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A new labour landscape: social movement unionism and Georgia's independent labour organising

Abstract

This article reviews the current situation in Georgia through the specific lens of trade unionism and the role of new independent unions in the street protests that took place during 2024 in relation to the country's controversial 'foreign agent' law and then against the outcome of the general elections. In particular, it documents the strike by GUILD, a new union representing cultural workers, in December 2024 and which had a number of successful outcomes. While identifying the challenges which independent unions realistically face, including the need continuously to balance internal democracy with practical action, broaden the social vision without losing workplace focus and scale up efforts within the limits of resources, the vibrancy with which independent unions are approaching their task provides a strong contrast with the staid, conservative stance of the traditional trade union movement. The author concludes that whether the spark of the December 2024 strike is able to grow into a new fertile landscape for labour will depend significantly on activists' ability to turn fragile alliances into a lasting network of solidarity.

Keywords: *social movement unionism, social justice unionism, trade union renewal, independent unions, Georgia*

Introduction

In recent years, Georgia has experienced recurring waves of public mobilisation, including demonstrations to defend EU integration, protests against environmental destruction, the 2024 rallies against a Russian-style 'foreign influence' law and the mass protests that erupted after the 2024 parliamentary elections. These actions have drawn tens of thousands into the streets and created a climate that should have forced trade unions to decide whether they stand with the state or with the movements calling for social change.

The Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) remains the largest organisation in terms of formal membership; however, its longstanding strategy of cautious cooperation with government and employers has not prevented a dramatic fall in union density, from roughly 42% of hired workers in 2007 to just 18% in 2022, mirroring a wider collapse of collective bargaining coverage (Ulandssekretariatet 2022). In the vacuum created by decades of decline, a constellation of independent, sector-based unions has emerged which have become increasingly active and visible on the political stage. These new unions are often financed through transnational

networks for training and funding, resources that are essential but now threatened by the 'foreign influence' legislation that the European Commission has condemned as a 'serious setback for democracy' (European Commission 2025).

The tension between a collaborationist centre and an insurgent periphery reached a peak in December 2024 when members of the Independent Union of Workers in the Cultural Sector, GUILD, joined the mass demonstrations that erupted after the elections. They faced mass arrests and then launched a solidarity strike that spread through cultural institutions nationwide. International union federations, such as UNI MEI (the division of UNI representing workers in the media, entertainment, arts and sports sectors), issued urgent statements backing the detainees and urging the Georgian authorities to respect freedom of association (UNI Europa 2024). Calls for a broader general strike soon followed, although the initiative stalled amid GTUC ambivalence and heavy police pressure (OC Media 2024a). These events sharpened a familiar question: can Georgia's labour movement transform itself from a narrow wage-bargaining actor into what scholars call 'social movement unionism' or its close cousin 'social justice unionism' – models that link workplace struggles to broader fights for democracy, equality and human rights (Julius et al. 2023; Scipes 2014; Stern 2013)?

There are plenty of examples of such unionism in South Africa, Brazil and Poland. But remarkably little attention has been paid to how these approaches might work in a small post-Soviet economy like Georgia, where neoliberal reforms have severely weakened labour standards even as civil society mobilisation remains vibrant. This article aims to explore that gap by examining how Georgian unions have responded to three intertwined pressures: a neoliberal growth model that has kept the official minimum wage at a symbolic 20 Georgian lari per month (about 6 euros); an authoritarian shift embodied in the 'foreign influence' bill; and the rise of new issue-based social movements, such as environmental and student-led groups, eager to build tactical alliances with organised labour.

The narrative that follows first traces the evolution of Georgia's trade union landscape since independence and then examines the current political pressure on labour and civil society. It goes on to describe the December 2024 cultural sector workers' strike as a critical turning point. The discussion then turns to the concepts of social movement unionism and social justice unionism to illustrate how these ideas help illuminate Georgia's experience. Finally, it considers possible future paths for the country's unions and its democracy.

By highlighting Georgia's divided union landscape, this analysis points to broader themes: how models of social movement unionism can take root beyond their usual settings; the resilience of labour activism under hybrid semi-authoritarian regimes; and whether small sectoral guilds can foster national solidarity instead of deepening fragmentation. Ultimately, the divide between Georgia's central and independent unions is not merely organisational, but strategic: a split between a logic of accommodation that no longer fits an era of democratic crisis and a logic of confrontation that offers a transformative path toward renewed worker agency and social justice.

Historical and institutional background

In the final months of the Soviet era, many Georgian institutions severed their formal ties with Moscow well before the republic itself declared independence. The National Football League was launched in March 1990, replacing participation in the Soviet Championship. Only six months later, the country's trade union leadership did the same, breaking away from Soviet-wide structures just as the country was moving to a market economy. Although neither originated from grassroots activity, these moves were highly symbolic. In the decades that followed, both club football and labour relations fell into chronic regression, burdened by financial instability, shrinking crowds or memberships and weak public support.

The Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC), formed after the break with Soviet structures, inherited not only the mass membership lists of Soviet-era unions but also a large collection of workers' sanatoriums, cultural centres and urban real estate. These assets soon became both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the sale of properties offered a rare buffer against the hyperinflation and industrial collapse which marked the early transition years. On the other hand, the process fuelled internal struggles over control of these assets and what Transparency International (2005: 4) later described as the 'threat [of] irrelevance' for an organisation unsure whether it was a social movement actor or a property management company.

External shocks intensified these structural weaknesses. Between 1991 and 1993, a military coup, civil war and armed conflicts in Abkhazia and Samachablo,[1] which were supported by Russia, tore at the fabric of the new republic while successive Russian embargoes in the 1990s and 2000s deepened economic decline and labour market informalisation. In this environment, the GTUC leadership chose a cautious, accommodationist posture toward government and employers: its officials accepted seats in the newly established Tripartite Social Partnership Commission (TSPC) but rarely mobilised members, despite the legal minimum wage stagnating at its symbolic level for more than two decades.

The result resembled what one activist later called 'tripartism without labour', a system in which state and employers negotiated on one side of the table while workers stood on the other without any credible form of protection. Union membership rates, which had hovered around 45% following the restoration of independence in 1990, fell to roughly 20% by the mid-2000s (Qristesiashvili 2010) and have since continued to decline, reflecting an approximately 95% decrease in membership.

Furthermore, surveys by the International Republican Institute, conducted between 2003 and the most recent wave in 2023, have consistently ranked trade unions among the least trusted public institutions in Georgia (see Figure 1), outscoring only the mafia when the latter was included in the questionnaire.

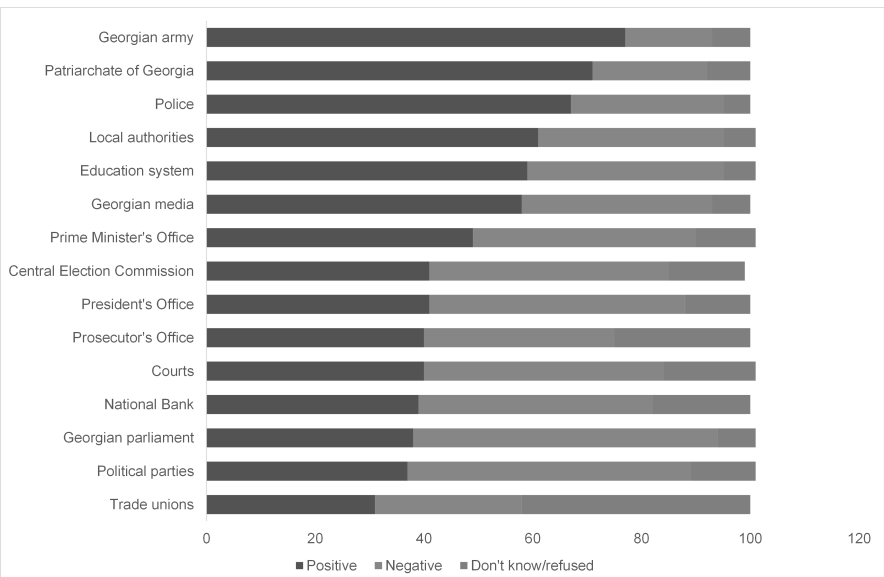
1 Editor's note: A Georgian historical district occupied since 2008 by Russia, lying within the Tskhinvali Region (controlled by the Republic of South Ossetia). The territory is officially referred to as Tskhinvali by Georgian authorities (after the name of its only city) but this revived old name – which is, however, significantly controversial – has become dominant among the Georgian public not least following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

> According to the June 2005 survey, Georgians were more likely to consult their local Al Capones for help than their trade union and came bottom of the survey. (Transparency International Georgia 2010: 2)

Nonetheless, these hard-edged crises laid the foundation for an alternative trajectory. From the late 2010s onward, a new generation of sector-based independent unions has begun to emerge beyond the GTUC's sphere of influence including, among others, unions in the medical, transport, media, cultural, health and social care, academia and mining sectors, as well as the Public Services Workers' Union. Unlike the confederation, these organisations were born into precarity, without the benefit of Soviet-era property transfers or membership legacies, and thus dependent on transnational networks for training and funding.

Such dependence made them prime targets when, in 2024, the ruling party attempted to push through a 'foreign influence' law that would have stigmatised many civil society actors as agents of external powers. The resulting confrontation between the government and the independent unions marked a decisive break with the accommodationist approach that had shaped Georgian industrial relations since 1990. By that time, some of these unions had already managed to build basic infrastructure, strengthen their organisations and begin the shift towards more traditional membership-based funding arrangements.

Figure 1 – What is your opinion of each of the following institutions?



Source: International Republican Institute (2023).

Political-legal environment and repression

Until quite recently, Georgia was praised in Washington and Frankfurt as a 'model student' of neoliberal reform. The World Bank ranked it among the easiest countries in the world to do business,[2] and the EU even granted Georgia conditional candidate status for membership in 2023. However, from late 2024 onward, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party took a sharp authoritarian turn, unleashing a flurry of new laws aimed at restricting civic space and protecting the government from accountability (Human Rights Watch 2024; Transparency International Georgia 2024).

Perhaps the most consequential was the Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence. Originally introduced and then withdrawn in 2023 amid mass public protests, it was first adopted in May 2024 and then reintroduced in an even tighter form in March 2025. This law requires any organisation, including trade unions, that receives more than 20% of its funding from abroad to register as a 'foreign agent'. Such organisations must submit quarterly funding reports and stamp a label on all their publications. Non-compliance carries a fine of up to 50,000 Georgian lari (approximately 15,000 euros) and, in the 2025 draft, criminal penalties of up to two years in prison (European Commission 2025). GD officials have justified the law as a defence against a supposed 'foreign-funded revolution' (see e.g. Nodia 2024).

This escalation of legal restrictions was soon followed by a post-election crisis. Between late November and mid-December 2024, as crowds gathered night after night on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue to protest at elections they saw as rigged, police repeatedly used tear gas and rubber bullets and even beat up journalists reporting on the scene. Around 224 people were arrested during those first weeks of protest. On 19 December 2024, when GUILD led a one-day solidarity strike alongside the protests, riot police stormed Tbilisi's Rustaveli Theatre, detaining 47 people including well-known actors Andro Chichinadze and Giorgi Nakashidze (UNI Global Union 2024).

In March 2025, as the 'foreign influence' bill was formally reintroduced in parliament, student groups launched sit-ins at university campuses. The clampdown persisted: an estimated 181 protesters were arrested that month, observers later reporting that many public sector employees had lost their jobs for supporting the pro-EU demonstrations (Reuters 2025). These workers would soon go on to establish the Independent Professional Union of Public Servants 'Article 78 of the Constitution'[3]. Accounts collected by the Public Defender's Office describe what happened to many

2 It was in 32nd place, with a score of 76.8, when the World Bank stopped conducting its 'Ease of Doing Business' Index in 2020. Currently Georgia ranks third on the World Population Review's replacement index, with a score of 77.7; and, interestingly, it scores top in terms of the labour-specific index (T4). See: https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/ease-of-doing-business-index-by-country, accessed 30 June 2025.

3 Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia, entitled 'Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures', obliges the constitutional bodies to 'take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization'. See Constitution of Georgia (Art. 78).

detainees behind the scenes: routine denial of access to lawyers; beatings inside police vans and detention centres; and pressure to sign pre-written confessions for 'disobeying police orders' (a misdemeanor under Article 173 of the Administrative Code). Amnesty International has labelled this pattern 'punitive violence that may amount to torture' (Amnesty International 2024).

International resonance

Civil society groups have filed a freedom of association complaint to the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards, arguing that the strike ban and foreign agent regime violate Convention 87. The committee agreed in June 2025 to request detailed information from Tbilisi, the first step in a potential Commission of Inquiry (International Labour Organisation 2025).

Simultaneously, UNI Europa's Media, Entertainment and Arts sector issued a solidarity statement urging GD to end the 'alarming levels of violence' and release detained cultural workers (UNI Global Union 2024). The European Parliament has debated conditioning macro-financial assistance on the withdrawal of the foreign influence law, although no formal suspension has yet been enforced.

Taken together, the legislative blitz and street-level repression have redrawn Georgia's industrial relations map. What had been a passive tripartite model is evolving into a majoritarian corporatism where the state and business speak with one voice and labour, especially its independent wing, is now seen as a potential security threat. The following section examines the December 2024 solidarity strike to consider whether rising unions and social movements can still create spaces for resistance.

Solidarity in action: the December 2024 cultural workers' strike

Protest, arrests and a union decision

On 28 November 2024, mass demonstrations erupted in Tbilisi after the Georgian Dream government abruptly announced it was 'suspending' the country's EU accession talks. The protests grew by the day and so did the police response. By 13 December, Amnesty International (2024) had documented roughly 460 detentions, 300 cases of ill-treatment, and 80 hospitalisations resulting from the repression. Among those arrested were eleven well-known figures from the arts, including Chichinadze and comedian Onise Tskhadadze.

For GUILD, an independent professional union representing Georgia's cultural sector workers, these arrests proved to be a turning point. GUILD, formed in 2020 and funded largely by international donors, had been debating internally whether labour organisations should remain 'non-political' or actively join the fight against the government's authoritarian drift. At this point, the motivations driving individuals to participate as trade unionists emerged in two ways: on the one hand, the presence of a professional union active in the cultural sphere; and, on the other, employees' incentives to become members once the union had been established (Iremadze et al. 2024).

The arrest of well-known actors and creative professionals persuaded the organisation to take a stand. On 4 December 2024, GUILD's executive board voted 17-2 to call a nationwide strike across all theatres, film studios and cultural venues where its members worked. Their demands were explicitly political: the immediate release of all detained protesters; the withdrawal of the draft 'foreign influence' bill; and the resumption of Georgia's EU membership talks.

Anatomy of the strike

Once the strike was declared, its impact was felt almost immediately. Within 48 hours, at least 22 publicly funded theatres and cultural centres across the country had cancelled performances. By 6 December, major privately run cinemas had also shut their doors in solidarity (Intellinews 2024). The movement quickly drew in allies beyond the arts sector. Student unions from Tbilisi State University and various independent trade unions all joined the picket lines bringing food, setting up first-aid tents and helping to organise rallies outside venues like the iconic Rustaveli Theatre. To sustain the strike, GUILD launched an online crowdfunding campaign which raised an astonishing 92,000 lari in the first four weeks. This reserve of funds allowed the union to pay its striking members a daily allowance.

The protest movement also showed significant capability in creative and symbolic tactics. Striking artists and their supporters organised nightly 'people's readings' of plays and scripts that had been banned or censored by the authorities. Troupes of actors performed impromptu street theatre sketches satirising the government. And on 14 December, the strikers led a silent march of an estimated 12,000 people from Tbilisi Philharmonic Hall to parliament. The marchers carried theatre masks as their emblem, a powerful visual representation of a culture being literally silenced by the state.

A first taste of social movement unionism?

For Georgia's labour movement, the December strike exemplified a new kind of unionism in action, displaying the hallmarks of social movement unionism and its social justice variant. Its demands went well beyond wages or workplace conditions to embrace broader democratic rights. Participants raised multiple slogans: 'Strike against violence', 'We are striking against repression' and 'Strike for the freedom of prisoners'.

The strike was also organised in an unusually inclusive way. Daily mass meetings and 'open assemblies' welcomed not just union members but students, environmental activists and other citizens. The agendas for each day's action were even broadcast live on social media, allowing people outside the union's ranks to follow along and contribute. In effect, the movement blurred the line between union members and the broader community.

Finally, by stopping cultural production, an area that is both an important export and a core part of Georgia's national identity, the strike drew public attention in a way that ordinary labour disputes rarely do. The artists' actions made international headlines and even forced Georgia's usually pro-government media to report on their demands.

Other independent unions also tried to show support. Small groups of delivery workers staged one-day 'sympathy' stoppages in solidarity with the cultural workers, although their participation was relatively limited. The GTUC, by contrast, remained on the sidelines, issuing a single press release that urged 'dialogue' between the strikers and the authorities. This stance only highlighted the widening rift between an accommodating old guard and a militant new generation (OC Media 2024).

Repression, resistance and the limits

As the strike gathered momentum, the Georgian state moved to suppress it. The Ministry of Culture threatened to dismiss and replace the directors of any public theatre that refused to resume performances. Government auditors launched sudden inspections of theatre payrolls and accounts, searching for any excuse to punish the institutions involved.

Overall, 47 GUILD members were arrested in the post-election protests, while more than 100 were detained and went on to face various disciplinary proceedings in labour courts, which mostly imposed sanctions. Separately, the protesting Royal District Theatre had its funding cut and Temur Chekheidze's workshop was closed and its staff laid off.

By early January 2025, the cultural workers' strike had achieved some results. On 8 January, a Tbilisi court ordered the release on bail of eight of the eleven arrested artists, the most publicly known detainees remaining in custody awaiting trial. GUILD itself came out of the episode with its reputation greatly strengthened: its membership reportedly doubled by March 2025 as previously 'apolitical' cultural workers joined in large numbers after seeing the union in action.

Perhaps even more significantly, the protest created the beginnings of a shared organising infrastructure. The alliances formed during those turbulent weeks did not disappear when the theatres reopened. The student unions and independent labour organisations maintained joint social media channels to coordinate future actions. The emergency strike fund that had been put together was turned into a permanent 'solidarity fund' to support other causes. Indeed, in the months that followed, activists tapped into these networks to support new struggles, from efforts to protect the cultural and natural heritage in Balda[4] to the ongoing protests in the mining town of Chiatura.[5]

Nevertheless, the risks for Georgia's independent unions have only grown. In May 2025, despite public backlash, the parliament proceeded with a final version of the 'foreign influence' law, highlighted by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (2025) as the 'Georgian FARA'. Once this law comes into force, groups like GUILD and other unions sustained by external funding will face a fateful choice:

4 Balda Canyon is a natural monument and a protected area in the west of Georgia.

5 Protests began in Chiatura, also in the west of Georgia, at the end of February 2025 with a series of demands including the restoration of underground operations which had been suspended by the employer, Georgian Manganese, in October, citing 'financial unprofitability'. This caused serious financial hardship in a town where GM is the largest employer. See OC Media (2025).

either register as 'foreign agents', accepting a label that will undermine their credibility, or cease any activities financed from abroad. If they violate the law, leaders could face criminal prosecution and up to two years in prison. In short, the very model that powered the December strike, relying on global solidarity networks and donor support, is now under legal threat.

The December 2024 cultural strike was the first nationwide action in Georgia to combine a traditional labour stoppage with mass street protest; in many ways, it is a textbook case of social movement unionism. It also revealed the strategic divide within Georgian labour. The independent unions have chosen open confrontation and broad coalitions as their way forward whereas the GTUC, still cushioned by domestic property income, publicly opposed the bill only after EU officials hinted that staying silent could put social dialogue funding at risk. Even then, its president limited the criticisms to 'procedural shortcomings', avoiding any mention of repression. On the day before the election, after more than two decades as president, Irakli Petriashvili appeared on the pro-government Imedi TV channel and suggested that it made little difference whether directives were coming from Moscow or Brussels, portraying the EU and Russia as similar external propaganda centres.

From social movement unionism to social justice unionism: widening the lens

The December events raise the question of whether Georgia's labour movement is moving toward a model of social movement unionism or social justice unionism. Both concepts refer to unions expanding their focus beyond workplace issues to engage in broader social struggles, but each has its own origin and emphasis.

There is another frequently cited template, called social democratic unionism (Benner 2004; Mathers 2007) – or, alternatively, 'radicalised political unionism' (Upchurch et al. 2009) – which rests on a stable pact between strong unions and a social democratic party in government. This tradition, however, offers little explanatory power in Georgia where, since independence, no social democratic party, administration or allied actor has existed to underwrite such political exchange arrangements. Accordingly, the analysis in this article puts brackets around that model and turns instead to the two frameworks most relevant to Georgia's independent unions: social movement unionism and social justice unionism. This section seeks briefly to explain these ideas and how they might apply.

Social movement unionism (SMU) is a term that started to gain wider use in the late 1980s among activists and researchers studying powerful waves of labour activism in the Global South. In countries such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea, unions were not only fighting for higher wages but also pushing for democracy and human rights under authoritarian regimes. For example, South Africa's COSATU stood up to apartheid, while Brazil's CUT worked together with landless peasant movements. Writers like Peter Waterman and Kim Moody observe that these unions share three main features: strong participation by ordinary members in union decisions; strategic partnerships with community groups beyond the workplace; and a vision that reached 'beyond the factory gate', linking everyday workplace demands to bigger issues like political freedom and environmental protection. In other words, SMU means that unions become a core part of broader social movements. Many see

this approach as a way to rebuild labour's relevance at a time when neoliberal economic policies have been weakening traditional collective bargaining. The concept of 'social movement unionism' has thus become a central research theme, although debate on the topic has slowed somewhat since around 2010 (Scipes 2014).

Social justice unionism (SJU) emerged as a concept rather later, mainly in industrialised democracies. By the 2000s, researchers in the United States, Europe and Australia were documenting how some unions were deliberately broadening their agendas to include community issues and civil rights (Fairbrother 2008; Fairbrother and Webster 2008; Waterman 2004, 2008). Among them, Amanda Tattersall (2010) conducted detailed studies of union-community coalitions in cities like Sydney, Chicago and Los Angeles. She uses the term 'social justice unionism' to describe a long-term strategy where unions integrate social change goals – fighting racism, advancing gender equality and tackling climate change – into their everyday work and bargaining.

Unlike the often spontaneous, crisis-driven nature of SMU, SJU focuses on patiently building lasting coalitions and institutional partnerships. For example, unions might create formal alliances with immigrant rights groups or environmental NGOs, share office space and funding, and coordinate campaigns over several years. In SJU, power comes not just from large protests but also from sustained 'relational organizing', as Tattersall describes it, that can shape policy and public opinion over time.

In practical terms, SMU and SJU share the core idea that unions should advocate broader justice issues, not just their members' pay packets. The differences are in pace and structure: SMU tends to emerge in bursts around moments of political turmoil, whereas SJU is more of a steady, integrated approach in stable settings. But in reality, the line between them often blurs and many experts treat SJU as simply a more institutionalised form of SMU adapted to different contexts. However, even these broad models of unionism face significant challenges and ongoing debates.

One of the major ones is the tension between internal democracy and organisational efficiency. Giving the grassroots a strong voice can indeed slow down decision-making and make it more complex (Michels 1911). Some less ideologically driven members may feel disengaged by constant meetings and political discussions. On the other hand, advocates of union democracy argue that deep member engagement is a source of strength. Labour educators Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle (1999) insist that unions cannot grow truly powerful 'without democracy, [without] rank-and-file [workers] organizing themselves', since real power comes from an involved membership. Similarly, organiser Jane McAlevey emphasises that 'high participation' by rank-and-file workers makes unions more effective (McAlevey and Lawlor 2023), helping create a union that members feel they truly own.

Another key question is about labour's special role in a broad social coalition. Some community activists and scholars worry that, if a union spends too much energy on general social issues, it may fail to focus on its core responsibility: standing up for workers in their workplaces. Political scientist David Ost (2002), for example, describes this tension in eastern Europe in this same way: unions that start acting like broad social movements, pursuing political or community goals beyond the

workplace, often end up neglecting workplace representation. This, in turn, drives members away and leads to a decline in union strength. This view shows that many workers care most about concrete improvements in their working conditions and that a union risks losing support if it steps away from its main mission of representing them at work. Others argue that a union's ability to strike and bargain collectively is exactly what gives strength to social justice causes, providing real 'teeth' to efforts that might otherwise rely on protests or lobbying. For example, labour theorist Kim Moody (1997) argues that an essential feature of social movement unionism is precisely the ability to use union power, such as the strike, to support broader community struggles and give them real impact.

A third challenge involves resources and the ability to grow and sustain efforts over time. Experiments in social justice unionism (especially in North America) have often depended on significant outside funding, such as grants from particular foundations, and professional staff to manage community coalitions. These are luxuries that unions in a smaller economy like Georgia may not have. Comparative research suggests that, in low-resource contexts, such broad union strategies are harder to maintain in the long run. Indeed, most studies find that ambitious grassroots campaigns in post-communist countries struggle partly because of limited organisational capacity, which eventually leads unions to retreat to a narrower 'service' model focused on core workplace issues (e.g. Ost 2002).

In short, while models like SMU and SJU hold much promise, they must continuously balance internal democracy with practical action, broaden their social vision without losing workplace focus and scale up their efforts within the limits of their resources – challenges that scholars and activists alike continue to debate.

That said, countries like Georgia might also be a surprisingly fertile ground for these approaches to take root. Sudden political changes – like revolutions or shifts in government – along with the relatively open lines between civil society and politics, and the lack of strong, established 'social partner' institutions, can all create chances for new union strategies to emerge. Recent examples of community-based unionism in countries as diverse as Indonesia and Croatia show that, when formal union membership is low and workplaces are fragmented, unions can gain influence through moral authority and innovative partnerships rather than relying on sheer numbers alone. In Georgia, where union density is modest and many young workers have never been part of any union, a movement that captures hearts and minds through broad social campaigns might stand a better chance than traditional organising at factory level.

So, how does Georgia's case fit into the typical SMU and SJU models? There are several key indicators to consider. Are the unions connecting workers' economic demands with broader democratic or rights-based issues? Are they sharing leadership and decision-making with non-union allies, such as NGOs, student groups and community councils? Are they combining traditional labour tactics like strikes and pickets with other forms of activism, including street demonstrations, legal action or creative cultural resistance? And, finally, how are they funded: mainly through member dues or through a mix of dues, grants and grassroots donations?

On the evidence so far, Georgia's independent unions share many of these features. GUILD and its partners linked labour action to a pro-democracy cause. They opened their meetings to other movements and combined a work stoppage with mass protests and art-as-protest. They also relied on a mix of regular membership dues and outside crowdfunding.

The GTUC, in contrast, has not adopted these approaches. It has mostly focused on basic workplace issues, keeping its top-down structure, staying away from confrontational protests and relying on old assets and local funding.

Georgia's labour uprising, then, closely resembles the kind of social movement unionism and social justice unionism seen in other countries during important turning points, though on a smaller scale and with its own local flavour. The question now is whether this spark of social movement unionism can last and grow into something stable, or whether it will be extinguished by repression or by being absorbed into the system.

Discussion: crossroads, constraints and trajectories

The events of December 2024 showed that Georgian unions can move beyond the narrow limits of wage bargaining and act as catalysts for broader democratic mobilisation. But one episode of activism, as inspiring as it was, does not automatically lead to a lasting movement. If the independent unions hope to build a durable form of social movement or social justice unionism, they will need to turn the extraordinary energy and structures of that moment into something more permanent.

That means facing two immediate challenges. First, shifting from one-off funding to more permanent sources of support. Crowdfunding and emergency donations were enough to pay for a single solidarity strike, but keeping a movement alive over time requires steady resources. Legal aid for arrested activists, training for new organisers and maintaining communications platforms all depend on reliable funding. With the 'foreign influence' law casting a long shadow, western grants may dry up or become too risky to accept. The independent unions might need to boost their member dues significantly or find new local fundraising methods to keep going in the long run. As their membership continues to grow across different sectors, these unions may also see an opportunity to build a shared independent confederation that can unite their efforts under one stronger voice.

Second, turning symbolic influence into real bargaining power. Shutting down theatres and organising creative street protests attracted media attention and won public sympathy. However, Georgia's economy does not depend on theatres; it relies on sectors such as transportation, mining, construction and public utilities. To shift the balance of power in full, the new labour movement will eventually need to build a presence in those strategic industries in which strikes or slowdowns can put economic pressure on the state and large employers. In other words, the moral victory of the cultural strike will need to be supported by real workplace power, or else the government may decide it can tolerate the protests without facing serious consequences.

The state's approach: criminalise, co-opt, divide

The government's response has combined different strategies often used in semi-authoritarian systems: criminalisation, co-option and division. Rather than relying solely on direct repression, the authorities have introduced restrictive laws, provided special advantages to more cooperative unions and applied targeted pressure against independent groups. Together, these measures are designed to weaken organised labour, disrupt solidarity and limit the capacity of unions to challenge state power.

Criminalise

By passing laws with broad and vague wording, like the foreign agent registration law and a ban on 'political' strikes, the authorities have made many peaceful protests technically illegal. Even if these laws are not enforced consistently, they still have a strong discouraging effect. Unions and NGOs must now carefully consider every grant they accept or every protest they join, as they risk facing legal action or penalties. This constant legal threat hangs over activists, draining their time and energy as they try to defend themselves or keep up with the complicated regulations.

Co-opt

At the same time, the authorities have been good at bringing the GTUC into their sphere of influence, using a mix of rewards and pressure. GTUC leaders are invited to join official bodies, such as the National Tripartite Commission, attend government events and participate in EU-funded labour reform projects. They are also often welcomed by big corporations which promote a kind of 'corporate patriotism' that frames social peace as everyone's shared duty. These benefits come with strings attached: the GTUC is expected to keep a moderate tone and avoid open conflict.

Divide

Meanwhile, the state uses targeted pressure against the independent unions – including audits, negative media campaigns and arrests of well-known leaders – as a means of isolating and weakening them. Every hour an independent union spends dealing with tax inspectors, filling out paperwork or defending its leaders in court is an hour not spent organising workers or planning protests. By picking off one group at a time – today the miners, tomorrow the actors, maybe next week the teachers – the authorities are trying to stop these unions from working together as a united front. This is a divide-and-rule tactic aimed at the labour movement.

How far this approach will succeed in Georgia is still uncertain. Two factors, mostly outside the government's control, could shape what happens. One is the European Union's stance. If EU institutions decide to apply real pressure – for example, by linking financial aid or membership progress to respect for labour rights – it could make repression more costly. But if Brussels and European capitals limit their response to statements of concern, the government might feel it can act freely at home.

The other factor is public opinion in Georgia. The authorities want to label independent unions and NGOs as tools of foreign influence. But if the unions can show ordinary Georgians that this is really about their own freedoms, that today's 'foreign agent' could be your child's teacher or your favourite actor, and tomorrow maybe you, then the government's clampdown could backfire. Strong public support would make it much harder to keep up the pressure.

Examples from other countries show the different ways this could develop. In Turkey after 2016, the main union confederations survived by accepting quiet stagnation: they kept their seats at the table but lost the trust and energy of their members. In South Korea, after 1987, established unions eventually joined mass protests to reconnect with workers and rebuild their credibility. Poland offers yet another example: an organisational split, where old and new unions separated completely and began competing for recognition and international allies.

Conclusion

The story of Georgia's unions is still being written. From the cultural workers' strike to the growing calls for a more democratic labour movement, the past year has shown both the promise and the fragility of a new kind of unionism. Georgia's labour movement now stands at a crossroads familiar to many countries facing creeping authoritarianism: embrace open confrontation and risk being crushed, or retreat into safe institutional corners and risk becoming irrelevant.

The December 2024 strike suggests that there may be a third way – a broader, more creative unionism that can turn workplace struggles into a shared call for democracy. But sustaining that vision will take more than courage: it requires building more substantial resources, deepening ties with communities and shaping a shared confederation that can hold diverse groups together under a common voice. Whether this spark grows into a movement with staying power or fades under the pressure of repression and fragmentation will depend less on the ingenuity of activists, which is already proven, and more on their ability to turn fragile alliances into a strong, lasting network of solidarity.

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