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# Strengths and Weaknesses of African Trade Unions in the Neoliberal Period with a Sierra Leone Case Study

Mark McQuinn\*

pp. 111-129

## Introduction

The majority of African trade unions face substantive hindrances in their efforts to defend the interests of labour. The cementing of neoliberal policies across Africa from the latter half of the 1980s (Bond, 2014, Harrison, 2010, Ferguson, 2007) has entailed the engendering by multilateral and bilateral Western donors of market-led economic development. A fall in trade union membership has occurred in a considerable number of countries, since anti-union attitudes and practices are common in many of the private sector firms that have replaced state-owned enterprises<sup>1</sup> (Chinguno, Mereki and Mutyanda, 2015, Yaw Baah and Jauch, 2009). Trade unions have, for the most part, found it difficult to establish a solid financial base and clear values-driven policies and practices in the face of these changes. While acknowledging the weaknesses of African trade unions at present, it is argued in this article that they also have strengths, as well as points of leverage in the war of position<sup>2</sup> with states and representatives of capital, which can be utilised to increase their capacity to defend the interests of labour. This position is advanced through an assessment of the weaknesses and strengths of trade unions continent-wide, which are then illustrated by a Sierra Leone case study, focusing on the national federation - the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) and the biggest trade union in the country - the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU). Both the overview of the general state of trade unions and the case study analysis highlight the central point that research on the African labour movement, which focuses solely on its deficiencies provide only a partial view. The position of trade unions differs across countries and is fluid. African trade unions have various forms of power resources, which many have utilised effectively to defend the interests of labour, since the imposition during the 1980s of neoliberal economic policies.

\* School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

1 State-owned enterprises are defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2015: 14) as 'any corporate entity recognised by national law, as an enterprise, and in which the state exercises ownership should be considered as an SOE. This includes joint stock companies, limited liability companies and partnerships limited by shares.'

2 The term 'war of position' is used in the article to characterise the struggle for ideological influence and power between trade unions (operating in the civil society sphere) and the state. It draws on the use of the term by Gramsci (2011), though this is not to claim he was its originator.

The Power Resources Approach (PRA), which emphasises the importance of agency when assessing the role of trade unions, is used as a conceptual framework in this article.

This article begins with a brief outline of the Power Resources Approach. In the second section, an overview is undertaken of the general weaknesses of African trade unions as representatives of the workforce. The third section summarises strengths of African trade unions and outlines two points of leverage they have in contestations with capital. The overviews in sections two and three reveal the importance of understanding the structures within which African trade unions exercise agency. The fourth section provides a synopsis of the challenges facing the Sierra Leonean labour movement, centring on the difficulties it has encountered in trying to rebuild since the end of the civil war in 2002. The current positions of the SLLC and the SLTU are summarised. Primary evidence - in the form of questionnaires and face-to-face interviews - is used to provide examples of the weaknesses and the strengths of the SLLC and the SLTU. The final section outlines the main findings from the examination of the position of the Sierra Leonean trade union movement and discusses some of its options in defending labour interests.

## The Power Resources Approach

The PRA gained traction in the early 2000s, influenced by the work of Wright (2000) and Silver (2016, 2008). The PRA has challenged the large body of research that emphasises the deterioration in the power and influence of trade union movements globally since the 1980s, based on general trends. Instead, the PRA stresses the significance of agency by focusing on the strategic choices trade unions make in particular contexts, as they respond to the rapid changes in capital-labour relations that have occurred since the rise to global prominence of neoliberal economic policies (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018).

Two types of labour power are at the heart of the PRA. First, structural power can be identified, which derives from *'the location of workers within the economic system'* (Wright, 2000: 962). Structural power is subdivided into types, categorised by Silver (2008) as workplace and marketplace bargaining power. Workplace bargaining power depends on the strategic location of employees in the production process and is mobilised by a willingness to take industrial action. Marketplace bargaining power is determined by how tight or slack the labour market is and the scarcity of the skills possessed by groups of workers or individuals in production processes. Second, associational power, which arises from the organisational ability of workers, is a key part of the PRA. Wright (2000: 962) defines associational power as *'the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers'*.

As research based on the PRA has developed, other types of trade union power resources have been delineated.<sup>3</sup> Two of these are utilised in this article when analysing the power resources available to the Sierra Leone trade union movement. First, unions possess degrees of institutional power, which derives from legislation relating to labour, along with the legal institutional framework. This form of power is closely linked to associational capacity and has historically been *'embedded in state legal frameworks that guaranteed the right to form trade unions'* (Silver, 2008: 14). Second, unions have various levels of societal power, which gives rise to *'latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society's support for trade union demands'* (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018: 122).

3 For an overview of different types of trade union power resources, see Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster (2018).

The ways in which African trade unions exert agency through using power resources is important to analyse. It is, however, necessary to situate any examination of agency within its structural context. The meaning of structure is contested, thus, providing an analytically rigorous definition is difficult.<sup>4</sup> In this article, structure is defined the '*pattern or framework of relationships between social institutions, such as markets, families, classes and political factions. It includes rules of behaviour associated, for example, with moral norms and hierarchies*' (Thomas and Allen, 2002: 189). The core aim of the PRA is '*to analyse the spaces of action of trade unions and employees under given circumstances*' (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018: 116). In the following section, therefore, significant circumstances that frame the context in which African trade unions exercise agency are outlined.

## Overview of the Weaknesses of African Trade Unions

Studies focusing on the overall shortcomings of African trade unions since the 1980s emphasise five interrelated concerns, which will be examined in turn: weak organisational ability, lack of financial capacity, a misplaced focus on representing the interests of workers in the formal sector, the absence of effective central bargaining units and the failure of labour legislation to protect the rights of workers. The first four of these drawbacks depict deficiencies in associational power. The final weakness summarised reveals a dearth of institutional power.

First, several analysts emphasise the problem of organisational decline among African trade union movements. For Schillinger (2005: 1), the ability of unions to influence the terms and conditions of employment of workers is '*weak*' in the neoliberal period. Lambert (2002: 186) concurs, arguing that initiatives by trade unions to represent members effectively have not had any '*significant impact or attract [ed] citizens into their ranks.*' Data on the South African labour movement provides an example of the salience of this point, revealing that trade union membership declined from 3.5 million in 2006 to 2.9 million in 2014 (Lefifi and Biyase, 2014). The difficulties involved in recruiting females into trade unions are of particular concern. While there has been an increasing focus on the need to attract female members, particularly vulnerable workers in the informal sector, this has been '*in many cases more talk than action*' (Minter, 2014: 12). Trade unions also face problems in engaging the rising youth population of the continent. Schwab (2015) points out that the number of sub-Saharan Africans reaching working age will exceed that of the rest of the world by 2035. It is important for labour associations to recruit substantively from the younger age range of this group, given their increasing numbers. This is a pressing matter since young people '*too frequently face difficulty in finding their place in trade union structures and activities*' (International Trade Union Confederation (n.d.).

Second, organisational frailty among African trade unions is inextricably intertwined with the issue of funding. A number of studies point out that trade unions often lack a solid financial base (McQuinn, forthcoming, Otoo and Osei-Boateng, 2012).

Trade unions, therefore, usually do not have modern facilities and cannot afford to employ suitably qualified staff, who could conduct thoroughgoing research on key issues affecting the workforce. Consequently, state officials are able to dismiss trade union perspectives as lacking evidence-based credibility. Such derisive attitudes have been taken

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lacroix (2012) for a discussion of definitions and meanings of structure and agency.

further in Zimbabwe, Benin and Nigeria, where governments have demonised trade unions, claiming that they are against the economic development of the state (International Trade Union Confederation, 2017).

A third issue for African trade unions is their focus on representing a shrinking number of formal sector workers. Many unions depend substantively for funding on dues paid by the formal sector. This has implications which extend beyond the financial. Jauch (2010: 184), for example, outlines how trade unions in Namibia concentrate on organising among formal sector workers with permanent jobs and *'thus represent only a section of the working class.'* Thomas (1995: 239) contends that their continuing concentration on representing workers in the formal sector has *'destroyed any possibility of the trade union movement's acting as a stable institution in labour-market development and transformation.'* The need for trade union movements to engage with workers outside the formal sector is urgent, since in Africa *'nearly all new jobs are being created in the informal economy where earnings are low'* (Otoo and Osei-Boateng, 2012: 25). In addition, Schneider (2012) estimates that 37.6 % of total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Sub-Saharan Africa is derived from work in the informal economy.

Fourth, studies argue that labour movements have difficulty in representing workers effectively due to the absence of a centralised and structured collective bargaining environment in Africa (International Labour Organisation, 2016; Baskin, 2000). This is a significant individual aspect of weak organisational capacity on the part of unions. For example, the lack of a collective bargaining unit, staffed by well-trained officials, has hampered the work of the Tanzanian trade union movement, since the return (in the 1990s) to multi-party liberal democracy and the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in the country (McQuinn, 2012).

Fifth, the enforcement of legislation protecting trade unions and labour rights is weak in a number of African countries. Laws recognising the right of workers to unionise exist widely across the continent, however, Otoo (2012) makes the point that governments - driven by the need to attract capital from domestic and foreign investors - are in many cases reluctant to enforce these pieces of legislation. Barya (2010: 102) provides support for this perspective, arguing that the Ugandan government has *'failed to enforce the laws on trade union recognition and the minimum wage.'*

Additionally, in the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Somalia, Burundi, South Sudan and Sudan, the rule of law has broken down to the point where there is no guarantee of labour rights (International Trade Union Confederation, 2017). In short, the institutional power of many African trade unions is lacking, not through the absence of a legislative framework, but because of weak enforcement of labour laws.

## Overview of the Strengths of African Trade Unions and Points of Leverage

Whilst the problems outlined above are significant, other analyses have pointed to an inevitable process of change in the role of trade unions, rather than deterioration, following the imposition of neoliberal policies in Africa. These studies contend that trade unions can effectively represent the interests of labour and contribute to the spread of democratic processes in the wider society. This body of research uses as evidential support, first, the significant size of trade union membership across the continent and second, examples of successful actions in defence of the rights of workers. Both of these strengths

show that African trade unions are capable of exhibiting a degree of associational power, though clearly context specificity is important and the situation varies markedly across countries.

First, according to Kraus (2007), trade unions remain important, as they are the largest organisations that represent the working class in Africa. This is one of the reasons why Kester (2007: 3) argues that African trade unions are '*ideally placed to contribute to the democratisation of the economy.*' Recent and accurate figures on trade union membership density in Africa are scarce. Research for the International Labour Organisation by Hayter and Stoevska (2011) shows that trade union membership among waged and salaried workers is 70 % in Kenya, 46.8 % in Sierra Leone, 39.8 % in South Africa and between 20 and 30 % in Egypt, Malawi and Mauritius.

Trade union membership as a proportion of all employment (total labour union density) is lower: 24.9 % in South Africa, 16.1 % in Egypt and 14.8 % in Mauritius being the highest figures (ibid). Most of these statistics are taken from surveys conducted between 2005 and 2010, revealing the need for new research on the issue. However, while the figures can be criticised as outdated and of questionable accuracy, they provide at least some support for the argument of Kraus that trade union membership in Africa is quantitatively significant. This point can be illustrated by comparisons with labour density in other parts of the world. Total labour density in 2017 was 18.7 % in New Zealand, 12.5 % in Mexico and 10.3 % in the US (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017b).

Second, a number of studies draw on the work of African labour organisations in opposing Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), based on imposing neoliberal policy prescriptions, to argue that trade unions can play a vibrant role in defending the interests of labour during the contemporary period. Konings (2011), for example, outlines the concerted opposition to the imposition of SAPs, organised by trade unions in Zambia, Ghana and Nigeria. Moreover, Ndiaye's (2010) study of trade unions in Senegal shows how their resistance to SAPs gradually increased in effectiveness.

It was limited during the 1980s, but became markedly more successful in the 1990s, through the formation of inter-union alliances and the promotion of a '*wider social dialogue that [made] them less vulnerable to unilateral manipulation by the state*' (Ndiaye, 2010: 34). Senegalese unions, thus, built societal power to increase the effectiveness of their campaign. Furthermore, recent research on nine African countries<sup>5</sup> concludes that trade unions have '*built powerful campaigns advocating decent work for all [and] produced pro-poor alternatives for sustainable development*' (Minter, 2014: 6).

In addition to these merits, trade unions have points of leverage in their war of position with the state and representatives of capital. First, income inequality in Africa is rising (Christian Aid, 2014), which provides an opportunity for trade unions to exercise agency in taking assertive stances on behalf of members.

Six out of the ten most unequal countries globally in terms of income distribution in 2010 were in sub-Saharan Africa (African Development Bank, 2012). Moreover, the number of extremely poor people residing in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 205 million thirty years ago to 414 million in 2010. For Bond (2014), this is leading to a rise in working class militancy in the form of strikes and other types of protests. Trade unions could, therefore, increase their societal power by robustly criticising government policies that are demon-

5 The nine countries are Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Kenya.

strably exacerbating income inequalities, leaving large numbers in poverty. If they do not critique such policies and formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse, trade unions risk losing support from members and credibility with the wider workforce.

Second, trade unions could increase their societal power through questioning the rhetoric, trumpeted by African governments, of the need to protect the 'national interest'. In the immediate post-independence period, many African governments used the argument that trade unions needed to subordinate their 'narrow' sectional struggles to the wider endeavour of overcoming the legacies of colonial repression. When unions pressed for improvements in the terms and conditions of members, they were accused of being selfish representatives of a labour aristocracy. This narrative was employed to justify anti-union legislation and the use of coercive powers against labour movement leaders, including imprisonment and exile.

Former President Nyerere, for example, used this perspective in disputes with the labour movement after Tanzania achieved independence from Britain in 1961. Nyerere (1976: 23) argued the first task of newly independent African governments was to generate economic development, which *'calls for the maximum united effort by the whole country if it is to succeed. There can be no room for differences or division'*. When trade unions pressed for the enhancement of the terms and conditions of members soon after independence, they were accused of greed and coerced to the point where they became quasi-governmental organisations. A number of trade union leaders were co-opted, imprisoned or exiled (McQuinn, 2012). This narrative continues, with President, John Magafuli, telling senior officials of the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA) at a formal meeting in 2017 that they *'should make [sic] national interests come before theirs'* (Azania Post, 2017).

However, the increasing pace and depth of neoliberal penetration in Africa is opening up space for trade unions to refute the argument of governments that they need to put the 'national interest' above the claims of labour associations (Buhlungu, 2010). The dominant neoliberal model prioritises the attraction of inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Africa. FDI in profitable economic sectors is often based on contractual agreements that lack transparency and impose onerous terms and conditions of work, thus, generating fractious labour relations. Consequently, trade unions have the opportunity to spotlight negative aspects of an over-reliance on this policy plank. For Laryea (2011: 119), in *'an environment of strong competition for foreign investments in the 1980s and 1990s, most African countries ended up granting wide-ranging tax concessions and excessive incentives to foreign investors that left them with little control over or benefit from the activities of foreign investors.'* Furthermore, the profits that have been acquired by African governments from foreign investments have not always been used effectively for the public good. Brautigam (2017: 168) makes the point that FDI can generate new skills and technology if the state provides a *'supportive policy environment'*, since local capitalists often lack access to transnational networks of capital, markets and credit. Given this situation, unions could enhance their societal power by pressuring states not to accept FDI on terms which exploits the indigenous workforce, appropriates national assets and Unions could set out the case for contracts between African governments and foreign investors to be transparent and to include provisions for skills and technology transfer to the indigenous workforce.

In tandem with the formulation of a counter-hegemonic discourse, unions also have the chance to take a more active role in coordinating and supporting labour disputes. In response to rising economic disparities, unclear contractual agreements with foreign direct



investors and government failures to invest in public goods, there have been an increasing number of strikes and demonstrations by workers in Africa. Bond (2014: 1) points out that globally in 2013, Africa's 'labour activists [were] easily the most militant even if not yet the most effective.' Kamau (2012) regards the rise in strikes in Africa as a wake-up call for governments. It could equally be argued that this increase is a wake-up call for the continent's trade unions. If trade unions play a conspicuous role in such disputes, demonstrating leadership qualities, organisational ability and offer a clear vision, they could enhance societal power. If they fail in this, their relevance as representatives of the workforce in Africa is likely to be fundamentally questioned (Kalusopa, Otoo and Shindondola-Mote, 2012).

This analysis shows that there are negative and positive aspects of African trade unions as representatives of the interests of labour. In order to overcome the drawbacks and to capitalise on the strengths, labour organisations need to develop a deeper and broader knowledge base.

However, the majority of trade unions lack associational power, through shortage of finance and modern facilities at offices that could be used to provide training for officials, improve facilities and fund research on key labour issues. Moreover, most union officials are too pressed for time, dealing with numerous practical issues, to reflect profoundly on strategic policies and practices. The situation varies across the continent in relation to these circumstances. Thus, to provide more context-specific detail relating to the weaknesses and strengths of African trade unions, the work of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) and the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) since the end of the civil war in 2002 is discussed in the following section.

### Case Study: Trade Unions in Sierra Leone in the Neoliberal Period

Following the cessation of the civil war, trade unions have engaged in a slow process of rebuilding - literally in one sense, since the head office of the SLLC in Freetown was destroyed during the conflict. At the coordinating body for trade unions, the SLLC faces the problem of how to form a coherent ideology for labour in a period dominated by neoliberal policy prescriptions promulgated by influential donors, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Harris, 2013; Williams and Young, 2012).

The poverty headcount in the country is 52.9 % (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2014). Moreover, the government is heavily dependent on foreign aid. In 2015 the total amount of Official Development Assistance (ODA) was more than double the annual budget of the government (Sisay, 2017). In 2016 aid from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD alone, amounted to 21.1 % of Sierra Leone's Gross National Income (GNI) (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017a).

Analyses of labour organisations in the neoliberal period depict a 'bleak scenario' (Stirling, 2011: 32) for them, pointing out that they are 'severely under-resourced' (Stirling, 2013: 547). Nonetheless, these assessments also outline the importance of trade unions as membership bodies within the associational sphere, which are well placed to pressure the government to formulate, implement and regulate legislation ensuring the basic rights of workers. Trade unions in Sierra Leone have strengths, as well as shortcomings, in the contemporary period, as the analyses below of the situations of the SLLC and SLTU reveal.

## Methodology

The discussion in the following section is based on primary research, undertaken from 2012 to 2017 in the form of semi-structured questionnaires and standardised open-ended interviews. Officials from the SLLC and the SLTU were asked to complete questionnaires, focusing on the weaknesses and strengths of their organisations. Following this, interviews were undertaken with the same officials, aimed at gaining deeper insights into the weaknesses and strengths of the trade union movement. The assessments of the situations of the SLLC and SLTU by their officials are examined in relation to their correspondence to the weaknesses and strengths of African trade unions, identified in sections two and three above. Details of the interviews are provided in a numbered list in Appendix A. The interviews are cited in-text by numbers, which correspond to the list in Appendix A.

## Overviews of the SLLC and the SLTU

Twenty-three formal sector and ten informal sector trade unions are currently affiliated to the SLLC, which does not have fully accurate and complete membership figures, as comprehensive data has been difficult to gather after records were destroyed during the civil war. In an interview, a SLLC official produced a document showing that the organisation represents in total 470,484 members - 63,534 from the formal sector and 406,950 from the informal sector (Interview 6).<sup>6</sup> The Ebola outbreak in 2014 and the mudslide in Freetown in 2017 have added to existing pressures on the SLLC. Trade union members lost their lives as a result of these two events and the federation has struggled to coordinate assistance to families who suffered bereavements, as well as members whose livelihoods were destroyed.

The SLLC records the SLTU membership as 36,000 (see Appendix B). However, according to an official, it is always difficult to give an exact membership number for the SLTU, as teachers continually join and leave the profession (Interview 5). Moreover, it was pointed out in an interview, that there are ongoing issues with 'ghost teachers' in the system, who are registered as working in schools and, therefore, get salaries but never attend (Interview 4). Despite the difficulties in ascertaining an accurate membership figure, it is clear that the SLTU is by far the biggest formal sector trade union in Sierra Leone. As the figures in Appendix B reveal, the SLTU accounts for approximately half of the total formal sector union membership in the country.

Education has been cited in influential donor and government documents as one of the keys to the successful development of the country (Azzi-Huck, 2014, Government of Sierra Leone, 2013). However, the environment for the development of education is market-led, as evidenced by the statement in the third generation Sierra Leonean PRSP that developing '*human capital [sic] in the next five years is fundamental to improving living conditions, increasing national prosperity, and building international competitiveness*' (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013: 58). The SLTU, thus, operates in an environment where the state and external donors regard education primarily in terms of the extent to which its attainment can add to economic productivity. This narrows the terms on which union officials can negotiate with the state on behalf of members.

<sup>6</sup> Twenty-three formal and ten informal sector trade unions are listed in a document provided during Interview 6 - see Appendix B for details. LO/FTF (2017) has different data on union numbers provided by the SLLC for the same year - 2017. The document provided by the SLLC official in an interview is used as the basis for the analysis in this article, as it has a clearer division of formal and informal sector affiliated unions. This document also provided the basis for points about union membership made by the official in the interview.

Nonetheless, the important strategic position of education in the developmental firmament, as well as its large membership, gives the SLTU a measure of structural power. The marketplace bargaining power of the SLTU is low, as the labour market in the education sphere is not tight. However, the large membership of the SLTU gives the organisation some workplace bargaining power. In response to delayed payments of salaries and other benefits, the union has threatened strike action on a number of occasions over the years and organised late returns to work following holiday periods. The rebuilding of the education system from 2015, following the Ebola outbreak, also provides an opportunity for the SLTU to play an assertive role in discussions regarding policies and practices.

### Weaknesses of the SLLC and the SLTU

**First**, poor organisational capacity is a crucial issue for the SLLC and the SLTU. The organisational weaknesses cited by officials from the SLLC and the SLTU in interviews related primarily to limited facilities at the offices of both organisations. Furthermore, it was pointed out in interviews that physical and communications infrastructure in the country are poor, making it difficult for officials from head offices to communicate with, and organise, colleagues at regional and branch levels (Interviews 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7). Inadequate facilities at the SLLC head office - particularly lack of computers - were also outlined as substantive problems in relation to organising members effectively (Interview 6). Similar issues affect the SLTU, with facilities at head office described as 'poor' (Interview 5). The SLTU only has two vehicles at head office: a 4-wheel drive, which is 15 years old and a small mini-bus. Computer facilities at the head office are described as a 'big problem' [since] 'all the machines are very old and in a poor state of repair' (Interview 5). The organisational difficulties experienced by the SLLC and SLTU, therefore, resonate with the arguments of Schillinger (2005) and Lambert (2002) concerning the general inability of African unions to coordinate their work effectively.

**Second**, and closely related to poor organisational capacity - lack of finance is a major constraint on the effectiveness of the labour movement. A senior SLLC official cited the shortage of finance as the foremost concern of the federation (Interview 6). This was also the case with the SLTU. Despite the relatively large membership of the union, 'acute financial problems' were regarded by an official, as the foremost difficulty for the union (Interview 7). An example of the longevity of this problem is the fact that the same perspective had been expressed five years before in an interview with a senior SLTU official in the Northern Region (Interview 1).

**Third**, officials from the SLLC and the SLTU are well aware of the need to move beyond only representing the minority of workers in the formal sector. As a result, the SLLC recently granted affiliation to a number of individual associations representing informal sector workers, which has added 406, 950 members to its ranks. The total number of SLLC members from the formal sector is only 63,453 (see Appendix B for details). According to an official, it is difficult, however, for the SLLC to successfully represent both formal and informal sectors within the union, given that the numerical balance has become so tilted towards the latter (Interview 6). Thus, while the recognition on the part of the SLLC of the need to represent informal sector workers is progressive for the trade union movement, the practicalities involved are complex. In the education sector, Untrained and Unqualified (U-U) teachers are a particular form of informal labour, who play a vital role in keeping the education system running (Akrofi and Parker, 2015). The importance of U-U

teachers can be gauged from the fact that only 42 % of primary school teachers nationally are qualified (Watt, 2018). The employment of large numbers of U-U teachers weakens the marketplace bargaining power of the SLTU. U-U teachers are not full members of the SLTU but the union organises in-service training courses for them and has lobbied the government to improve ways of allowing them to qualify formally as teachers (McQuinn, forthcoming). These initiatives show that the SLLC and the SLTU have addressed the argument of critics who take the line that the trade union movement in Africa cannot develop and transform labour markets, as it concentrates on representing the minority of workers in the formal sector.

**Fourth**, SLLC and SLTU officials are concerned about iniquitous use of legal-bureaucratic measures by the state to control the labour movement (Interviews 6 and 7). The SLLC has found it difficult, for example, to defend the rights of workers in the minerals sector, where the labour force has been subject to coercive legal-bureaucratic measures from the state. For example, the government refused workers at African Minerals Limited (AML), a British-based company that mines iron ore in Tonkolili district, the right to select a union of their choice. Employees were prevented from joining a relatively new body, the Mining and Allied Services Employees Union (MASE). Following protests, the Ministry of Employment, Labour and Social Security de-registered MASE, which nullified its collective bargaining certificate, making its work largely meaningless (International Trade Union Confederation-Africa 2014). Serious concerns were also raised in an interview with a SLTU official about the failure of the state to enforce legislation guaranteeing the rights of teachers, erratic payment of salaries for teachers and the lack of provision of stipulated allowances for travel and accommodation (Interview 6). These findings provide support for Otoo's (2012) argument that governments in Africa are often reluctant to enforce laws providing rights for trade union members.

**Fifth**, the SLLC and the SLTU both lack a dedicated collective bargaining unit, specialising in achieving optimal terms and conditions for union members. The long drawn-out negotiation between the SLTU and the state over changes in the way teachers are paid provides an example of the need for an effective collective bargaining unit. The issue of pay for teachers in Sierra Leone is complex and the government has been struggling to create a workable composite salary system since 2010. The previous system was based on the payment of a salary plus allowances on variable scales for accommodation, medical care and transport, which was described by an official as unwieldy to the point of being chaotic (Interview 2). SLTU officials were given documents showing a planned salary for teachers of 1,400,000 Leones gross per month in 2014 (\$329), which can be compared with 600,000 Leones gross salary per month (\$141), set by the government as the minimum wage for teachers from January 2014, along with 480,000 Leones gross salary per month (\$113), as the overall minimum wage (Interview 2). Despite the existence of these figures in official documents, the salaries of teachers are not fully paid in all parts of the country. This has given rise to constant complaints from SLTU members to its officials. Given this example of the complex and multi-faceted nature of setting salaries for teachers, the creation of a collective bargaining unit, overseen by qualified and experienced staff, would greatly benefit the work of the SLTU. At present, SLTU officials without specialist training in collective bargaining issues and methods have to undertake negotiations over the terms and conditions of employment for teachers. The difficulties for the SLTU in negotiating changes to the terms and conditions of employment for teachers illustrate the contention of Baskin (2000) that the lack of collective bargaining units is a problematic

issue for African labour organisations. Along with teaching profession, negotiations to establish collective bargaining agreements are ongoing in the services, agriculture, industrial and construction sectors (LO/FTF, 2017).

### **Strengths of the SLLC and the SLTU and Points of Leverage**

The total working age population of Sierra Leone (15-64 years) is 3,341,525 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2014). This means that the full membership of the SLLC - 470,848 - amounts to 14.1 % of the total working age population. Formal sector members account for 1.9 % of total working age population and informal sector members, 12.2 %. The 14.1 % figure provides some support for the argument of Kraus (2007), that African trade unions remain important, as they are the largest organisations that represent the working class. However, the fact that unionised formal sector workers make up only 1.9 % of the total working age population shows how important it is for the SLLC to make the integration of the informal workforce into the trade union movement effective. The recent affiliation of informal sector unions to the SLLC has increased the associational power of the labour movement. It has also presented the organisation with the problem of how to represent effectively and equitably the majority of its members, who are largely involved in precarious informal work and not easy to contact and organise. At the same time, the SLLC needs to provide representation for the much smaller number of formally employed workers, many of whom have been unionised for a considerable period of time. This is also difficult, as it was pointed out by a SLLC official in an interview, that there is increasing unemployment in the formal sector, which has led to a loss of members (Interview 6).

If a workable system of paying dues can be formulated the incorporation into the SLLC of the large number of workers in the informal sector could provide at least a partial solution to the labour movement's lack of financial sustainability. The SLLC could draw on recent initiatives in other parts of Africa for inspiration. Spooner and Mwanika (2018), for example, show how the integration of informal workers in Uganda into the Amalgamated and Transport General Workers Union (ATGWU) has provided a way to alleviate the financial problems of the union. They also point out that the ATGWU model has been replicated in parts of East and West Africa. However, an SLLC official was cautious about the financial benefits to trade unions in Sierra Leone of affiliating informal sector workers (Interview 6). The official pointed out that the incomes of most informal sector workers are low and precarious. Consequently, the SLLC is on the verge of setting up an investment company to leverage loans from banks for informal sector workers. The SLLC has put up collateral for the loans and is acting as a guarantor. The organisation is aware that many informal workers do not earn enough income to pay union dues regularly and are at risk of defaulting on loan repayments (Interview 6).

The second general strength of the African labour movement outlined in section three was the notable success of some trade unions in defending the interests of labour during the neoliberal period. Such successes have not occurred to any substantive degree in Sierra Leone. Neither the SLLC nor the SLTU have formulated a clear and concerted counter-hegemonic discourse. An SLTU official stated that the union and the government '*were not easy bedfellows*' (Interview 2). However, the official also acknowledged that the SLTU is aware that the government faces its own constraints and is trying to respond to requests from the union. Such statements are partly responsible for the perception, among some sections of the membership and the wider citizenry, that the union takes too

accommodating a stance towards the government. Sections of the media are also heavily critical of the SLTU. The title of an analysis in the national newspaper, the Sierra Express in 2017, captures the sentiment of these criticisms - *Questioning the Relevance of the SLTU* (Sierra Express, 2017. See also, Sierra Express, 2015, 2013, and 2012). The stringent critiques in the media have influenced the perspectives of the public, thereby fostering the union's lack of societal power.

The SLLC and the SLTU could increase societal power by engaging in strategies and actions to galvanise workers that do not require a vast amount of resources. For example, the continuing lack of contractual transparency in the minerals sector of the economy, provides a point of leverage for the SLLC in its war of position with the state and representatives of capital. According to a report on the minerals sector by the National Advocacy on Extractives (2009: 1), there is '*an extreme lack of transparency, with a lack of information at all levels, creating mistrust and ignorance about the financial position and intentions of government and companies.*'

The SLLC, therefore, has the opportunity to increase its societal power by constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse around this issue. An internal report by the government itself estimates a \$98 million revenue loss between 2004 and 2016, through tax concessions to one mining company (Sierra Rutile) alone. Speeches, rallies and press releases on the issue, coordinated by the SLLC, would not necessitate raising a large amount of finance. These activities could be used to foreground the favourable terms on which the government is allowing representatives of capital to enter markets in Sierra Leone, while wages and conditions of employment for workers in such firms are poor and not always clear.

The use of coercive legal-bureaucratic measures by the state against unions representing workers in the minerals sector - outlined above - also creates a point of leverage for the SLLC. A counter-hegemonic discourse, could be created by the SLLC, emphasising the points that the right of workers to join a trade union and to be provided with services and benefits promised in contracts of employment are codified in legislation. The systematic promotion of such a discourse - supported by a supranational body, such as the International Trade Union Confederation - could increase the institutional power of the labour movement.

The overview of five weaknesses and two strengths of the Sierra Leonean trade union movement, as well as its points of leverage, illustrates the importance of locating any examination of agency within its structured context. As Bieler (2018: 243) aptly puts it, '*a focus on agency still requires an awareness of the structuring conditions within which agency takes place.*'<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Brookes (2018) points out, the PRA could be developed through a detailed examination of relational power, focusing on the interests, resources and strategies of both the workforce and representatives of capital. An analysis of the power resources available to the state and representatives of capital in Sierra Leone - and how these are deployed - would be useful in providing a fuller picture of the options for strategy and practice open to trade unions.

7 Bieler (2018) makes the important point that the PRA could be enhanced by locating the position of workers within an analysis of capitalist social relations of production, which generate particular forms of structure and agency. A deeper discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this article.

## Conclusion

African trade unions operate uncertainly in the neoliberal period, with a considerable number under-resourced and struggling to formulate coherent strategies, policies and practices. Many general analyses of trade unions offer a pessimistic view regarding their ability to defend the interests of workers effectively. The PRA, however, challenges such viewpoints by focusing on the importance of agency and strategic choices made by trade unions, as they respond to the policies and practices of states and/or representatives of capital. The approach, therefore, provides a valuable framework to assess the work of African trade unions. Nonetheless, the PRA as it stands is unable to fully explain the ways in which trade unions interact with the state and representatives of capital. The approach needs to incorporate a clear and systematic way of analysing structured settings within which agency on the part of trade unions operates. In this article, five substantive structural problems affecting the agency of trade unions have been outlined: weak organisational capacity, lack of finance, an over-emphasis on representing formal sector workers, inadequate enforcement of existing labour legislation protecting labour rights and the absence of effective central bargaining units. From the empirical analysis of the SLLC and the SLTU, it can be seen that the majority of these five weaknesses are significant in restricting their capacity to defend the interests of labour effectively. Two overall strengths of African trade unions have also been examined: first, their representation of significant numbers of the working class and, second, instances of success in combatting the deleterious effects of neoliberal policies on labour. Concerning the former, the trade union movement in Sierra Leone does represent a notable number of the working class, since the SLLC has, in recent years, moved to incorporate the country's many informal sector workers into its ranks. The SLLC has, in this way, demonstrated associational power. The SLTU has a large membership in an important sector of the formal economy - education. This gives the union a measure of associational power and - in the structural sphere - a degree of workplace bargaining power. Regarding the second general strength, neither the SLLC nor the SLTU have organised sustained opposition to the deepening of neoliberal policies in the country. This has weakened their societal power. Finally, two related points of leverage for African trade unions have been highlighted. First, a vast gap between the incomes of a rich minority and the large numbers of the population across the continent who live in poverty is apparent. Second, the increasing penetration of sectors of African economies providing high returns by foreign investors, on terms and conditions which lack transparency, is lending a hollow ring to the arguments of governments that labour movements need to subordinate their claims on behalf of members to those of the greater 'national interest'. The SLLC could focus more clearly and systematically than is currently the case on issues of economic inequality in the country and the poor terms and conditions of employment endured by many workers. Concerted support from the SLTU - with its significant membership - would add weight to such a discourse. The SLLC could also collaborate more with trade union federations in other African countries in forming union policies and practices. The same is true for the SLTU, since many issues affecting teachers in Africa are similar across individual countries. The war of position between trade unions and the state and representatives of capital is never static. The SLLC and the SLTU have opportunities to use structural, associational, societal and institutional forms of power resources to challenge the state's hegemonic discourse and to present alternative ways of utilising the nation's economic assets.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

- ATGWU - Amalgamated and Transport General Workers Union (Uganda)  
DAC - Development Assistance Committee  
FDI - Foreign Direct Investment  
GDP - Gross Domestic Product  
GNI - Gross National Income  
ILO - International Labour Organisation  
ITUC - International Trade Union Confederation  
MASE - Mining and Allied Services Employees Union (Sierra Leone)  
ODA - Official Development Assistance  
OECD - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development  
PRA - Power Resources Approach  
SAPS - Structural Adjustment Programmes  
SLLC - Sierra Leone Labour Congress  
SLTU - Sierra Leone Teachers Union  
TUCTA - Trade Union Congress of Tanzania  
U-U - Untrained and Unqualified (teachers)

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## Appendix A - List of Interviews

**Interview 1** - Vice President (Northern Region) of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union. Information provided on 8 August 2012.

**Interview 2** - Deputy General Secretary of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union. Information provided on 10 August 2012.

**Interview 3** - Deputy Director of Education of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress. Information provided on 20 August 2012.

**Interview 4** - Official, National HIV/AIDS Secretariat. Information provided on Tuesday 21 August 2012.

**Interview 5** - Deputy General Secretary of the Sierra Leone Teachers Union. Information provided on 13 June 2014.

**Interview 6** - Senior Secretary at the Sierra Leone Labour Congress. Information provided on 17 June 2017.

**Interview 7** - Deputy General Secretary, SLTU. Information provided on 17 June 2017.

Appendix - Trade Unions in Sierra Leone		
Trade Union /Trade Union Centre	Affiliation to National Trade Union Centre	Total Members
SLLC Sierra Leone Labour Congress	n/a	121,692
CCOTU Central Confederation of Trade Unions	n/a	8,340 (2011)
Trade Unions		
Artisans Public Works of Services Employees Union	SLLC	1,600
Clerical Banking Insurance Accounting Petroleum Union	SLLC	2,010
Construction Workers Union	SLLC	1,500
Electricity Employees Union	SLLC	1,200
Hotel, Food, Drinks, Tobacco & Entertainment Workers Unions	SLLC	4,500
Union of Mass Media, Financial Institutions, Chemical Industries & General Workers	SLLC	500

Maritime & Waterfront Workers Union	SLLC	1,000
Motor Drivers & General Transport Workers Union	SLLC	1,000
Municipal & General Government Employees Union	SLLC	1,000
National Union of Civil Servants	SLLC	1,000
National Union of Forestry & Agricultural Workers	SLLC	1,100
Sierra Leone Fishermen's Union	SLLC	400
Sierra Leone Dockworkers Union	SLLC	1,014
Sierra Leone Health Services Union	SLLC	2,010
Sierra Leone National Seamen's Union	SLLC	1,000
Sierra Leone Teachers' Union	SLLC	36,000
Sierra Leone Union of Postal & Telegraph Employees Union	SLLC	1,054
Sierra Leone Reporters' Union	SLLC	450
Sierra Leone Union of Security, Watchmen & General Workers	SLLC	2,500
Skilled & Manual Productive Workers Union	SLLC	510
United Mineworkers Union	SLLC	1,804
Union of Railway Plantation Minerals Industry & Construction Employees	SLLC	300
Sierra Leone Port Authority Senior Staff Association	SLLC	82
<b>Total</b>		<b>63,534</b>
<b>Informal Sector Unions / Organisations</b>		
Indigenous Petty Traders Association	SLLC	12,500
Indigenous Photographers' Union	SLLC	500
Sierra Leone Artisanal Fishermen's Union	SLLC	235,000
Sierra Leone Traders Union	SLLC	36,000
Sierra Leone Musicians Union	SLLC	250
Bike riders Union	SLLC	120,000
Pensioners Union	SLLC	1,200
Commercial Tricycle Riders Union	SLLC	500
Sierra Leone Union of Technicians	SLLC	300
Home and General Workers Union	SLLC	700
<b>Total</b>		<b>406,950</b>

Total Affiliation to SLLC - **470,484**.

**Note:** SLLC officials provided this list in an interview. Document received on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017.