

Union Strategies in the Sri Lankan Tea Plantations: Rediscovering the Movement Dimension

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Abstract

With the launch of export-oriented industrialisation policies in 1977, trade unions in Sri Lanka entered a new set of challenges. The state promotion of labour market deregulation and privatisation has directly undermined union strategies based on bureaucratic modes of organising worker solidarity. Nevertheless, among the gamut of union strategies are tendencies characterising what is described as social movement unionism (SMU). The SMU approach focuses on strategies of independent unions combining participatory democracy internally with structured alliances externally. This paper looks at the case of a union in the tea plantations and its potential towards developing a SMU strategic orientation. In particular, the discussion focuses on the deepening of democratic tendencies within the unions which may be capable of reinforcing the movement dimension of unions.

Introduction

With the emergence of the latest phase of internationalisation of capital, trade unions across the global economy are faced with new challenges. These new challenges relate to the enhanced mobility of capital and state

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strategies promoting Export Oriented Industrialisation (EOI), integrating and fragmenting workers in different regulation regimes. Advocated by the global institutions of economic governance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), state strategies of privatisation and labour market deregulation have expanded the 'casualisation' jobs, shrinking the core of secure, permanent, full-time jobs. This coincides with the 'feminisation' of labour markets, illustrated by the increasing entry of women into wage labour and mostly into casualised jobs. The EOI strategies are grounded in restraining representative politics of unions, by dismantling corporatist mechanisms that nurtured dominant trade union strategies.

Amidst the spectrum of trade union strategies responding to EOI in Sri Lanka are tendencies characterising what is described as Social Movement Unionism (SMU). This paper focuses on a tea plantation union, particularly describing its potential towards developing a SMU strategic orientation. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section describes the SMU perspective, particularly in relation to dominant union strategies of political unionism. The second section looks at union strategies in terms of changing politics of production under privatisation. The third section describes the plantation union, National Union of Workers (NUW), and its tendencies towards developing a SMU strategic orientation. With representative politics of unions increasingly restrained by narrow party politics, the SMU approach highlights the need to transform both internal and external union relations when trying to assert the movement dimension within unions. This is especially in deepening internal democracy, encouraging forms of participatory democracy while reinforcing alliances with counter-hegemonic movements.

1. Social Movement Unionism

In distilling the spectrum of trade union strategies into some essential features, three main forms of unionism emerge. Certainly, these union forms change over time, and are interrelated, and can be described as economic, political, and social movement unionism. Economic unionism (business, "best practice", or company unionism) situates trade unions primarily as labour market actors, dominated by employer interests and narrowed to workplace issues. The World Bank and the IMF promote this neo-classical economic approach to unions, in a discourse of 'partnerships'.

Political unionism situates trade unions as economic as well as political actors, particularly as working class organisations, emphasising rep-

representative politics and the state. Both economic and political unionism characterise the dominant union forms that emerged with the influence of post-second world war geo-political alliances. These dominant union strategies were socialised in closed national economies and trade union internationalism represented by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Consequently, these unions are embedded in nation-state oriented strategies based on male biased bureaucratic modes of organising workers.

Social movement unionism (SMU) perspectives emerged in the early 1970s, in response to changes in the international division of labour that accompanied state strategies undermining worker solidarity and trade unions. Taking into account globally flexible structures of production inducing a new international division of labour, the SMU perspectives highlighted the inadequacies of entrenched union strategies based on bureaucratic modes of organising workers in the formal sector.

The emergence of new approaches to trade unions was based on labour movement strategies resisting authoritarian state forms, in “semi-peripheral” areas or “late industrialising” economies of South Africa and Brazil in the 1970s, and South Korea and Philippines in the 1980’s (Moody, 1997; Seidman, 1994). However, the development of SMU strategies is not confined to semi-industrialised authoritarian countries. In the North, the Canadian Auto Workers Union, and Justice for Janitors in the US (Johnston, 1999) have adopted similar strategies (Moody, 1997; Waterman, 1993).

SMU perspectives focus on ‘independent’ union strategies that extend beyond the workplace, encouraging forms of participatory democracy as well as the movement dimension of unions. Movements in this approach imply the organisation of a continuous collective agency oriented towards transforming everyday life as well as institutional practices.

Political Unionism

The initial debates around the SMU approach converged on the union-party relationship, contrasting itself from political unionism (Lambert 1989, Waterman 1993). The dominant approaches to explaining the union-party relations were based on Marxist (Socialist) and Durkheimian sociological (social democratic, liberal Keynesian) perspectives. While the two perspectives differ in terms of explaining capitalism, they both situate trade unions as subordinate to the political party or the state. In turn, trade unions are approached as actors in an evolutionary rationali-

sation process of capitalism and industrialisation, incorporated into the state, via political parties. However, the party-union relationship entered a new set of relations with the decline of classic Socialist or Communist labour parties, and the de-linking of the labour movement from the ideology of socialism (Hobsbawm, 1989).

While SMU perspectives complement elements of political unionism – critical engagement with industrial relations system and contentious movement politics – their point of departure concerns the reconstitution of collective agency. In terms of collective agency, SMU focuses on new ways of organising and mobilising worker solidarity.

In contrast to political unionism, the SMU approach suggests that there should be relative union autonomy from political parties and the state. Enduring forms of political unionism based on formal bureaucratic modes of organising workers with interlocking union-party leaders have reinforced the authority of union leaders and their control over members. In the process, union leaders and officials have justified the elimination of opposition, restraining internal dialogue, political debates, and workplace militancy. Highlighting the tendencies of political parties to negotiate and institutionalise changes demanded and won by trade unions, the SMU approach suggests party strategies that serve, rather than lead and dominate, trade unions and the labour movement (Waterman, 1993: 11).

With participatory democracy as a core element, the articulation of union independence is grounded in encouraging autonomous, creative initiative of unions and union members. Here, dominant union strategies based exclusively on formal democratic procedures are reoriented towards participatory forms of democracy linking “democracy of deciding with democracy of doing” (Wainright, 1994). In asserting participatory democracy, the SMU approach emphasises the experiential and the tacit dimensions of organisational knowledge grounded in a concrete localised context of workplaces, communities, and institutions of daily life. While recognising the necessity of technical and specialised forms of knowledge, this participatory approach encourages a pooling of knowledge and validates tacit forms of knowledge (Wainwright, 1994). Here, the assertion of participatory democracy internally is interrelated with reorganising external alliances.

In transforming external relations, the SMU approach emphasises building structured alliances with other counter-hegemonic movements and organisations – women, ecology, human rights, peace, and the post-1999 Global Justice and Solidarity Movement. These alliances are ‘structured’ by way of constitutional provisions and collective decision making (Lambert, 1989). Here, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which also include International NGOs (INGOs) and Transna-

tional Activist Networks (TANs) have emerged as potential allies in reinforcing the movement dimension of unions.

2. Politics of Production in Sri Lanka

With the election of the United National Party (UNP) in 1977, the Sri Lankan state strategies shifted from state-led industrialisation (1956-77) towards an export oriented market-led strategy advocated by the World Bank and IMF. The promotion of privatisation and deregulation of labour markets have dismantled corporatist mechanisms, thus restraining representative politics of unions. Here, the introduction of Export Processing Zone in 1978 banned unions, while dividing workers among different sets of labour legislation. These legal changes were complemented with coercive state strategies repressing unions and labour activists.

The tea plantations in Sri Lanka are an expression of the colonial plantation economy, that has endured for over 175 years with minimal changes in relations of production and the labour process. The plantations mostly located in the central hill country are worked largely by Tamil workers, who were brought in as indentured labourers under British colonialism.

The denial of citizenship to Tamil plantation workers, following independence in 1948, enhanced the fragmentation of unions along ethnic identity politics. The plantation workers' protracted struggle for citizenship rights illustrates the politics of Sinhala-Buddhist ethnocentric nationalism. In 2001, there were around 75,000 plantation workers that were considered 'stateless'.¹ The assertion of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, along with Tamil nationalism in the North, particularly since mid-1970s, has subordinated hill-country Tamils to both expressions of ethnocentric identity politics.

The Tamil community in the plantations has a distinct ethnic identity from the Tamil communities in the North and the East parts of the island. The key characteristic of the latter is their access to land, while the plantation workers characterise a landless, agrarian proletariat. With the militarisation of the ethnic conflict, since 1983, the Tamil plantation workers were faced with arbitrary arrests and detention restricting their freedom of movement (Manikam, 1995). While citizenship rights were granted in 1986 at first, and then extended in 1988 more comprehensively, problems related to producing birth certificates and identity cards continued to restrain citizenship rights (Manikam, 1995).

The main reforms in the plantations emerged under the United Front (UF) government (1970-77) supported by working class parties and the

labour movement. The UF government nationalised the plantations extending trade union rights in the plantations (restraining terminations, recognising right of entry for trade unions, and advocating check-off facilities). Along with the land reforms launched in 1972, the company owned plantations were nationalised in 1975. While the actual land redistribution was marginal, the Sinhala-Buddhist state strategies influencing land reforms evicted Tamil workers in some areas. Although the unions gained collective rights, the labour regimes in the plantations changed very little.

The labour regimes in the tea plantations are based on despotic forms of labour control in which coercion prevails over consent. The exploitation of labour often situates manual labourers as 'coolies' denying workers their rights, respect and dignity. The dominant management strategies of labour control combine patriarchal kinship relations based on caste, with control over space, where the residential labour blurs the boundaries between work, family and private life (Kurian, 1998).

With women workers forming the core labour force engaged in plucking leaves, the gender division of labour in the plantations situates women workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy (*ibid.*). The plucking activity, a critical labour intensive portion of the production process, generally requires women to work longer hours than men, for the same wage (since 1984). The double burden of long working hours, under harsh conditions, and doing household chores in ill-ventilated kitchens along with problems of food, both in quantity and quality, contribute to the dismal health status of women (Vijeysandiran, 1991). Infant and child mortality is considerably higher among the estate population than the non-estate population (*ibid.*). In turn, the patriarchal structures subordinating women workers in the plantation labour regimes, are complemented by enduring union strategies.

Political Unionism in Sri Lanka

The emergence of political unionism as a dominant trade union strategy in Sri Lanka relates to their key role in the anti-colonial struggles. The trade unions and the labour movement led by working class parties were significant actors expanding the realm of representative politics. The 1956-1977 'closed economy' period transformed the paternalist colonial mode labour control towards a liberal corporatist mode, legitimising the role of trade unions within systems of industrial relations and parliamentary politics. This also incorporated unions into the state with interlocking trade union and party leaderships. For instance, the two (UNP) presidents during the 1977-93 period, also held union leadership posi-

tions. The UNP Minister for Plantations (89-90) was also the leader of the UNP union in the plantations of the Lanka *Jathika* Estate Workers Union (LJEWU).

The unions' incorporation into the state is a significant mechanism reinforcing bureaucratic modes of organising workers. While rationalising unions in the interests of the state, political unionism strategies reinforced a stratum of union leaders, with overlapping roles as politicians, lawyers and industry/sector experts. By emphasising organisational efficiency over accountability of officials, organisational knowledge was centralised, distancing officials from members. The incorporation of unions into state strategies also meant reorganising unions in terms of capitalist, patriarchal and ethnocentric strategies of the state. Here, the privatisation of plantations illustrate the mobilisation of party subordinated unions-for the interests of state.

Privatisation of Tea Plantations

The ruling UNP allied unions, the LJEWU and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), supported the privatisation of plantations. At the time, these two unions controlled nearly 70%-75% of the unionised workers (Maliyagoda, 2000). Meanwhile, the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC), a coalition of trade unions allied with working class parties and a range of plantation NGOs, opposed the privatisation.

The restructuring of plantations under liberalisation, launched in 1980, coincided with the ruling UNP regime undermining the labour movement led by the working class parties. The eruption of militarised ethnic conflict since 1983, reinforced authoritarian state strategies directly restraining unions. Meanwhile, the privatisation of plantations in 1992, took place in the aftermath of an unprecedented outbreak of political violence, related to the 1988-1991 insurrection of the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna - Peoples Liberation Front* (JVP) and the counter-insurrection of the state. It was a period of generalised terror, involving mass disappearances, overt repression of trade unions and union leaders, and the arbitrary arrest and detention of Tamil workers. The state's enhanced coercive power, particularly during this period, directly undermined union resistance and the movement dimension of unions.

The significant impact of privatisation relates to the narrowing scope of collective bargaining by retracting state social provisions for plantation workers. The new employment contract limited days of work and wage increases while intensifying the labour processes. In order to oversee a variety of socio-economic issues excluded from the employment contract, such as housing, wages, education, healthcare, sanitation, and

agricultural development, the Plantations Housing and Social Welfare Trust (or the "Trust") was launched in 1993. The companies retain a majority representation in this tripartite body, jointly funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). However, the Trust was limited in its capacity to actually initiate any reforms, illustrating new forms of subordination and exploitation of workers under privatisation (Manikam, 1995; Shanmugaratnam, 1997: 34).

Trade Unions in the Plantations

Trade unions in the tea plantations are located in the most organised sector of the economy, among the most poverty stricken and marginalised workers. In the post 1977 period, conditions of poverty in the plantations worsened. During the period 1990/91 to 95/96 the number of poor households increased from 21% to 26% (Vijeyesandiran, 1991). The dominant union strategies in the plantations illustrate forms of political unionism, and are often extended beyond the workplace to union-community alliances.

The plantations consist of a fragmented constellation of around 61 registered unions in 1999 (Labour Dept., 1999). The unionised workers accounted for nearly 64% of the total workforce in the plantations (450,000 unionised workers out of a workforce of around 700,000 workers) in 1999. Nearly 80% of the unions are small unions with less than 1,000 members, with around six large unions representing the core unions (Labour Dept., 1999).

The two largest unions in the plantations are the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) in 1939 and the *Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union* (LJEWU) in 1961. The CWC is also a political party representing mostly the Tamil plantation community. It emerged as the dominant union in the post-1977 period, primarily due to its alliances with the ruling Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian parties (the UNP 77-94 and the PA – Peoples Alliance 94-2001).

The LJEWU is one of two main UNP party unions that expanded through political patronage, under the UNP rule (1977-94). While all major unions in the plantations are political party subordinated unions, the CWC and the LJEWU strategies are mostly narrowed to collective bargaining (economic unionism) while the working class party unions articulate a broader agenda of social reform (political unionism). Nevertheless, all major unions are entrenched in bureaucratic modes of organising workers, paternalist and patriarchal internal relations and limited alliances with other worker organisations within and outside plantations.

3. The NUW: Emergence and Activism

The National Union of Workers (NUW) was formed in 1965, as a dissenting group of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). The CWC alliance with the anti-Communist ICFTU, during the early days of the Cold War, led to its first fracturing in 1956, and the second with the NUW split. The NUW split highlighted the authoritarian leadership style of the CWC, along with its' narrow, state and party subordinated union strategies.

The NUW, an officially 'independent union', aligned with working-class party unions, Communist Party (CP) and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). Both the CP and the LSSP were central to articulating class politics of unions. In the early years (1966-70), the NUW membership accounted for nearly 50,000 workers. However, during the 1970-77 period under the United Front (UF) government, the NUW along with other working class party unions allied with the UF, saw their membership decline. The economic crisis of the early 1970s combined with Sinhala-Buddhist ethnocentric strategies in undermining social reforms pushed by the labour movement. During this period the CWC and the LJEWU (UNP) expanded their membership by organising worker discontent for their own party interests.

The NUW membership further declined with the UNP's decisive repression of opposition unions and the labour movement during the early 1980s. The trend continued even under the new PA (People's Alliance) government (1994-2001) which was supported by the labour movement. Most joined the CWC and the LJEWU, since these unions gained access as key actors in collective bargaining following the 1992 privatisation. The NUW also lost members due to poorly organised estate level branches.²

The NUW shifted its independent union positioning in 1990, launching its own political party with the aim of rebuilding its membership base. Since the 1988 extension of franchise to more Tamil plantation workers, trade union strategies in the plantations increasingly focused on representative electoral politics. However, the NUW has had limited success at elections. More importantly, election campaigning expenditures have led to a drain on union resources. In effect, the union's financial position has remained weak, surviving on a shoe-string budget, since around the early 1990s.³

The NUW membership in 2000 comprised 25,418 workers, with women (13,583) constituting 53% of its membership. During the period 1995-2000, the NUW membership decreased 21%, from 32,095 to 25,418. The number of estates with NUW presence declined by 17%, from 330 in 1995 to 250 in 2000. While a significant majority are Tamil

workers, a small minority of the members are Sinhala workers. The executive committee of the NUW consists of 5 members, including one woman who is the vice president. The broader organising committee includes 32 members. The main union positions – the general secretary, president, and treasurer – are held by senior male trade unionists. The NUW administrative staff included 40 full-time and 18 part-time, mostly male workers, spread across 15 district offices. As in most plantation unions, the lowest unit of organisation is the estate branch, which consists of three committees focusing on women, youth and general interests. The branch members on the estates elect the Estate Committees that are co-ordinated by a district office. This organisational form also involves a specific value orientation.

Internal Relations

The NUW was formed with representative democracy as a core value of unionism. Accordingly, “any worker organisation should be headed by a worker in order to render its best services to the workers” (WEAL, 1995: 170). This value orientation has encouraged electing workers as leaders while training them to assume leadership positions. Amidst remnants of a ‘coolie’ culture, this strategic orientation highlights NUW’s efforts to reclaim worker dignity. Thus for instance, the position of president within the union is allocated to an elected plantation worker.

However, the formal democratic structures of the organisation in practice coincide with leadership styles sustaining a centralised bureaucracy. The leadership and the bureaucracy, although geared towards a notion of a ‘good’ bureaucracy that evades corruption and inefficiency, still demonstrate a narrow strategic orientation as a ‘service union’, reinforcing the depoliticisation of members.

The NUW’s organisational democracy, with centralised decision-making, illustrates a representative democracy primarily geared towards command and control of the membership. Since the launch of liberalisation in 1977, there have been only two general conferences held in 1985 and in 1992. In addition, the present union leadership see the lack of resources delaying the next conferences. According to the general secretary, the main objective of electing leaders at the general conference is achieved by the delegates’ conference held every two years. However, this illustrates a restriction of internal democracy.

Although the NUW is based on a bureaucratic mode of organising workers, the union has also mobilised workers in a range of contentious collective actions. From wearing black bands, go-slows, to militant strikes, the NUW has maintained its capacity for contentious movement

politics or resistance outside the institutional domain. However, the dominant orientation to organising workers continue to sustain patriarchal and paternalist internal relations. The appointment of a woman worker as a vice president in 1985 was a major organisational achievement. Nevertheless, there is little effort to transform enduring patriarchal structures within the union. Similarly, the paternalist tendencies of the NUW leadership have restrained the nurturing of youth leaders.

External Relations

The NUW's main alliance is with the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC), which has emerged as a potential alternative to the CWC and the LJEWU. Besides its alliance with the JPTUC, the NUW has limited external relations, illustrating a general tendency among plantation trade unions. In asserting union internationalism, the NUW maintains loose links with South Indian activists and the WFTU affiliated unions. However, these links are limited in mobilising global solidarity actions or in articulating new union strategies.

In terms of INGOs, the NUW maintains sporadic links with German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and US American Centre for International Labour Solidarity (ACILS) labour organisations. These relations reinforce forms of economic unionism, by narrowing their interventions to worker education programs focused on collective bargaining issues. In June 1998, the FES launched the National Association for Trade Union Research and Education (NATURE) involving 16 major unions. The guest lecturers included representatives from the World Bank, IMF, Planning Ministry, and the Public Enterprise Reform Commission (PERC). There were no direct links with the universities, research or activist NGOs or labour oriented academics/activists. Accordingly, the labour INGOs complement ICFTU strategies of promoting economic unionism.

Although the NUW leadership is critical of the role of NGOs in the plantations, temporary alliances are often formed. Here, the NUW is linked with the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Area (CSPA), a network of small NGOs (including *Satyodaya*, Christian Workers Fellowship, and Social Development Centre) engaged in a range of activities from social development projects to lobbying the state. According to the NUW leadership,

... the whole problem is that NGOs, not all, but some are only there for namesake. They appoint their own people, they live a cushy life ... trade unionist are ones who suffer ... NGOs also talk ill of trade

unions, 'people are giving subscriptions and what are you doing for them?' ... They don't know the amount of work we do ... they go do propaganda in the estates, and the workers also think they are right. Without the trade unions they can't get into estates.

The NUW and most other plantation trade unions' antagonism towards NGOs are reflective of their strategic orientation as (depoliticised) providers of services, grounded in bureaucratic modes of organising workers. Nevertheless, the union capacity to mobilise workers is a distinct feature of unions in comparison to most NGOs in the plantations. Here, the union antagonism towards NGOs also reflects the pressures of new corporatist arrangements, undermining union strategies in the realm of representative politics.

Strategies of Representative Politics

The NUW's party-union relationship remains weak in terms of building union capacities. During the 1988-1998 period, two NUW union leaders were elected as members of provincial councils. However, a significant proportion of the NUW membership vote mostly for the major parties (primarily the CWC and UNP) rather than the NUW. The political party was launched with the aim of accessing institutions of governance and state resources, particularly at the provincial council level. While the CWC and the LJEWU (UNP) have monopolised access to most state resources, the NUW was able to acquire two industrial sewing machines for its youth training programs geared towards gaining employment in garment factories.

The NUW's electoral strategies are restrained by the weakness of the electoral system itself. The centralised (presidential) system along with the domination of majoritarian parties entrenched in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism have undermined both class as well as ethnic identity politics of hill country Tamils. Meanwhile the escalation of ethnic conflict has reinforced militarised authoritarian state mechanisms (i.e. Prevention of Terrorism Act and Emergency Regulations) targeting plantation Tamil workers with threats, intimidation, and violence. In this constrained context, the NUW's engagement in the realm of representative politics has subordinated rather than amplified collective mobilisation.

Women Worker Strategies

The NUW intervenes on a range of women worker issues at multiple levels, while embedded in enduring structures of patriarchy in the plan-

tations. At a national level, the interventions include demands for equal wages, better housing, education, and health. The NUW has sustained a campaign to change the Maternity Benefits Ordinance highlighting dismal conditions in most maternity wards in the plantation areas.

In terms of articulating women workers' interests, the NUW celebrates the International Women's Day, and the May Day ceremonies often include women speakers. However, these occasional expressions absent the formation of structured alliances with women's organisations. Although the union strategies have attempted to include women into the decision-making processes, the representation of women in these positions remains marginal.

The NUW's training programs and income generating activities for women workers parallel similar efforts by other trade unions and NGOs in the plantations. However, the ubiquitous "sewing classes" promoted by most trade unions and NGOs in the plantations are limited in actual income generation or in changing the subordinate status of women. Most of the projects aimed at improving the economic status of women, i.e. poultry-rearing, growing vegetables and flowers, batik making, bee-keeping, cookery, etc, reinforces their double burden of wage work and domestic labour (CENWOR, 1985: 175).

Possibilities of Social Movement Unionism

The NUW is embedded in a whole host of constraints reflective of most unions in the plantations. Nevertheless, it also expresses some unique possibilities. Although the NUW launched its political party in 1990, the party primarily serves rather than dominates the union. In effect, the NUW illustrates a strategic orientation countering the dominant party subordinated unions (the CWC and the LJEWU) in the plantations. The NUW's political unionism extends beyond systems of industrial relations as economic actors, to making claims on the state as political actors. While this independent political unionism illustrates a range of limitations in terms of its bureaucratic organisational mode, it also points towards potential for developing social movement unionism strategies.

Although the NUW has promoted 'bottom up' leaders, the formal structures of the trade union have remained top down. While encouraging strong branch level leaders, there is also a tendency to see this activism with suspicion, as potentially breaking away to join other unions. Nevertheless the democratic value orientation opens the possibility of deepening formal democratic organisational structures, towards participatory forms of democracy.

The point of entry towards encouraging participatory democracy re-

lates to the NUW's approach towards organisational knowledge. Here, organisational knowledge is primarily seen in a specialised and technical character, concerned with collective bargaining and labour rights. By situating technical and administrative imperatives as crucial 'givens', the NUW reinforces a 'professional elite' or 'experts', often with best intentions to serve members, yet unaccountable to the membership.

Here, the strategic perspectives of SMU emphasise the deepening of formal democracy to express forms of participatory democracy. While acknowledging the complex contradictions of organisational change, the aim is to encourage a bargained outcome that recognises diversity and subjugated identities (Waterman, 1993). This concerns a negotiation of different aims and broadening strategies of collective bargaining that often filter out certain worker demands.

The deepening of formal democracy relates to enhancing worker capacities and education. Worker education here is based on a pooling of knowledge combining specialised, technical forms of organisational knowledge with tacit and experimental approaches to knowledge. Building worker capacities internally is intertwined with broadening union alliances externally. In particular, the aim is to encourage structured alliances with democratic social movements and organisations, recognising diversity in unity.

With a majority of members consisting of women workers, deepening NUW's alliances with democratic women's organisations is a potential step towards reinforcing internal democracy. The NUW's celebration of the International Women's Day as well as links with the CSPA illustrates existing capacities for developing deeper alliances. Here, the NUW's loose alliances with NGOs such as *Penn Wimochana Gnayodayam* (PWG), are central to reinforcing the movement dimension of unions. The PWG represents an NGO closely linked with the women's movement engaged in interventions to improve plantation women's status that also includes politicising women.

In building union capacities capable of resisting new challenges posed by privatisation, the NUW illustrates the potential for developing SMU strategies. Encouraging forms of participatory democracy and strategic alliances are central to experimenting with a complex process of organisational change. In building NUW's capacities, the aim is to combine union strategies in the realm of representative politics, while nurturing tendencies of collective mobilisation and contentious action.

Conclusion

The privatisation of plantations, along with the deregulation of labour

markets, have reconstituted union strategies. The dominant union strategies based on party subordinated unions (political unionism) narrowed to representative politics, are increasingly inadequate in resisting a gamut of constraints faced by unions. Emerging from actual trade union practices challenging globalisation, SMU perspectives suggest new possibilities of re-discovering the movement dimension of unions.

The NUW, in contrast to dominant party-subordinated unions in the plantations, illustrates an independent union that embodies the potential to develop an SMU strategic orientation. In the case of the NUW, the transition towards an SMU orientation relates to the prioritisation of participatory democracy and strategic alliances. Both strategies concern elaborating and reinforcing existing tendencies within unions. While the transition towards an SMU approach involves a complex combination of strategies, the NUW's commitment to asserting worker dignity opens the possibility of building union capacities rediscovering the movement dimension of unions.

Notes

- 1 US State Department (2002) *Sri Lanka Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. Available: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18315.htm> [accessed on August 2002].
- 2 Personal interview with the NUW leader, Mr Kandiah (2000).
- 3 All data on the NUW were collected during the field research conducted in 2000.

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