

Trade unions – between the Scylla and Charybdis of politics

Abstract

In an analysis of their own participation and level of influence in the political life of a society, unions cannot be viewed in isolation because they have always acted in a particular social environment, functionally interconnected and interdependent, on the basis of the principle of feedback. Capitalism as a social system has changed, opening new issues connected to all social factors, trade unions among them, and encompassing the issue of the political role of trade unions and their relations to other factors in political life – political parties, the state and civil society organisations, among which they also belong. The changes that have occurred in capitalism, in the nature and character of its legal system and in the mechanisms of the political, economic and social order of society, which give us the right to conclude that capitalism today is different to capitalism in the nineteenth or at the beginning of the twentieth century, have ‘pushed’ unions in the field of political action and have also had a significant impact on the content and form of this type of activity.

Keywords: trade unions, trade union rights, human rights and freedoms, democratisation, transition, production, state, capitalism, labour history, working class, pluralism, political engagement, political parties, political factors, organisation

Introduction

Modern times, like previous epochs, confirm the wisdom of the ancient Romans – *historia magistra vitae est*. Those who have learned from history have received multiple benefits and their life has certainly been more beautiful and better. Nevertheless, the question is what kind of students people are, whether they like to run away from school, and learn from the economically, socially and individually most expensive way, i.e. from their own experience, not adhering to the very instructive and useful saying: ‘If you did not do it yourself, you should have been looking over the fence as your neighbour was doing it.’

Of course, the neighbour that should be looked up to is the one that is better, more successful and more hard-working. This lesson is of special significance and importance to countries in transition, including Serbia, because adherence to this instruction can significantly reduce the otherwise high economic and social costs of transition, or of the range of economic, political and social reforms which are encompassed by transition. Of course, the hardest and most demanding of all reforms is the one that should

be achieved in our heads – the system of values, views on life and morality – this is, at the same time, the *conditio sine qua non* of all other reforms.¹

The history of politics is, of course, much older than the history of unions. If we accept the most general definition of politics – that it is a social activity aimed at directing all other social activities, it may be said that politics is a permanent companion of human society, from its beginnings, just as how in every form of human society, and at every level of development, it was necessary to establish some mechanisms for integration among people as conscious and social (and that means moral) beings. In this sense, politics has always been a public matter, because the management of social processes – managing people, their fates and their lives – is, by its nature, a public matter. In this sense, it may be said that the ideal politics would be the full consensus of all. It is a historical fact that such a complete consensus has never in history been achieved, even in today's most democratic, economically and technologically most advanced societies, but it certainly represents an ideal to which democratic, humane societies aspire. It is by the degree of achievement of this ideal that we can evaluate the true nature and character of these societies.

It is also a historical fact that, in very long periods of history, power over others lay in the hands of a small number of people or an individual, which was an inevitable source of social conflict, the essence of which was always the essential contradiction between the public nature of politics and attempts to give it a private character. The claim that politics is essentially a public matter is assisted by the opinion of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle, who called humans *zoon politikon*, while, speaking of the community, which was always at the epicentre of the political life of society, he said that every community was of service to something good, with the state being of service to the highest good.² In other words, almost two and a half millennia later, he has left us the human, democratic criteria with which we may evaluate each country, Serbia included, based on the response of each to the question of whether the state serves the highest good and implying that the greatest good is the good of all. History, in this sense, has given a clear answer – states ruled by individuals or small privileged groups of people are not states that serve the highest good.

The emergence and development of civil society – based on private property, free and fair competition and multi-party parliamentary democracy – defined, in the field of political life and the political organisation of society, Kant's Copernican revolution and ushered into the centre of political life the individual citizen, with a *corpus* of human rights and freedoms. These include basic human freedoms and rights, such as the right to life, the right to liberty, physical and mental integrity and economic, political, social and trade union freedoms and rights. In the changed social circumstances characterised by the increasing complexity of the social structure and the increasing pace of social life, a free citizen establishes a growing number of social functions – in the family, in the local community, in the political life of society by the establishment of a universal

- 1 *After the crises: What now. Searching for new possibilities* Proceedings of International Scientific Conference, Higher Education Centre for Applied Entrepreneurship Studies: Belgrade, 2011.
- 2 Aristotle: *Politics, Culture* Belgrade, 1967. *Zoon politikon* = political animal.

right to vote and parliamentary democracy, in civil society organisations and in professional and technical associations.

In this cornucopia of growing social roles and functions, one is the most important. That is the role that each individual performs in the process of creating material and spiritual goods, which has the decisive influence on the content and objective range of all other social roles and which determines the social status and personal destiny of every individual. Not fate, as the decision of a higher power, but as a challenge to each individual to control their own destiny. Thus, the entire course of the emergence and development of civil, bourgeois societies acknowledges the historical continuity of the core of social conflicts always being concentrated around natural resources and the process of creating material and social goods, as well as the principles and practices of their distribution.

A capitalist civil society based on competition, i.e. within essentially changed social circumstances, raises the issue of conflict in a new way; an issue as old as mankind, or of human labour, as a constant companion and inevitable condition of human survival – i.e. the issue of the relationship between creativity and force in human labour.

In the continuing search for the answer to this question, one of the starting points is the following. Economists are right when they say that work, in the narrow economic sense, represents economic necessity. Work, or the production of material and spiritual goods, is the biological and social condition of the existence of every individual and society as a whole. This is an axiom of economic and social thought. However, labour is also a creative act, a process in which people express and develop their creative possibilities, imagination, knowledge and competitiveness, with this creative component being the driving, developmental force of civilisation (Marinković, 20008). The compulsory and creative components of human labour, which are like Siamese twins, follow the whole history as a kind of dance between light and shadow. Modern times undoubtedly confirm that the greatest achievements in economic, technological and human development are achieved by societies that have managed to secure a dominance of the creative over the compulsory component of human labour.

In this context, we should analyse the political aspects of trade union activity and their relationship to other factors of political life.

Unions and politics – confrontation, cohabitation, partnership

The above statement brings us back again to the historical context of the emergence and development of trade unions, but in the context of two other factors in industrial relations – employers and the state. Evidence shows us that history does not repeat itself, or else it repeats itself as farce. However, to understand the essence of the political aspects of trade union activities, history is valuable because it enables us to analyse the origin and development of certain phases of the trade union and labour movement in the dimension of time, observing this development as a kind of time machine that may stop at points of significance that were key to the development of trade unions, social democracy and the position of representatives of the world of work.

Such an approach to the development of trade unions through the dimension of time leads us to the conclusion that the trade union movement, from its beginning up to the

present time, is based on the same basic principles as a permanent source of its strength. These are:

- freedom of organisation
- autonomy of will
- independence from employers, political parties and the state
- solidarity
- social justice.

It is also historically true that unions, from their beginnings, have striven to achieve the following five functions – economic, social, protective, educational and political. The above functions are not always achieved with the same levels of intensity and dynamics. Of course, at different times in different social circumstances, each of these functions has been implemented to varying degrees and in different forms. Simply put, social circumstances during a certain period may ‘force’ a union to put an emphasis on, for example, the economic, or the social, or any other of these five functions. However, when this process is observed continuously, in a way in which it can be objectively observed and analysed, then we can easily see that these five functions always make one whole and that to question or neglect of any of them individually raises the question of the social role of unions in general.

In the theory and history of the labour and trade union movement, it is usually considered that unions, in the first stages of their formation and development, had exclusively an economic and social function in the sense that they concentrated almost entirely on so-called re-distributory issues such as the length of the working day, wages, working conditions and the like. In contrast, the political function of trade unions, as well as trade union involvement and influence in the political life of society, began only in the later stages of the development of the trade union movement.

Indisputably, the actions of trade unions in the early stages were mainly concentrated on the above-mentioned issues, as well as on others based on redistribution. However, it is an illusion from which the wrong conclusion about such a division of phases in the development of the trade union movement may be drawn, in which the union in one such phase did not have a political role and function. On the contrary, trade unions have, since their beginning, of course had a political function albeit that this has had different dynamics, intensity and in different forms in the different stages of their development.

The most radical forms of workers’ and trade union protests in the early stages of the trade union movement (factory arsons, the murder of factory owners, public protests and clashes with the army and police), undoubtedly had a political character and sent specific political messages, too. The Chartist movement, in which dissatisfied workers fought for their rights, freedoms and the dignity of human labour, with charters sent to the British authorities, was a workers’ union and political movement. This movement, along with other forms of worker rebellions in the early stages of the development of trade unions, was directed towards the specific injustices being done to workers, union members and leaders in particular factories, but it was also directed against exploitation and the poor living conditions of workers in general. Their goal was to change workers’ unworthy and unacceptable place in the social order, and that was the dominant political objective.

There are, basically, the same dilemmas concerning the nature, aims and objective range of the political engagement of unions in modern times. One can speak of a spontaneous character of the political struggle of trade unions, since trade unions in general bear the sign of this spontaneity over a long period. It is understood that such spontaneity cannot, in any case, be equalled with the uncontrolled anarchy which has also followed some phases of the trade union and labour movement. The word ‘spontaneous’ here is used in the sense of being home-grown, which is the creative driving force of the labour and trade union movement, a spontaneity that unions still need today as much as they needed it two centuries ago when they were created. This statement tells us that we must not fall into the theoretical and methodological error of seeing a political role for trade unions only in the context of current stereotypes and the still-dominant mechanisms of union participation in the political life of a society. These are, frequently, limited as far as the need to realise that original role of trade unions in political decision-making processes is concerned (Waddington and Hoffman, 2000).

Namely, in an analysis of their own participation and influence in the political life of a society, unions cannot be seen in isolation, because they have always acted in a particular social environment, functionally inter-connected and interdependent, and on the basis of the principle of feedback. Capitalism, as a social system as a whole, has changed, opening up new issues connected to all social factors, trade unions among them, including the issue of the political role of trade unions and their relations with other factors in political life – the political parties, the state and the civil society organisations, among which they belong. The changes that have occurred in capitalism, in the nature and character of its legal system and the mechanisms of the political, economic and social order of society, which give us the right to conclude that capitalism today is very different to the capitalism in place in the nineteenth or at the beginning of the twentieth century, have ‘pushed’ unions in the field of political action as well as significantly influencing the content and form of this action.

Among the many characteristics which have some importance in this process, the following are particularly noteworthy:

- becoming a mass movement. This increased awareness of union, labour and economic rights and, on this basis, increased the social power of labour unions. This process eventually led to the establishment of relative balance between the world of work and the world of capital, which compelled the owners of capital and the state gradually to make social partnership with unions
- the increasing capacity of unions to organise radical mass examples of workers’ and trade union protests, containing hidden or open political demands. After all, every mass protest of workers, or long strike, clashes with the police, the firing of strikers and strike leaders for union activity and participation in the strike, the arrests of organisers of and participants in the strike, and the trials that follow that – all these in essence represent a form of radical political conflict (Milenković, 2010)
- a permanent increase in the economic, social, political and moral costs of industrial and social conflicts. Social and industrial conflicts are very expensive. They affect all industrial relations factors – government, employers and, first and foremost, workers and their unions. Increasingly harsh and demanding competition, in so-

cieties where success is measured by profits, increasingly directs all industrial relations factors to try to find a solution to debatable issues around the negotiating table. And the negotiating table is found not only in enterprises, institutions or organisations of employers, but also in places where important political decisions are being made (Careja, 2007)

- the introduction of the universal franchise, which definitely changed the balance of power in the political arena. Namely, with the development of the industrial mode of production, the working class grew in number, becoming in the process an increasingly significant part of the electorate. It is undeniable that the structure of the working class today has much changed, but this does not call into question that this is a social group formed from those who live by their work – i.e. from their expert and professional knowledge, or their ability to produce certain material and social goods. Any government that wants to maintain its position over a long period in the political life of a society must take into account the interests of a substantial part of the electorate
- the overall increase in the level of education. This is the foundation for an increase in social awareness and, within this framework, of people's rights to live in freedom and dignity from their own work. This is, of course, a focal point of the programme of trade union struggle.

The key change, essentially opening a new chapter in the activities of trade unions in the political life of a society, was made after 1929, during and after the Great Depression. The change was influenced by the definitive entry of the state into the economic life of society, which inevitably directed unions to focus their activities on the factors of political life – parliament, government and the political parties. Historically, the process began at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Trade Union Congress in Great Britain first established its Political Committee and, a few years later, the Labour Party. Soon, elsewhere in Europe (Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy) social democratic parties were created. All these parties, however, are connected by one fact – their birthplace is the trade union movement. In other words, unions then definitively entered the political life of society in a new, open way, creating different mechanisms for their participation in and influence on the political life of society, in the process looking for political allies.

From this point on, unions have led two parallel lives which are functional parts of the whole – union life in companies and institutions, the birthplace and source of union strength; and acting on the public stage as a factor in political life. It was, and remains, one of the biggest temptations that unions have faced then – participation in the definition of a strategy for the economic, technological and social development of society, with all the challenges and responsibilities carried by such a new position and role for unions. This is, and not only in Serbia but also in other developed countries, the most challenging litmus test of the capacity of unions to adapt to changing social circumstances.

One thing is, however, certain – unions cannot today be politically neutral, since this would essentially mean them giving up on their social roles and the responsibilities for the successful implementation of these. Their original role requires them to be critical of political and economic developments, of the economic policy of the government,

and to make suggestions and start initiatives in order to affirm and protect the interests and rights of workers. In other words, the union is a public matter and union attitudes and actions, in this sense, are subject to the critical evaluation of union members, workers and the public at large. This is supported by the success of union actions, while their effectiveness at representing the rights and interests of workers largely depends on gathering public support.

Therefore, in a civilised, elementary democratic sense, the attitudes that *a priori* deny a union the right to participate in the political life of a society and speak about it only in the negative context must be rejected. At the same time, the statements and attitudes of some union leaders, who speak about union neutrality and stress (considering this to be a positive thing) that the union should not care about politics, but instead only about the interests of workers, are also ridiculous and unfounded. Those who speak like this do not know, or do not want to know, that the rights and interests of workers cannot successfully and fully be protected without the active participation and significant social power of trade union involvement in politics.

Ultimately, views of the so-called ‘political neutrality of unions’ are also political statements, but are unfounded as well as being wrong and damaging to the union. In this sense, we can say that neutrality is also a political strategy which, in these contemporary social conditions, marginalises the union, tying its hands on all fronts and in all aspects of its operations.

The challenges of the political transition of unions in Serbia

The process of the transition in central and eastern Europe, which symbolically and actually started with the destruction of the Berlin Wall, is, by its very nature, contradictory and conflicting. In Serbia, it was forcibly delayed and the slow, inefficient and obstructed transition, and the social reforms that this implies, have been very conflictual and have had an extremely high and – for the vast majority of workers – a socially intolerable price. Confrontations connected with the role of unions in the political life of a society, and their relationship with other factors of political life, have contributed to the intensity and severe social consequences of these conflicts (Đukić, 2006).

Recent history confirms that one of the main clashes on the political and trade union scene was related to conflicts connected to the relationships between unions and political parties. The conflicts began with the first steps towards establishing a multi-party system, when the struggle for the influence of political parties on trade unions, their members and workers in general began. This is the time of the establishment of trade union pluralism, which started with protests and clashes within the hitherto sole trade union – the Federation of Trade Unions of Serbia – from which individual organisations sprang as a sign of protest and resistance towards the leadership of the Union on the grounds of its subservient relationship with, at the time, the existing Communist League of Serbia and, later, the Socialist Party of Serbia. That attitude towards politics and political parties, especially towards the ruling party, was the reason, on the pretext of the different treatment of the major general strike of textile and metal workers, for the

conflict and division within the leadership of the Federation of Trade Unions of Serbia and which irreversibly opened the process of establishing trade union pluralism.³

At the same time, during the past two decades, many unions have come to an inglorious end because they have allowed themselves, for various reasons, to become subject to political manipulation by the political parties or the government.

Observing the level of continuity in this process, we can conclude that trade unions, in terms of achieving their political function in the new circumstances, were victims of the inherited system of values and practices from the past, as well as of their inability to cope with the new circumstances. This also reflects an overall picture of incompetence in the level of union education among union members and activists. Namely, the frequently-repeated claim that unions in the socialist system were not involved in politics is not true. On the contrary, their main task was to spread and promote among workers the ideologies and politics of the only, ruling party, basically according to the concept that Josip Broz made in 1937, which reads:

Workers in the Party, communists in the trade unions,

and that is the foundation of a dominant political role. In return, the unions were given the right to deal with a whole range of practical, lucrative jobs. This decades-long practice of unions, and the system of values on which this practice was based, significantly influenced the relationship between trade unions and political parties, the state and the general manner of union participation in political life. This manner, in the new social conditions and under pressure from changes in the ownership structure, radical industrial and social conflicts, political and trade union pluralism, had disastrous consequences. The state of today's workers in Serbia, among other things, is a picture of a state where the social power of unions is small, at a time when workers needed a strong union the most. A large part of working class and trade union energy melted in divisions and conflicts that were political in nature (Mihailović *et al.* 2007).

One of these dilemmas, the reason for conflict and division, is now definitely resolved. Today, no relevant factor in political life, trade unions or the world of academia denies the right and need of unions to participate in political life; it is a requirement for unions in the new social conditions strategically to defend the interests of workers. Today, unions in Serbia have a huge practical reason to engage more actively in political life: the immense dissatisfaction of workers with their own growing financial difficulties and social status; and that none of the factors in political life deserve a pass grade. This dissatisfaction was a huge potential source of energy in the necessary and expected social changes, which obviously neither the unions nor the other social factors used in the right way.

This inevitably raises the question of the most suitable model of union participation in political life which allows a union to promote the interests and rights of employees in political decision-making processes and to increase the overall social power of unions. What, here, may be the practical use of the experience of today's developed countries and political parties which have a social democratic and labour orientation?

3 Documentation of the Association of Independent Unions of Serbia.

Of course, there is no recipe but there are indisputable, proven historical landmarks – the freedom of workers to organise, autonomy of will, the internal democratic organisation of unions and trade union financial independence.

All these landmarks point to an integral requirement – unions must increase their social power or, in lay terms, they must first clean their own house. It is illusory to expect unions to increase their participation and influence in political decision-making while at the same time their social power in companies, as well as their reputation and trust among members and employees, continues to be very low, as all relevant research studies into unions in recent years have confirmed (Mihailović *et al.* 2007).

This means that unions must definitely reject their old model of union organising, based on the so-called ‘basic organisation of the Federation of Trade Unions’. This is one of the main sources of feudalism and division between unions – not because of union questions but because of lucrative, commercial issues – and begin to draw up a modern, flexible, developing model of union organisation, appropriate to contemporary European practice. The key criterion for the success of this process must be the democratisation of trade unions: the establishment of democratic institutions and practice – above all, the free and democratic election of union leaders – and of effective mechanisms for spending union funds and means. In other words, the union must become a public matter. This will create the conditions for unions efficiently to use the existing mechanisms and opportunities to participate in political decision-making.

In this regard, it should be noted, unions are already participating in various ways in the political life of society – such as the public appearances of union officials; social dialogue at the national and local level; the process of collective negotiation at sectoral level, which always contains elements having an influence on political life; and union influence on the adoption of certain laws which are, directly or indirectly, important to the interest of the material and social status of employees. The greatest number of strikes, especially those in public service, make requests of the authorities, requests which are largely, and often predominantly, political in nature. This indicates that strikes can be treated as a form of union participation in the political life of society. It is another question as to why these, and other forms of participation in political life, are inefficient, or why they are not used in the right way – which is, essentially, a picture of the unsatisfactory state of unions in Serbia today. Truth to tell, there are extenuating circumstances – the political authorities and employers have essentially hostile attitudes towards unions, but this cannot relieve unions of their responsibilities in the political field.

Finally, from the perspective of the history of the labour and trade union movement, as well as from contemporary practice, unions have definitely had to learn a lesson – that the permanent union position towards all factors of political life must be that the union always acts as a critical opposition to any government. This means that the union has no eternal friends and allies among the factors of political life, but that it defines its relationship with the political authorities and political parties on the basis of a single criterion – the actual relationship of such political factors to the position and interests of workers.

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