One was led by Cyrille Adoula (Léopoldville/Stanleyville/Coquilhatville) and the other by Raphaël Bintou (Katanga/Kivu/Kassaï). The failure of the two senior leaders to co-operate both split and seriously weakened the union at this critical period. FGTK's strength was concentrated in the larger urban areas. In 1961 it had an estimated 5000 members but claimed 70,000 (including sympathisers) in 1964. On the international level, it directly affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in April 1960, a move which reportedly caused some tension with the FGFB leadership which, until then, had assured international links.

Trade Unions, Political Parties and Independence

With the long delayed birth of a political party system in the Congo, trade unionism was suddenly transformed. The rapid emergence of numerous, mainly regional and ethnically-based political parties to contest elections at the date of independence neared, led to the creation of splinter groups of workers. These divisions were sponsored by the politicians to gain support from the influential urban worker population. One such group claiming status as a trade union was the communist Union Nationale des Travailleurs Congolais (UNTC), founded in April 1959. It never achieved more than a marginal existence.

Patrice Lumumba founded his own labour movement in 1958, the Syndicat National des Travailleurs Congolais (SNTC), to serve as a labour arm of his Mouvement National



Anti-Lumumba manifestation organised by Abako in August 1960

Congolais (MNC) political party. The SNTC aimed at replacing all the other trade unions which, it claimed, were merely foreign imports. Alphonse Roger Kithima, a MNC Political Bureau member, was named General Secretary. Kithima split with Lumumba in 1960 to devote himself entirely to trade union work. Now free of party restraints, he continued attempts to unify the entire Congolese labour movement, reportedly with significant ICFTU assistance. Independence from Belgium came almost as a surprise for both the Belgians and Congolese. There was no timetable and even the most extreme nationalists had spoken in terms of a thirty-year plan which would have postponed full independence to 1986! No one on the Belgian side seemed to have envisaged a time when final responsibility for the Congo would be out of the Europeans' hands. As a result, a horizontal rather than a vertical system of development had developed, aimed at slowly raising the living standards and education of the whole population rather than quickly forming a small elite to which power might be transferred, as done by France. Belgium intended that the Africans should take responsibility slowly and gradually from the bottom up and that, in the meantime, the top positions in all sections of society should be held by Europeans.

It was the 4 January 1959 explosion of violent riots in Léopoldville that forced Belgium to rethink its long stagnant colonial policy. Over 200 people lost their lives when the Force Publique opened fire on the crowd of demonstrators. Even as late as December 1959, in the top four civil service grades 9835 posts were held by Belgians while the Congolese had only 649.

Events moved quickly towards full independence for a woefully unprepared Belgian Congo. The labour movement was immediately

perceived by the various political parties as an ideal partner in the struggle for political emancipation from Belgium. Well before political parties were officially created, the trade unions played a crucial rôle in training local cadres, opening the eyes of many future leaders to the structures and dynamics of social and political action. The early struggles of the colonial trade unions closely paralleled those faced in later years by the political parties. Trade unions had been forbidden to participate in any political activities by the 27 January 1957 decree but they easily avoided this obstacle through participation in the various local cultural movements. They served as quasi-political bodies issuing and supporting manifestos and helping to raise African political consciousness among the urban population. Once political parties were formally permitted, a large number of active and former trade union cadres took senior positions, especially those from the APIC ranks. Many other unionists served as advisors to the newly formed political groups.

Many of the early trade union leaders emerged as key figures in the newly formed political parties of the late 1950s. They included APIC cadres Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, Alfred Pinzi, Joseph Yumbu Lemba and Cléophas Kamitatu. FGTK's Cyrille Adoula and Alphonse Roger Kithima of SNTC were also political activists.

Once the final decision was made to grant full independence, the colony's election followed in May 1960. There were over 100 competing political parties. Patrice Lumumba's MNC won the most seats, but these represented only about a third of the Parliament. He was named Prime Minister with Joseph Kasa-Vubu (Abako) as the nation's first President.

Search for Trade Union Unity

The early years of independence were chaotic and undermined by a deeply troubled political environment. A divided labour movement, caught between political turmoil and their members' worsening situation, tried desperately to shape an effective policy. Shifting alliances among the diverse political parties contributed to anarchy which continually undermined attempts to promote development of a stable civil society.

The major theme which shaped Congolese trade unionism during the years following independence was the attempt to forge labour movement unity. In October 1960, SNTC leader Kithima published a booklet, *La doctrine générale du syndicalisme congolais*. He urged all unions to merge and proposed a programme to democratise trade union structures and a detribalisation of the masses. There were suspicions of political motives. Kithima's brother in law was ex-FGTK leader Cyrille Adoula who was deeply involved in party politics. Both were MNC party cadres. The following year, in August 1961, the creation of the Confédération des Syndicats Libres du Congo (CSLC) was announced. It initially grouped APIC, SNTC, FGTK and several smaller unions along with the Syndicat National des Enseignants du Congo (Syneco). This new confederation was the first step in realising Kithima's goal of unity. There were reports that this initiative was assisted by the American AFL-CIO union during visits of Irving Brown in the early 1960s and, to a lesser extent, from Germany. Given its strategic location in Africa, manipulating Congolese politics and trade unionism was a major focus for both sides of the Cold War. While the merger did unite a number of Congolese trade unions, it proved to be an unstable coalition. First, it failed to include the

powerful UTC Christian faction. UTC leader Bo-Boliko explained that he did not see the need merely "to create unity for unity's sake." On 7 August 1961 the CSLC announced a provisional executive board. Ten days later, the FGTK declared that it intended to pursue its own political agenda outside the new confederation and, early in 1962, denounced the protocol of unity with CSLC. Kithima charged that this was due "to Belgian pressure". The new union claimed to represent 100,000 workers but this was generally believed to be an overly inflated figure. A reliable estimate at the time put the membership closer to 9000! Like the FGTK, CSLC also affiliated with the Brussels-based ICFTU international labour body, in spite of reported opposition from the Belgian FGTB. Several smaller trade unions maintained autonomy. Force Ouvrière du Congo, created in 1959 by the Abako political party, was limited to the Bas-Congo region and soon dissolved. The Confédération Générale des Travailleurs du Congo (CGTC) was formed in November 1961. It was aided by the French CGT and closely identified with Antoine Gizenga's Parti Lumumbiste Unifié (PALU). Proclaiming a revolutionary ideology, it affiliated with the pro-communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). The CGTC programme sought "the unity of the Congolese workers [...] as an urgent necessity." Judged subversive by the authorities, it was only after International Labour Organization intervention that it was granted formal recognition in September 1964. However, the union never became a significant force. At least twelve other splinter unions were active at this time.

During the period immediately following independence from Belgium the Congo's unions had an estimated dues-paying membership of only 74,500 workers, representing under 10% of the roughly 770,000 wage earners. At

the same period, in Congo-Brazzaville across the river, some 28% of the workers were organised and in nearby Cameroon 26%.

The new Congolese government inherited the restrictive, paternalistic policies that had shaped many decades of colonial rule. In industrial relations there was a long tradition of administrative controls and restrictions. The small African elite was ill prepared to take over responsibilities. No clear policies were articulated by the deeply split trade union federations concerning how to serve as a social partner with either the employers or the new government.

The first years of the Congo's independence were marked by social and economic instability resulting from political chaos. Patrice Lumumba's brief government ended with his dismissal and eventual murder. Ex-labour leader Cyrille Adoula had a longer term in office, from September 1961 to June 1964, but prices on basic commodities rose some 400% with wages failing to keep pace. Protesting the collapse of workers' purchasing power led to strikes, demonstrations and frequent arrests of union leaders. There was a state of permanent tension between the labour movement and the government(s). UTC led a march of unemployed on the Parliament in mid-August 1960, presumably as part of the anti-Lumumba campaign.

While the number of contradictions and divisions among the politicians threatened the Congo's future, the trade unions moved slowly towards unity. In January 1962, a number of Africa's labour movements met in Dakar (Senegal) to create the African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC). This 41-member body of the continent's moderate unions, including the UTC, CSLC and FGTK. ATUC insisted that country affiliates unite to form single national centres. Upon returning home, the three Congolese unions formed an 'Inter-syndicat' in September to promote unity of

action before merging. This body had no formal structure and only functioned as a loose coordinating forum. However, it managed to prepare frequent joint policy statements, often sharply critical of the government. Officially, objectives included:

- humanising government relations with unions to promoting better social policies,
- harmonising often difficult relations between trade unions and employers, and
- preparing a unity congress within 18 months after signing a charter.

The nation's crisis worsened. Massive unemployment created in the early 1960s was unparalleled. By 1962 estimated unemployment had risen from 29% to 58% of the wage earning population. Combined with rapid, uncontrolled population growth in the cities, excessive inflation and a drastic loss of workers' purchasing power was producing a social powder keg.

In scathing communiqués, the unions accused the politicians of wasting public funds, unjustified expenses producing chronic budget deficits, loss of investments, collapse of production, continual currency devaluation, erosion of the workers' purchasing power, enrichment of a parasite elite at the expense of the peasant and worker majority. Between 1960 and 1968 real wages declined by 55%. This conflict reached a critical stage on 29 March 1962 with the arrest of UTC leader Bo-Boliko followed by a general strike and, on 24 October 1963, with the jailing of leaders of all three major unions.

Adding to the growing level of confusion, the number of provinces were expanded from 6 to 21 in 1962, further destabilising the civil service. Rivalries between a growing number of political parties, and the failed secession of Katanga and Sud-Kasaï provinces shook the Congo's cohesion. The final blow was a savage rebellion

beginning in January 1964 in the Kwilu region which spread throughout the country. It made spectacular progress in the eastern Congo but began to wane in September with the capture of Kisangani, capital of 'Lumumbism.' The military, strengthened by its role in suppressing the rebels, seized control of the country in November 1965, bringing General Joseph Mobutu to power.

Death of Democratic Trade Unionism

The Congo labour movement's attempt to democratically forge unity was soon eclipsed by political forces. A December 1966 seminar of the pro-Mobutu Corps des Volontaires de la République "recommended" the creation of a unified labour movement in the Congo free from all external influence, claiming that "the trade unions are similar to the failed political parties." The three national centres vigorously opposed this suggestion. However, the grasp of dictatorial rule was tightening on all elements of civil society. An ordinance of 15 February 1966 suspended the right to strike.

In May 1967 Mobutu consolidated his power base, creating the Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR) political party and dissolving all others. Official policy, defined in the MPR's N'sele Manifesto, "[...] invited all workers of the agricultural, industrial and commercial sectors, intellectual and manual, to trade union integration in unity."

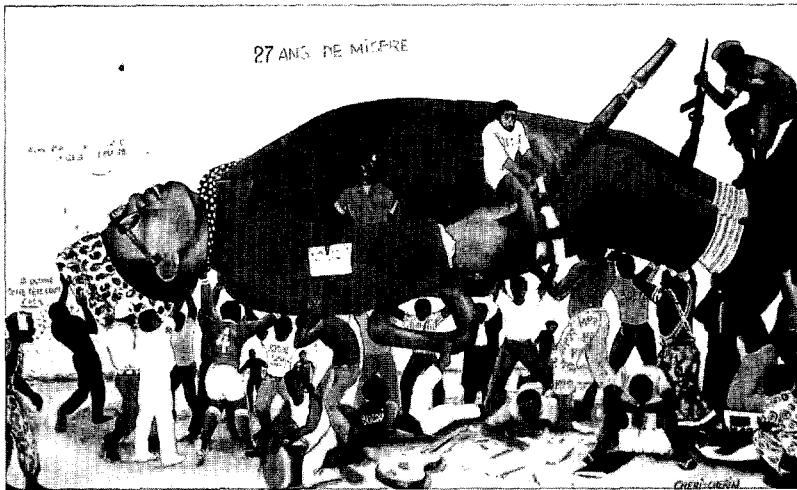
The balance of power existing among the various components of the labour movement at this period can best be evaluated from social election data and representation in joint bodies. During 1965 trade union shop stewards elections took place throughout the country. There were 151,445 private sector workers eligible to vote. The UTC received 76,876 (63.9%), CSLC

20,484 (mostly from Kinshasa and Cuvette-Centrale/Mbandaka) (17%), FGTK 7458 (almost all from Sud-Kasaï) (6.2%) and others 3261 (2.7%). The same year, UTC claimed a total of 125,000 members a likely figure, given that the election figures represented only larger, private enterprises. The Conseil National des Syndicats du Congo (CNSC), formed by members of the Intersyndicat in March 1967, was made up of seven UTC delegates, five CSLC and three FGTK. Thus, UTC represented roughly 50-60%, CSLC 20-25%, FGTK 15-20% and splinter groups 5% of the Congo's organised workers, estimated at 250,000 by the mid-1960s.

Union consolidation and control, as 'suggested' by President Mobutu, was underway. Ten small splinter unions, outside the Intersyndicat or CNSC merged in the Syndicat Unifié du Congo during February 1967.

Finally, a 21 June 1967 conference in Kinshasa was attended by 400 delegates. Representation was apportioned according to membership: UTC 180 (45%), FGTK 80 (20%), CSLC 110 (27%) and SUC 30 (8%). They examined the possibilities of organic unity among all workers' organisations and agreed to form new single national centre, the Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Congo (UNTC).

UNTC's first General Secretary was UTC leader André Bo-Boliko who left the movement in 1970 when elected to Parliament. His assistants were Thomas Booka of CSLC, Raphaël Bintou from FGTK and Victor Beleke, a senior UTC cadre. At last the Congolese labour movement was united but the price it paid was to forfeit freedom. Shortly after the creation of UNTC, a subtle process of co-optation by the MPR gradually sapped any spirit of autonomy. Ex-CSLC leader Kithima became Permanent Secretary of the MPR Political Bureau, Bintou and Bo-Boliko received



Only ten years after winning the freedom to organise from the colonial authorities, the Congo's trade unionists were condemned to nearly a quarter century of domination by Mobutu's MPR (collection E. Matthijs)

lucrative positions on the GECOMIN Administrative Council. Those accepting the MPR's iron grip on the country were rewarded with political and party posts, company directorships, diplomatic and ministerial assignments and even substantial property following the massive 1987 privatisation of state property initially confiscated from foreigners during the 1973 'Zairianisation' exercise.

Leftist CGTC opposition to the forced merger was quickly eliminated with the November 1966 arrest of the union's three senior leaders, accused of being "[...] former students of communist indoctrination centres of subversion techniques and clandestine struggle with activities programmed by communist countries." After being released from prison in 1967, the three fled to Brazzaville.

Has Congolese Trade Unionism a Future?

Only ten years after winning the freedom to organise from the colonial authorities, the Congo's trade unionists were condemned to nearly a quarter century of domination by

Mobutu's MPR. The UNTC, which became UNTZa in 1971, was not inactive and negotiated hundreds of collective agreements, organised thousands of workshops and seminars and built an extensive health and social service network for its members. However, the price it was required to pay was absolute loyalty to an increasingly corrupt and inefficient political system. Certain union leaders were richly rewarded, while dissenters were harshly punished. The mass of workers gradually lost interest in this hollow, undemocratic facade of a labour movement.

Today, the trade union reality in the Congo is again one of weak, splintered organisations unable to represent workers' interests effectively in confronting the autocratic, unstable Kabila government and the economic chaos resulting from years of war and neglect. Salaries go unpaid for years, union leaders who protest are summarily arrested and the movement is far less united today than it was in 1960.

As discussed above, colonial unions in the Congo got off to a very slow start having organised only 1% of the workforce by the mid-1950s. They remained dominated by pa-

paternalistic Belgian labour organisations up to independence and, with the partial exception of the CSCC/UTC, sorely lacked adequate human and material resources. Like the Congolese political parties, unions were ill prepared to face up to the harsh realities brought on by the precipitous rush to independence. Many of labour's best cadres were siphoned off into political posts. The political vacuum of the early 1960s forced the movement to take strong positions to defend their members deteriorating working conditions. Their short-term success in opposing the politicians' failure revealed labour's potential power as a rallying point for civil society. This latent strength was not overlooked by General Mobutu who set about crushing union freedom upon coming to power. Can an effective labour movement emerge from the wreckage of the Congo's socio-political structures? Past experience clearly shows that paternalism and dependence on external resources lead only to weakness. The labour movement needs to rebuild itself from the grassroots, training cadres at all levels with an insistence on democratic and transparent structures. It must gain such inner strength if it is to avoid the fatal manipulation of politicians and other false friends. There must be a renewed emphasis on providing basic services to members - collective bargaining, training, grievance resolution and social protection - in order to freely earn workers' loyalties as opposed to the forced membership imposed by the MPR party.

The key to future strength is unity, forging a new spirit of worker solidarity in a country so long divided by ethnic, religious, political and personal rivalries. A united labour movement was almost achieved in 1963-1964 but was pre-empted by Mobutu. It is now time for the fragments of the existing Congolese trade unions to transcend their differences and return

to the principle "In unity there is strength." A sincere attempt to reunite the workers on a democratic basis could provide the much needed catalyst for a civil society in the Congo needed as a counter weight to political anarchy. The opportunity exists and the trade unions must be encouraged to take advantage of this while they still can.

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