

## FEATURED ARTICLES

### *Suppressed but not defeated: Unionism in Sudan*

By Thomas Schmidinger

email: [thomas.schmidinger@univie.ac.at](mailto:thomas.schmidinger@univie.ac.at)

Rarely it happens that trade-unions in Sudan are really accorded the value that they deserve. Not only is their role in the independence movement in Sudan but also their contribution against the military regime of Abbud, Numairi and Bashir of great importance. This paper thus aims to have a fragmentary look at the beginning of unionism as well as some perspectives on the situation of these unions under the contemporary regime.

#### **The founding of the Worker's Affairs Association (WAA)**

In 1946 the founding of the Workers' Affairs Association (WAA) already constituted the first organization of Sudanese workers of the mechanic workshops of the Sudanese railway. It was at the same time the first union organization in sub-Saharan Africa outside South-Africa. This first Sudanese Union was established by simple workers with less ideological orientation even before the first communist organization was founded in the region. The establishment of this first union had a role model character for other workers.

In the same year when the WAA was founded the tenants of the Gezira Scheme went on strike to support their demand that the reserve fund of some £E 1.300.000 should be paid to them (FAWZI, 1957: 20). Next nurses, as first female employees, are said to have tried to organize themselves to unions at the same time.

The WAA was the product of a great necessity felt by the workers of the railway economy to demand higher salaries and an improvement of working conditions.

Already some months after its establishment the WAA organized the first big strike of urban workers in Sudan. On 12 July 1947 a delegation of communist workers met with the manager at five o'clock in the evening to ask him to have dinner with them. In one of the interviews that I conducted with one of the then-striking workers, he describes the situation as follows:

*"But the police said no, you go to your houses. The police came with sticks and*

*guns and said you must go home. 3 of the workers can meet the general manager, but all the workers said we all want to stay here. The committee can meet the general manager and come out to tell us what happened. But the police said no and began to use the sticks and the workers used bricks to defend themselves. After one hour of fighting in the street, the workers decided to go to strike."* (BASHIR, 2001)

li Muhammad Bashir, one of the co-founders of the WAA and participant of the strikes of 1947, continues his narration that this strike eventually ended with a victory of the workers and the official recognition of the unions. Another strike of the workers lasting for one whole month in fall 1947 finally forced the government to draft a body of labour legislation. (NIBLOCK, 1987: 116). As a result the minimal loans were quadrupled and the maximal loans were a bit less then doubled.

*"As a result of bitter agitation for higher wages and better conditions made by the Workers' Affairs Association, early in 1948 investigations were made by the Independent Committee of Inquiry set up by the Financial Secretary and persisted over by a Judge of the High Court."* (FAWZI, 1957: 21)

#### **Trade Union Ordinance**

The Trade Union Ordinance counts as one of the most important legislative development which was adopted in 1948. Tim Niblock analyzes the position of the WAA on that development:

*"The WAA initially opposed the Trade Union Ordinance, mainly on the grounds that (unlike its British equivalent) it required the compulsory registration of trade unions. Following discussions between six representatives of the WAA, six government representatives and three members of the Legislative Assembly (including 'Abdallah Khalil and Muhammad Ahmed Mahjub), however, the government agreed to some minor amendments to the Ordinance and the WAA agreed to work within its framework. Trade union activities, therefore, could now proceed - in effect protected by a strong legislative framework."* (NIBLOCK, 1987: 116)

Consequently to the establishment and the success of the WAA many unions were founded in whole Sudan, especially from workers of the regions who own various modern capitalistic enterprises. The registration process according to the Trade Union Ordinance started in 1949 through the registration of 5 unions. 1951 it were al-

ready 86 registered unions and in the following year 99. In 1954 there were in total 123, and in 1956 135 unions with a total of 87,355 registered members.

The establishment of a recognized union movement constituted to an organizational continuity of an active union movement, but canalized the working conflicts and enabled at the same time conflict resolution through negotiation. In the first years of the Sudanese Union movements there were a lot more strikes than after the Trade Union Ordinance came into force. At the same time however the general strikes, that were only made possible through the cooperation of organized unions, grew immensely in the years 1950 to 1952.

#### **The Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation (SWTUF)**

In 1950 various Sudanese unions formed an umbrella union organization in form of the Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation (SWTUF). This organization had a more general political orientation, than the previous then existing single unions. Gabriel Warburg characterizes the activities of new Federation as follows:

*"In December 1951 the SWTUF decided to take an active part in Sudanese politics. Prompted by the unilateral abrogation by Egypt of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty in 1936, the SWTUF declared that its objective was to defeat imperialism and to achieve for the Sudan the right of self-determination. To achieve this end, >The United Front for the Liberation of the Sudan< was established and all workers' and peasants' unions were called upon to establish national committees in order to function within this Front which was initiated and run by communists."* (WARBURG, 1978: 97)

Not only communist and other anti-imperialist parties played a big role in the fight for the de-colonization of Sudan, but also the unions, which in fact established the mass basis for this political objective.

In 1952 the SWTUF started – not least in the context with this political objective – to organize farmers, land tenants and country workers. Existing land tenant organizations like the *Gezira Tenants' Association*, were rejected by the SWTUF, as they were perceived as government based pseudo-organizations. Warburg supplements:

*"In August 1952, the Northern province tenants held their first conference at 'Atbara, under the auspices of the railway workers. This was followed by the Nuba*

*Mountains cotton cultivators, whose congress, in May 1953, was attended and addressed by the president of the SWTUF. Finally, the Jazira cotton growers joined the ranks of the newly founded 'United Front for the Liberation of the Sudan'."* (WARBURG, 1978: 98)

#### **The limits of the previous union movements**

The quick expansion of the Sudanese unionism can not disguise the fact, that they did have their limits in terms of gender issues as well as to their regional expansion.

As in the 50ies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hardly any women were working in fix labour contracts, the previous union movement was predominately dominated by men. Although the communist dominated parts of the labour movements did have a progressive position towards gender issues in Sudan, this was still an exception in this political field. I do not know of any efforts that were done to integrate and organize women in precarious working conditions, into the previous union movements. Also in the literature on the union movements in Sudan women hardly played a role. In none of the older standard works women are singularly treated within this issue. Positive exceptions are the more recent works, such as that of Sondra Hale (HALE, 1997).

Next to this it is important to highlight that those workers that were organized within these unions were often workers with relatively better working conditions with fix working contracts (often government employees for example). The poorest part of the Sudanese proletariat is hardly represented here.

Even more striking is the regional arrangement of union organizations. This arrangement is primarily limited to the modern sector in northern Sudan. Saad ed-Din Fawzi criticizes:

*"Last but not least, the labour movement has so far left southern employees largely untouched, which is hardly surprising in view of the wide differences between the two parts of the country, and the relative isolation of the south owing to poor transport facilities and linguistic and ethnic divisions."* (FAWZI, 1957: xii)

#### **Unionists and communists**

In the establishment of these unions communists were strongly involved. They were, however, not the only political party in Sudan, that was active in the establishment of unionism. Other national anti-colonial groups, such as the 1943 founded Ashigga-movement, were also supportive to the union movement. (NIBLOCK, 1987: 112)

The most important ideological closeness was however found with the Communist Party of Sudan or more respectively their forerunner organization, the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation (SMNL) (al-haraka as-sudaninya lil-tahrir al-watany). Here it is important to note that the SMNL was rather founded in 1946, supposedly only a few months after the establishment of the WAA and was inspired by the Egyptian DMNL of Henri Curiel. Even before Sudanese students had organized themselves in the DMNL in Egypt, which was now supposed to form the core of the SMNL. Mohammed Nuri el-Amin portrays:

*"One reason for this uncharacteristically hasty decision could have something to do with the negotiations that had been in progress between Britain and Egypt over, among other things, the future of the Sudan; the intense activity on the part of the communists and the leftist Wafdists which had been aimed at obstructing those negotiations; the harsh measures which the government found itself forced to adopt against all its adversaries before things went out of hand; and, finally, the likely decision on the part of the EMNL to have an offshoot in the Sudan in order to be better able to direct the agitation against those negotiations." (EL-AMIN, 1996a: 24)*

Another reason for the haste to found a communist organisation in Sudan, is found within the fact, that at this time quite some British communists were active in Sudan. The Egyptian communists around Henry Curile supposedly feared that the *Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)* would overtake the initiative to found a Sudanese Communist Party, if they were not quick enough.

Interestingly the real date of the foundation of the SMNL is not known or more respectively different indications are being made. Tim Niblock's date of 1944 is most probably to early (NIBLOCK, 1987: 112), the indications of Gabriel Warburg, according to which the first political demonstrations of the SMNL took place in March 1946 and the indication of Ali Muhammad Bashir, with whom I was able to conduct an interview with in Atbara, according to which the Communist Party was founded in October 1946, seem to be more accurate. The varying indications of Warburgs and Bashir could also be related to the fact that the first party cell of the SMNL in Khartoum and Umdurum indeed became active in March, whereas the first party cell in Atrabar was only estab-

lished later. Also the official party history indicates 1946 as year of foundation of the SMNL (AL-HIZB, 1988: 5).

El-Amin correctly ascertains:

*"If we begin with a consideration of the exact date at which the SMNL appeared, we shall find that some founders - such as Abdu Dahab, Abd al-Wahhab Zain al-'Abidin, Ahmad Zain al-'Abidin, one of Storey's earliest recruits among the graduates of the Gordon memorial College and Abd al-Rahim Kududa - believe that it was formed in 1945, though Ahmed Zain al-'Abidin and Abd al-Rahim Ahmad both thought that it could also have appeared early in 1946. Others, like Abd al-Khaliq Mahjub, categorically gave early 1946 as the date of the formation of the SMNL, while Abd al-Aziz Rudwan sticks his neck out for the specific date of 16 August 1946." (EL-AMIN, 1996a: 28f)*

The location of the foundation of the SMNL is as well not clear. The indications vary from Cairo to Khartoum, although the indications that statc Sudan as founding region prevail. With the name of SMNL this group however manifested itself only in Sudan.

The SMNL played an important role that must not be underrated within the anti-imperialistic fight for the independence of Sudan. The party was however weakened through allocations between fractions and through split-offs. In the core of the inner-party allocations was the question on the accession to Egypt. This matter, however, was settled for the Sudanese Left through Nasser coming into power in Egypt and the persecution of communists in the country. The remaining core of the SMNL eventually acted under the name *al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-Sudani* (Communist Party of Sudan, CPS or Sudanese Communist Party, SCP). They still remained attractive for intellectuals but was most of the time (with the sole exception of the early Numairi regime) restricted in its political power.

It would break the framework of this paper to deal with the entire history of the CPS. The focus in this paper will lie in the perpetually growing links between major parts of the unions and the CPS. This cooperation has eventually led to the fact that later more authoritarian regimes, from Numairi to al-Bashir, rigourously acted against independent union organizations.

### Regime and unionism

After the military coup on the 30 June 1989 the unions eventually became part of the Founders of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which tried to build up an umbrella organization as opposition to the regime of Umar al-Bashir. Conscious of the fact which role the unions played in the fight against previous military regimes in Sudan, all unions were forbidden on the second day of the military coup. Nagim Negmadin, the previous secretary general of the doctor's union, describes the measures which were taken from the regime:

*"This was one of the first things they have done. Our clubs were closed. Our money has been taken, everything was confiscated."* (NEGMADIN, 2001)

Already on the 9 August 1989 eight representatives of the most influential unions, amongst which were the *Association of Civil Servants' Union*, the *Association of Professional and Technicians' Union*, the *Bar Association*, the *Press Association* and the *Union of Khartoum University Lecturers* a memorandum to the RCC demanding a stop of anti-union measures and the permission for unions to act again. The regime consequently responded with a mass arrests of union leaders.

*„So after we sent this message they started to arrest the trade unionists. First they were sent to Kober-prison and then the majority was sent to Shalla-prison, which is far away from here near Chad..."* (NEGMADIN, 2001)

The aim of such a transfer to different prisons with worse prison conditions was to achieve the isolation of unionists, which even in detention, represented a danger to the government. But these measures did not stop the unions. End of November, and in the beginning of December, there was yet another one-week strike of doctors, which led to a new wave of arrests. Most of the doctors were quickly released again, but those most active in political affairs were kept in prison. One of the organizers of the strike, the gynecologist, Dr. Mam'un Muhammad Husain, was even sentenced to death on the 10 December. The leader of the coup Umar al-Bashir declared the call for a strike as high treason and thus rejected to pardon Husain. Only massive protests in Sudan and on international level led to the fact that the government eventually resigned and pardoned Husain in Mai 1990.

Especially in the first years the regime was not very robust and thus reacted with severe draconian measures against any independent unionism. At

the same time the regime made an effort in establishing a pseudo-normality, opened up new yellow unions and placed government officers of the regime within the unions. Nagib Negmadin describes the new unions which were loyal to the government with following words:

*"The governmental trade union is full with security people. They are no trade unionists"* (NEGMADIN, 2001)

Indeed the new from the government arranged unions had amongst others the task to supervise the workers in the bigger enterprises.

Nevertheless the work of the left unionist under the regime of Umar al-Bashir was quite successful. For example they managed to arrange strikes although there was ban on strikes. Being part of the NDA the unions also achieved to play an important role within the opposition apart from their complex interest policy.

These successes of left unionism can be led back to the strong roots of unionism within the Sudanese working class and of the worsening of the social conditions of the proletariat. Although the work of the unions did have some success, the hopes of the left unions is perpetually confronted with kickbacks, as was confirmed to me by Nagib Negmadin, general secretary of the doctors' union until the coup of 1989:

*"The government is now not the same like before. There is a margin of freedom now. And now we think that we could use these small freedoms for the coming elections of the trade unions, which started two months ago. But we failed. The problem was that we don't have any money. We don't have paper and nothing. For me it is even difficult to move. We wanted to work together with the political parties, but we didn't find any support from any party. Even the Communist Party failed to support its people in the last elections of the unions."* (NEGMADIN, 2001)

Nevertheless even the yellow unions began to criticize the economic and social failures of the regime. A staff member of an international organization, which works closely together with the government and thus prefers to be anonymous, explains:

*"Of course there are also different wings inside the yellow unions. They are controlled by islamists, but not all of them agree to be fully coordinated by the re-*

*gime. Inside the islamists there is a small minority that also informs the press and the public about the corruption of the yellow unions. They want to form a real islamist union who is working for the interests of workers. This minority thinks, that the yellow unions are neglecting the interests of workers. For example they complain about the union-leaders that they are not fighting for the interests of workers who were kicked out of their jobs."*

Concerning the role of the unions opened by the government in 1992 the voices of oppositional unionists are still ambivalent. The ambivalence created by the loosening of the union interdiction of the regime against oppositional unionists, is described by Ali Khalifa Mahdi, who until 1989 was the general secretary of the union of technicians and who at the same time was the financing consultant of the union of engineers:

*"The mass of the trade unionists said that they will not work under these artificial trade unions led by the National Islamic Front. According to my point of view, this is wrong, because trade unions are not political parties. We have to work with these frame, even if it is artificial, so that we can change it, that we can show our protest, that we can struggle and can show our problems. And we can succeed. During a struggle you can succeed. If it is a movement the things will go forward anyway. But unfortunately most trade unionists said that the workers should boycott the elections of the trade unions. Of course we know that the elections are falsed, everybody knows that. [...] But other trade unionists like me say, we can not boycott it, we will struggle, we will go to vote. And sometimes there are some successes. One ore two real trade unionists are being elected. Of course they are threat-*

*ened: "Don't nominate yourself, we will dismiss you, we'll take you to prison, you will fail..." And of course the struggle goes on. Some people win, some not, but there are some successes. I think that even in these last elections we have some people who have succeeded to be in the leadership of the trade unions. And little by little the trade unionists are convinced not to leave these trade unions organisation for them. We will struggle and I'm sure that the time will come that these trade unions will be in the hands of the real trade unionists." (MAHDI, 2001)*

The use of the unions as well as wider liberties through unions must not be misunderstood, as the results of official union elections are still being faked and oppositional unionists are still intimidated to candidate in elections. The partial liberties that were accorded to unions in the past years are perpetually threatened and still need to be fought for every other time.

Besides the many years of suppression have alienated the independent unions from the concrete labour fights in Sudan.

Through the ratification of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the integration of the NDA in the peace process of 2005 a positive influence on the situation for independent union work in some regions of Sudan has been achieved. Many large constructions, such as the Merowe-dam have however been build by Chinese forced labourers. In the oil-industry which has become the most important economic sector of Sudan, also a lot of non-Sudanese workers are employed, who have no perspective of any union organization. Sudanese who are even only under slight suspicion of not being on the same side of the regime, have no chance of obtaining such jobs. It is still doubtful whether under such conditions independent unionis can develop or whether the previous unions from 1989 which have been forced to live in underground still can play a role in the overall development of Sudan and and the conflicts within.

**Bibliography**

AL-HIZB al-Shuyu`i al-Sudani: lamahat min tarih al-hizb al-shuyu`i al-sudany  
Khartoum, 1988

EL-AMIN, Mohammed Nuri: The Emergence And Development of the Leftist Movement In The Sudan During The 1930's and 1940's  
Khartoum, 1984

EL-AMIN, Mohammed Nuri: The role of the Egyptian Communists in introducing the Sudanese to Communism in the 1940s  
in: International Journal of Middle East Studies, 19, November 1987; S. 433 - 454

EL-AMIN, Mohammed Nuri: The Sudanese Communist Movement, The First Five Years I  
in: Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 32, No. 3, July 1996a, pp. 22 - 40

EL-AMIN, Mohammed Nuri: The Sudanese Communist Movement, The First Five Years II  
in: Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 32, No. 4, October 1996b, pp. 251 - 263

EL-AMIN, Mohammed Nuri: The Sudanese Communist Movement, The First Five Years III  
in: Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 128 - 151

FAWZI, Saad ed Din: The Labour Movement in the Sudan 1946 - 1955  
London, New York, Toronto, 1957

HALE, Sondra: Gender Politics in Sudan; Islamism, Socialism and the State  
Colorado, 1997

HOLT PM / DALY MW: A history of the Sudan, From the coming of Islam to the present day  
Harlow (GB), 2000

MATTES, Hanspeter: Sudan-Chronologie 1956 - 1993  
in: Wuquf 7 - 8/1992 - 1993  
Hamburg, 1993, pp. 47 - 69

NIBLOCK, Tim: Class and Power in Sudan; The Dynamics of Sudanese Politics 1898 - 1985  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London (GB), 1987

WARBURG, Gabriel: Islam, Nationalism and Communism in a traditional Society, The Case of Sudan  
London, 1978

**Interview of the Author with**

Nagib NEGMADIN, 26.4. 2001 in Khartoum  
Ali Khalifa MAHDI, 25. 4. 2001 in Khartoum  
Ali Muhammad BASHIR, 28. 4. 2001 in Atbara  
One anonymous Sudanese Staff member of an international organization in March 2001 in Khartoum

*Thomas Schmidinger is lecturer at the institute of political science at the University of Vienna, president of the independent lecturers union (IG Externe LektorInnen und freie WissenschaftlerInnen) and has published his work on „Worker movements in Sudan“ (Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main) in 2004. Website: <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/thomas.schmidinger/>*

»»»><«««