Chapter 8
MOU Convergence:
Trade Union Discourse and Practice

ABSTRACT

Several historical, sociocultural, and political dimensions have shaped the development and the discourse and practice of the trade union movement. The characteristics of "traditional" trade union discourse and practice are explored, providing a contextual understanding for the contest, challenge, and change evidenced by the process of translation into the MOU actor network. There are several implications for the "identity," "relational," and "ideational" aspects of trade union discourse and industrial relations practice by convergence with the MOU actor network. However, while relationships within the black box of network interaction affords the union movement prominence and access to the powerful halls of leadership and governance, the union constituency becomes contested in acceding to discoursal change and practice resulting in "boxing and dancing" within the new context of diminished adversarialism.

BACKGROUND

The trade union movement has been instrumental in advocating for and being the prime actors in, the development of social partnerships in Jamaica. Reflecting upon the traditional discourse and practice of the trade union movement, the political and socio-cultural context from which it emerged is

informative, moreso as the growth of the labour movement in Jamaica has been synonymous with the emergence of the two major political parties, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the Peoples' National party (PNP). As described by Acosta and Alleyne (2006), the Bustamante Trade Union (BITU) was formed in 1938 under the leadership of Alexander Bustamante, who was also the founder of the JLP and an advocate for several measures relating to worker rights and benefits. Bustamante's cousin, Norman Manley, was the founder of the National Worker's Union (NWU) in 1944 which was aligned to the PNP. These two unions were a central feature of the development of both political parties – the JLP and the PNP and memberships were 'mapped into political loyalties' (Acosta & Alleyne, 2006).

The roots of the affiliations of the two unions dictated the rivalry between them, described by Stephens and Stephens (1986) as being 'conflictual', which has been a persistent feature within the union movement, to the extent that unification of the union movement was never a possibility.

According to Johnson (1980), the rivalries, apart from being along ideological lines at one point in time as supported by Stone (1985), also stemmed from one union raiding the personnel and labour leaders of the other and them exhibiting a tough image, antagonistic stance and a readiness to fight, through threats towards each other and the taking of industrial action. The rise of trade unionism was underpinned by their formal legal recognition however the formal unity of the movement was always stymied by one group being antagonistic against the other. This was also in concert with the traditionally antagonistic relationship between workers and employees of the day, exacerbated by the authoritarian posture often taken by managers and employers mixed with racial and class overtones.

As part of the nationalistic posture and aspirations towards achieving independence in Jamaica, the union movement was integrally involved politically, which still has its effects in the contemporary dynamics of labour management relations (Goolsarran, 2006). The trade unions and their leaders were equal or dominant partners in the coalitions which ruled both the political parties and the governments (Munroe, 2000; Acosta & Alleyne, 2006). Acknowledgement of this feature, was also shared by Stone (1989) to the extent that the two seemed indistinguishable, causing political unionism (Cowell, 2006) to dominate industrial relations practice. This is consistent with Munroe (1992) who indicated that the unions became a vehicle to deliver political support, which had implications for the balance of power

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