

Ghanaian Trade Unionism in Perspective

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Abstract

Trade unionism as a combination of workmen to safeguard their collective good has been associated with industrial societies. That is, societies that have moved from agrarian economy to an industrial one. Although Ghana is not a fully industrial country the agitations of workmen collectively can be traced to the colonial era, especially with the establishment of government institutions and injection of European capital into the economy. Evidence of workmen agitations from the early period has been sketchy. However between the 1920s and 30s a number of strike actions by well-organized body of workers forced the colonial administration to examine critically issues of labour. It was in response to these agitations that the colonial government enacted the Gold Coast Trade Unions Ordinance, 1941 to regularize the activities of these unions. The paper seeks to discuss chronologically the development of trade unionism in Gold Coast from its early stages before the use of western constructs, to describe it.

Keywords: Trade Unionism, Gold Coast, Ghana, Labour, strike

1. Introduction

The history of trade unions³ in the Gold Coast⁴ stretches back to the beginning of colonialism. By 1874, the Gold Coast had been formally declared a British colony. This development was marked by revolutionary changes in the political, economic and social fields. Socially, following the decision of the British government to remain on the coast, Governor George Cumine Strahan proceeded to abolish slavery and slave dealing.⁵ The release of people from slavery led to an increase in the demand for wage labour.⁶ The colonial administration encouraged

³ Many definitions abound for Trade Unions. The Gold Coast Trade Union Ordinance, 1941, section 2, defines a Trade Union as any combination whether temporary or permanent, the principal purposes of which are the regulation of the relation between workmen and masters or between workmen and workmen or between masters and masters. A trade union can also be described as the gathering together of many single workers whose interest in work are the same because they earn their living in the same way. From the various definitions there are two basic factors that determine whether a group is christened a trade union or not. That is, there should be a common occupation and a common employer. Trade Unionism as used in the study describes collective action by people who sell their labour in order to protect their living standards.

⁴ Ghana assumed her present name in 1957, when she became independent. Under British colonial rule, however, she was known as the Gold Coast. A name, which came to apply in 1900 to the three previously distinct territories: the Gold Coast colony, Asante and the Northern Territories. Unless otherwise indicated Gold Coast will be used here as it was after 1900, that is the geographical area which in 1957 became the independent state of Ghana including the British mandated area of Togoland, which was administered as part of the Gold Coast from 1919 onwards. Both names will be used in the literature. The reason being that it will be a useful reminder of the contrast between the colonial territory and an independent nation.

⁵ Between 1441 and the nineteenth century a commercial enterprise, the Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade flourished. It involved the export of Africans to the New World to supply labour for European gold and silver mines and the cotton, sugar cane, tobacco and rice plantations. The eighteenth century saw the peak of this traffic in human beings, as a result of the increased demand for African slave labour in the New World and the intensified competition among the European countries dealing in slaves. For the Europeans, the traffic in human beings became what is known as the triangular trade, which began when goods were exported from Europe to West Africa and in exchange bought men and women. The second arm of the trade referred to the transportation of the African slaves across the Atlantic for re-sale in the New World. The third arm of the trade was the route from the New World to Europe. Influenced by the industrial revolution and the activities of enlightened humanitarians, Great Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807. what was left was the old forms of servitude like pawning, panyarring and others that predated European contact. For further discussion of slavery and its abolition see: Akosua A. Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15th to the 19th Century* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004)

⁶ Prior to contact with Europeans, various forms of indentured, communal and customary labour existed. However, there was no class of wage and salaried workers in the modern sense. This class of wage earners began to emerge after contact with Europeans. By the 19th century, a wage labour class had emerged to one degree or another. This development was necessary because before there could be an organized labour movement, there had to be a class of workers dependent on wages. With the advent of colonialism, the colonial administration encouraged the development of the wage earning class. This they did

the development of this new wage work relationship by introducing the Master and Servants Ordinance of 1877.⁷ This Ordinance sought to regulate the relationship between the employer and the employee. Although it was bereft of provisions for trade unions, it stated clearly that unless otherwise agreed, employees should be paid wages. Thus by the 1880s there existed three social classes in the Gold Coast: the educated Gold Coast elite, the European elite and the wage earning class.⁸ It was among the wage-earning class that organized labour activities started to emerge.

2. Methodology

This paper is qualitative and relied on the orthodox approach to historical enquiry that combines primary archival data and secondary sources. Colonial records on labour agitations and trade union issues were sourced from the Public Records Administration and Archives Department (PRAAD) in Kumasi and Accra. Information gleaned from the records of PRAAD were used to enrich, evaluate and supplement information gotten from secondary sources like books and journals.

3. Context

Trade unionism as a universal phenomenon of “collective action by people who sell their labour power in order to protect and improve their living standards”⁹ has enjoyed considerable study in the Western world. This emanates from the fact that the trade unions at this part of the world have been in existence for over two centuries. However, the history of labour as a social movement rather than a commodity¹⁰ is relatively recent in Ghana as in most parts of tropical Africa.

The development of an intellectual interest in tropical African trade unions began in the 1950s with publications by Roberts, Roper and Epstein.¹¹ The works of these authors help in understanding the development of a wage-earning class and the subsequent development of trade unions out of this class. They argue for indigenous development of trade unions in West Africa. In the discourse on working class formation within the context of colonial economic transformation the African was seen as lazy, unproductive and unresponsive to time discipline. Keletso Atkins challenged the characterization of the “lazy African” in her redemptive project on the cultural origins of an African work ethic.¹² Until her work, very few historians appreciated an “African work culture” with its own set of values. The changing interest in labour as a social movement stemmed from the fact that the 1950s was a period of heightened nationalist agitation for self-rule in almost all of colonial Africa and the role of labour was crucial.¹³

by enacting the master and servant ordinance of 1877, which sought to regulate the relationship between the employer and the employee. Though it was bereft of provisions for trade unions, it stated that unless otherwise agreed, employees should be paid wages. See: Browne Orde, *The African Labourer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), A. Gareth, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807-1956* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2005), Peter Gutkind, *The Emergent African Urban Proletariat* (Centre for Developing –Area Studies, 1974),

⁷ An Ordinance for regulating the relations between Employers and Employed under contracts, 23 July, 1877, PRAAD, Accra, ADM 4/1/6

⁸ Adu Boahen, Ghana: *Evolution and Change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Accra: Sankofa Educational Publishers Ltd, 2000) p. 103

⁹ V. L. Allen, “The study of African Trade Unionism”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 7 no.2 (July, 1969), pp. 289-307

¹⁰ The aim of all colonial governments in Africa and elsewhere had been the quest for raw materials and the use of the colonies as the destination for manufactured goods. Thus for a long time academic attention was focused on labour as a commodity with emphasis on labour productivity, efficiency, labour turnover, selection, control and training.

¹¹ B. C. Roberts, ‘Labour Relations in overseas Territories’, in the *Quarterly* (London) xxvii, 4, 1957; J. I Roper, *Labour Problems in West Africa* (London, 1958); A.L Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester, 1958)

¹² Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead Give Us Our Money!: The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Publishers, 1993)

¹³ Ioan Davies *op cit* pp.1-20; Lester N. Trachtman, “The labor Movement of Ghana: a study in Political unionism”, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol.10, No.2, part 1. (Jan., 10 1962), pp. 183-200; Rolf Gerritsen, “ The Evolution of the Ghana Trades Union Congress under the Convention People’s Party: Towards a re-interpretation”, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, vol. Xiii (ii) (December 1972) pp. 229-244; R. B Davison, “Labor Relations and Trade Unions in the Gold Coast”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol.7, No.4 (July, 1954) pp. 593-604; E. Cowan, *Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana*, with a forward by John K. Tettegah (Accra: Trades Union Congress, n.d)

During the 1960s African labour historians occupied themselves with discussing the role of labour in nation building and assumed that trade unions were the highest expression of worker consciousness and class formation.¹⁴ Most studies also focused on labour migration and terms like “target worker” and “semi-proletarianized peasantry” were used to describe workers’ resistance to industrial discipline.¹⁵ By the 1970s Africanist scholars charted a new course for African labour studies. This new path focused not only on labour unions, strikes and migrant labour but the broader range of adversarial and subversive behavior through which workers expressed themselves.¹⁶ The boundaries of this new path extended further to examine labourers as social beings with positions in communities, families and the broader society.¹⁷ What labourers brought to the workplace and how it impacted families and communities became very relevant for later studies.

The trade unions in Ghana have attracted numerous students but thus far there are few major works.

Also the few have lacked a historical dimension. Thus, it has been generally assumed that the rise of Ghanaian trade unionism is primarily a post-world war II phenomenon because the Trades Union Congress was inaugurated in 1945. This has made it very difficult to assess organized labour in its entirety. This paper examines chronologically the development of trade unions in Ghana.

4. Early development of the Wage-earning class

Right from the beginning of European enterprise in West Africa there has always been a group of Africans that worked as wage earners in European and African commercial firms. Some worked as clerks, craftsmen or labourers for these firms.¹⁸

Peter Gutkind tells the story of the cannoemen and how they demanded high quality cloth and gold as wages for the services they rendered.¹⁹ The cannoemen have been identified as one of the early groups of individuals that offered their services for a fee. Indeed the services of cannoemen were indispensable to the activities of capitalist enterprises in West Africa. They served as transporters, carting goods and passengers from European ships that had anchored in mid-ocean because of lack of natural harbours and the powerful surf that made it difficult to berth at the coast.²⁰

Carriers also participated actively in the newly emerging commercial enterprise that Europeans facilitated. In the period before the second decade of the 20th century head-loading or portage was a major means of transporting goods from one place to the other. At the coast carriers head loaded the merchandise of European ships to the ware houses. They also facilitated the transport of goods to and from the hinterland.

The cannoemen for example were fishermen by profession and engaged in wage employment to augment what they got from fishing. Thus, the supply of their services was not consistent, and added to that they were aware of the important part they played in the commercial enterprise on the Coast. They “understood very well that they had the power to bargain, to negotiate the terms of their employment and that if the terms were not to their liking they were able and willing to withdraw their labour”.²¹ Most carriers were also peasant farmers that offered their services during the lean season also to augment what they got from farming.

However, pre-colonial engagements were dominated by slave workers who carried out such services as transporters for their masters. In the aftermath of the emancipation proclamation and the belief that there would

¹⁴ Bill Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

¹⁵ See Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The labor question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

¹⁶ Robin Cohen, “Resistance and hidden forms of consciousness amongst African workers”, *Review of African Political Economy*, No.19, consciousness & class (Sept.-Dec., 1980) pp. 8-22

¹⁷ See Lisa A. Lindsay, *Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003); Carolyn Brown, “We were all Slaves”: *African Miners, Culture and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003); Elizabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity and Class in The Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005)

¹⁸ Raymond E. Dumet, ‘John Sarbah, the Elder, and African Mercantile Entrepreneurship in the Gold Coast in the Late Nineteenth Century’, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 14, No.4 (1973), pp. 653-679

¹⁹ Peter C. Gutkind has been able to demonstrate, using primary document from the Royal African Company that cannoemen agitation dates back to 1753. He traces how indispensable the cannoemen were to the European trading ships and how they were able to withdraw their labour whenever their wage demands were not met. During this time the cannoemen received rum, liquor and tobacco as pay. Whenever they agitated for better condition, they demanded high quality cloth and gold instead of liquor, rum and tobacco. For further discussion of the Gold Coast cannoemen see: Peter Gutkind, “The cannoemen of the Gold Coast (Ghana): A survey and an Exploration in precolonial African Labour History”, *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 29, cahier 115/116, Rivages 2 (1989), pp. 339-376

²⁰ W. W. Claridge, *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti from the Earliest Time to the Commencement of the 20th Century*. Vol. I, London: F. Cass, 1915. Pp.43

²¹ The cannoemen of the Gold Coast

be a smooth transition from servile labour to wage labour, the colonial government started batting around with the idea of the desirability of enacting an ordinance to facilitate agreement of hiring and service for limited periods. This discussions culminated in the labour ordinance of 1875. The basis of the law was the Master and Servant law of 1867 which by this time had been a thing of the past in Britain, the seat of the empire. It had been replaced in 1875 by the Employer's and Workmen Act after a prolonged labour agitation. The new Act recognized workers' rights to collective representation and expunged the punitive sanctions of the M &S laws. The full impact of the 1875 ordinance is not well documented, but 2 years later the Gold Coast colonial government passed another ordinance with the same purpose.

On January 1, 1878 the Master and Servants Ordinance 1877 came into effect in the Gold coast.²² It provided the legal framework for recruiting and maintaining labour in the Gold Coast. It also sought to regulate the relationship between employers and the employed, and was also clear in its effort to encourage wage employment and the money economy. Section xv of the ordinance stipulates that unless otherwise agreed, employed persons should be paid their wage with money.

To ensure effective primitive accumulation, colonial governments in Africa took several steps to develop this new class of workers. Most colonial governments²³ resorted to land control mechanism to curtail the African land rights. It was hoped that without title to land the African will not be able to live a subsistence life style and will thus be forced into wage employment. Also there was recourse to taxation as a way of coercing the African into full wage employment. The colonial government imposed head tax on all adult males for a period. This tax was to be paid with money and the belief was that it will force the African to seek wage employment.

In West Africa and the Gold Coast there was no recourse to land alienation. In the Gold Coast, as in the rest of Africa, land 'was a symbol of the continuity of the family, and in this lay a good deal of its religious significance'.²⁴ Indeed in the Gold Coast, unlike, Southern Africa, land was easily available because it controlled by its aboriginal owners. The colonial government's policy of controlling land and putting its wealth at the disposal of the government and promote foreign interests in land, minerals and forest products was heavily challenged by the locals. This land control protest eventually led to the formation of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society in 1897.²⁵ By the 1910s, the Gold Coast colonial government was more concerned with land alienation through over commercialization. With the influx of mining capital into the Gold Coast, land was commercialized with concession seeking individuals and firms offering huge sums of money for land.

In 1852, there was the first experiment with direct taxation in the Gold Coast when the Poll tax ordinance was passed. It was not to directly force the African into wage employment as was done in other colonies. The idea was to generate enough revenue to support an expanding government machinery and also to provide more roads, schools, hospitals and dispensaries in the Gold Coast. The poll tax was heavily resisted by the Gold Coast chiefs and people from 1854 when they realized they were not deriving direct benefits from the tax collected. Rather most of the expenses was in the area of paying government officials.²⁶ It was not until 1898 that the issue of direct taxation was revisited.²⁷ Resistance to some of these colonial policies led to collective actions by Gold coasters organized based on region, ethnicity or occupation.

5. From Proto Unions to Modern Unions

Evidence of workmen agitation dates back to 1896, when Cape Coast cannoemen withdrew their labour.²⁸ This group of workmen who earned a living by ferrying goods and people from European ships that were unable to anchor close to the shore took this action in support of a demand for improvement in their conditions of service.²⁹ Thereafter, in 1898, the Commissioner of the Northern Territories reported the existence of a union of carriers from the coast who were able to dictate the terms on which they would convey loads.³⁰ These 'proto unions', as Orr called them, demonstrate all the features of a trade union.³¹ However, very little is known of the

²² An Ordinance for regulating the relations between Employers and Employed under contract, 23 July, 1877, Public Records Administration and Archival Department, Hereafter PRAAD, Accra, ADM 4/1/6

²³ Particularly in Eastern and southern Africa

²⁴ Kimble, A Political history, p17

²⁵ Adu-Boahen

²⁶ Kimble, A Political history, p168-191

²⁷ Kimble, A Political history, p168-191

²⁸ Kimble, A Political History of Ghana, p.44

²⁹ The cannoemen were able to strike because they were fishermen by profession. They partook in wage work to supplement their earnings from fishing.

³⁰ David Kimble *op cit.* p. 44

³¹ Charles A. Orr, "Trade Unionism in Colonial Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol.4, No.1 (May, 1966) pp. 65-81



groups, their leaders and organizational structure because their activities were not well documented. Like all most early agitations before the 1930s, they only surfaced in historical documents when they agitated for better conditions.

The first decade of the twentieth century was dominated by the institutional organization of craftsmen. These craftsmen associations like those of the goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths and carpenters were akin to trade unions in their object. As was expressed in the 1911 census report “certain of the trades possess organizations termed guilds, which are not dissimilar in objects and methods to a modern trade-union”.³² The professed aims of these groups were “to regulate wages, to make laws concerning apprentices, to guard against unfair competition and to settle dispute among the craftsmen”.³³ All in all they worked to safeguard the living standards of their members. As capital flowed into the Gold Coast mining sector from Europe and South Africa, the interest of the African was pushed to the role of a wage worker in the mining industry. Then again capital inflow led to an increasing rush for concessions in the Gold Coast. The colonial government sought to regulate these concessions by passing the mining protection ordinance. It was in response to this ordinance that the Gold and Silversmith Association was formed in 1909.³⁴ However, the broader objective of the Association was not lost on Kwamina Dwinfu when in 1914 he applied to the Commissioner of Asante for recognition of the “Gold Smiths Association League”:

It has become a general practice of some of the goldsmiths in ashanti to alloy gold with brass, copper and other metals when executing work for customers who have given them pure or fine gold for such work. In the interest of our business and work we have formed the present association the object of which is to pursue, prosecute and bring to punishment such people.³⁵

The inter-war period saw a resurgence of labour protest in the Gold Coast. After 1917 prices rose steeply and despite a general shortage of labour, wages did not rise. The cocoa boom of 1919-1920 ensured that in spite of the high prices of imported goods farmers and the communities as a whole were able to afford their needs. However, the general financial and trade depression of the world extended to the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast experienced an economic depression from 1920 and cocoa the main stay of the Gold Coast economy was seriously affected. The price of cocoa fell from £122 to £39 per ton, and this seriously affected purchasing power in the Gold Coast.³⁶ These economic difficulties were compounded by the worldwide depression of 1929, which ensured a total collapse of prices in the Gold Coast. Workers reacted spontaneously to these difficulties and their prime target was government, the largest employer of wage labour in the Gold Coast. In February 1919, the Public Works Department (PWD) workers set off a series of protests that marked the period when they demonstrated collectively against the delay in the payment of their wages. Then again, artisans in Accra also struck in 1921 under the banner, Artisans and Labourers Union.³⁷ The Railway employees who have been described as the most militant of all the unions³⁸ and the PWD workers went on strike when the colonial administration demanded a reduction of wages as a result of the depression. In 1925, boatmen also refused to ferry the Prince of Wales from his ship to the shore of the Gold Coast unless their wages were increased by one hundred percent.³⁹

It was in response to this African agency- the wave of strikes- and the fear that the trade unions would develop underground like the British unions⁴⁰ that the colonial administration started batting around with the idea of

³² Government of the Gold Coast: *Census Report*, Accra, Government Printer, 1911, p.35

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ David Kimble op. cit p.40

³⁵ Kwamina Dwinfu to the Chief Commissioner of Ashanti, PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG1/10/1

³⁶ Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast legislative Council Debates*, Accra, Government Printer, 1921

³⁷ Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast legislative Council Debates*, Accra, Government Printer, 1921

³⁸ Lacy, L. Alexander, *A History of Railway Unionism in Ghana* (M.A Thesis: University of Ghana, 1965)

³⁹ Labour protest during this period was not limited to the Gold Coast; it was experienced throughout the British colonies.

⁴⁰ The early stage of the Industrial Revolution in Britain was a period of appalling working conditions and long working hours. Workers were paid a pittance for their work and seventeen hours work per day was the norm. These conditions brought workers together according to their trades such as carpenters, brick layers, cobblers etc. in order to secure better working conditions from their employers. However the British parliament passed the Combination Act of 1799, which banned Trade Unionism. The Trade Union movement thus went underground. Workers formed gangs known as the luddites who lynched unscrupulous employers, looted property, broke machines, set fire to factory buildings and vanished. For the twenty-five years that the trade unions were banned, both the rich and the poor lived in fear. There were wide spread strikes and lockouts, looting, arson, civil commotion, burglary and armed robberies. To remedy the situation the British Government repealed the Combination Act in 1824 and passed the Trade Union Act in 1825, so that workers could legally organize trade unions and

encouraging the development of trade unions.⁴¹ An Order in Council was issued to the British colonies in 1931. By these orders the British government implored the government of the colonies to encourage the formation of Trade Unions and focus their activities on wages so that their attention might not be directed towards political demands. This was followed by the appointment of Sir Granville Orde Browne as the first labour officer to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Prior to the appointment of Orde Browne, the British colonial Government had received a British trade unionist, J. R. Dickinson to the Gold Coast. His purpose was to conduct a preliminary survey of labour conditions in the Gold Coast, aimed at developing, controlling and directing labour. Subsequently, upon the receipt of the report of the survey the Gold Coast colonial government complied with the content of a 1937 circular⁴² and established the Labour Department in 1938. In addressing the Legislative Council Governor Arnold Hodson emphasized the importance of the Department to labour issues:

As you are aware, there have recently been several strikes of labour, as a result of which dislocation of business, loss of output to employers and loss of wages to employees have been caused. In each case the reasons for the strike were obscure and no precise grievances of the employees appeared to have been properly ventilated; no convenient machinery exists whereby Government, which cannot dissociate itself from the causes and effect of labour unrest, can investigate such grievances. I have accordingly obtained the sanction of the Secretary of State for the creation of a new department of Government, which will be known as the labour Department, and for which provision will be made in next year's Estimate⁴³

Thus, on 1 April 1938, the Gold Coast Labour Department was formally inaugurated in Kumasi as an agency of government. Among its functions was the monitoring of the relationship between employers and employees, inspection and examination of labour conditions, surveying of legislation relating to labour and reporting on the development of Trade Unions. Also it was to report on the conduct and relationship between trade unions and employers. In the annual report of the Labour Department, Dickinson acknowledged the urgency of attending to trade union matters since it was prudent to deal with a recognized reputable and responsible organization which could collect and articulate workers' grievances. In his view, if such recognition was not given to a well-organized union, agitators would take advantage of the situation and exploit it.⁴⁴

Following this, the Gold Coast colonial government complied the 1931 circular and on 10 March 1941, the Legislative Council of the Gold Coast enacted the Trades Union Ordinance No. 13.⁴⁵ This ordinance came after over six years of consideration by legislators. Indeed, in British colonial Africa the Gold Coast was "the last of the West African colonies to have such a law"⁴⁶. This Ordinance was aimed at registering, regularizing and regulating the activities of trade unions in the Gold Coast and steering their interest away from politics. Section nine of the Ordinance stipulated that: "Any five or more members of a trade union may by subscribing their names to the rules of the union and otherwise complying with respect to registration, register such Trade Union under this ordinance".⁴⁷ Despite the freedom given to workers, the same document hedged the freedom of Government employees to unionize. Section three made it unlawful for any person in the service of the Gold Coast to be a member of a union except in cases specially approved by the Governor.⁴⁸ Government employees were further blacked out when the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Ordinance (1941) made strikes in

bargain collectively with their employers. For further insight into the development of British Trade Unions see: Victor Feather, *The Essentials of Trade Unionism* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1963); Allan Flanders, *Trade Unions* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1952); Eric L. Wigham, *Trade Unions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); Jenkins and Mortimer, *British Trade Unions Today* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967)

⁴¹ Cooper, Decolonization and African Society, p. 2

⁴² The circular emphasized the desirability of establishing a Labour Department in each territory.

⁴³ Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast legislative Council Debates*, Accra, Government Printer, 1938

⁴⁴ Government of the Gold Coast: *Labour Conditions*, Accra Government Printer, 1939, pp. 12-13

⁴⁵ Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast Ordinances*, Accra Government Printer, 1941 No. 13. Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast Legislative Council Debates*, Accra Government Printer, 1941.

⁴⁶ The Chief Inspector of Labour, Captain J. R Dickinson. Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast Legislative Council Debates*, Accra, Government Printer, 1941. p43. In British West Africa, Gambia was the first territory to pass the Trade Union Ordinance in 1932. Nigeria and Sierra Leone passed theirs in 1939.

⁴⁷ Government of the Gold Coast: *Gold Coast Ordinances*, Accra, Government Printer, 1941 No. 13

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

public services illegal.⁴⁹ Section six made strikes and lockout illegal and a criminal offence if it was not in furtherance of a trade dispute but aimed at coercing government.

Although most people in the Gold Coast have shown ability for collective bargaining and organizing, and unions like the motor drivers' union, postal agents union, enginemen's union and several others were already operating, the ordinance regularized their activities. The first union to register under this ordinance was the Motor Transport Union.

Since the inauguration of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) at Sekondi in 1945, the unions have not kept to the colonial objective of insulating them from politics and "depoliticizing" trade unions. This stemmed from the fact that government is the largest employer of wage labour and economic demands are mostly inter-twined with politics. At the inaugural meeting of the TUC, Joe Annan advised his fellow unionists that:

We should engage in the politics of our country and the rest of the world and hasten the day when a strong and verile Labour Party will be the political organ of the Labour Movement in the Gold Coast. We should organize a political fund with which to promote legislation on trade union rights, factory safety, compensation for individual accidents and similar matters; and we should enlarge our interest to extend to the control of industry, general social problems and, indeed, to most questions affecting the public welfare.⁵⁰

Thus, a recount of the history of the labour movement of Ghana has shown a deep involvement with politics. Three years after its inauguration the TUC entered directly into a political matter. In 1948 the 'Big Six' leaders of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) were detained and held responsible for the year's riot by the colonial administration. The TUC called for the immediate release of the detainees, and also a lift of the ban on newspapers and pamphlets in the Gold Coast. Subsequently the TUC got involved with the nationalist struggle by its alliance with the Convention People's Party (CPP) and participation in the positive action of 1950. These events virtually collapsed the TUC, as union funds were exhausted and many unions lost support. As a result two competing centres emerged after 1951, the Gold Coast Trade Union Congress and the Ghana Trade Union Congress, which coexisted for about 18 months. By 1953 the two groups had merged to form one umbrella body. In spite of the political involvement of the TUC from the 1940s unions have never neglected their prime function, which is the betterment of the living standards of workers.

6. Conclusion

In recounting the history of the development of trade unionism in the Ghana three phases can be clearly distinguished. The first phase was marked by proto unions. This represents the periods when unionism can be identified through agitation for better working condition. Although these proto unions surfaced only as a result of agitations with employers they form the early part of workers consciousness as a group. The second phase was marked by agitations in the inter-war period. Unions like the public works department workers, artisans and labourers, and the railway workers showed up in historical records. These unions were more visible in historical document and they had some structures in place. However, by law the unions were not recognized by the colonial government. The third phase was after the enactment of trade unions ordinance 1941. The ordinance defined all these unions and gave them institutional backing and recognition.

With the regularization of the activities of trades unions the colonial government made efforts to steer their activities away from politics. In spite of these, the trade unions became actively involved in the politics of the Gold Coast.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid* No.12

⁵⁰ Joe Annan, "Our Trade Union Policy and Organization", on the occasion of the inaugural meeting of the Gold Coast Trades Union Congress held at Sekondi on September 8, 1945, as Quoted in Patrick Obeng-Fosu, *Industrial Relations in Ghana: The Law and Practice* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2007)

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- Adm 5/- series Reports of committees and commissions
- Adm 4/- series Ordinances of The Gold Coast
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- Gold Coast Census Reports
- Gold Coast Weekly Review