**Rise and Development of Trade Unions in Kenya**

**Introduction**

***Definition:*** A trade union, also known as a labor union, is an organized association of workers who come together to negotiate with employers on matters related to their employment conditions, such as wages, benefits, and working hours.

They aim to improve working conditions, promote job security, and ensure fair treatment for their members. Trade unions play a crucial role in protecting workers' rights and promoting fair labor practices in Kenya. Here's a breakdown of their emergence, development, structure, and functions:

**The Fight for Fairness: A Historical Look at Trade Unions in Kenya**

Trade unions in Kenya have a rich history, marked by periods of struggle and triumph in their fight for better working conditions and workers' rights. Their history is detailed below:

**Emergence (Early 1900s - 1960s):**

***Colonial Coercion:*** The early 20th century saw the rise of the first trade unions in Kenya, primarily among plantation and railway workers subjected to harsh working conditions and low wages under British colonial rule. An early example is the Mombasa Dock Workers Union (established in 1947), which fought for better pay and safer working environments for dockworkers facing exploitation.  
Kenya’s trade union movement evolved through difficult situations created by the British colonial government which persistently defended employers in order to prevent the rise of an organized labor movement. But towards the end of the 1930s, there was a slight change in policy. The colonial government allowed the creation of unions but in a very restricted and limited way as far their rights and operations were concerned.  
Pioneers like Fred Kubai, Makhan Singh and Bildad Kaggia took the opportunity to set up trade unions. In 1935 Makhan Singh at the request of Asians workers set up the Indian Trade Union which he soon broadened to embrace all races and trades. The union eventually became the Labor Trade Union of Kenya. By the late 1940s Kubai had set up the Transport and Allied Workers Union (TAWU) and Kaggia the Clerks and Commercial Workers Union.  
The path to bettering working conditions was however not as easy to achieve, and thus the formed trade unions had to resort to drastic measures. For example, one of the first major milestones in Kenya’s trade unionism was the Dockworkers Union strike of 1955. It paralyzed operations at the port of Mombasa and presented the first opportunity for a trade union leader to successfully represent workers in the settlement of a strike. Mboya as KFL secretary-general negotiated on behalf of the Dockworkers and won them a 33% pay increase.  
But this period also saw the rise of rivalry amongst labor leaders which almost destroyed the trade union movement as several splinter groups emerged. In 1958, Mboya’s deputy at the KFL, Arthur Ochwada, set up the Kenya Trades Union Congress. Ochwada and other critics of Mboya opposed his close ties to American and European trade union organizations such as the American Federation of Labor –Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the International Confederation for Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).  
But Ochwada’s challenge was mainly personal. A different challenge to Mboya would arise after he formed the Nairobi Peoples Convention Party which he used to get elected to the Legislative Council in 1957 in the first direct elections of Africans to the country’s legislature. Two of his former allies within the KFL, Dennis Akumu and Ochola Mak’Anyengo, now accused him of aligning the KFL with the West against the non-aligned position which African leaders had taken on the then raging ideological cold war between western countries, led by the United States, and communist countries, led by the Soviet Union.  
In 1962 Mboya became Minister for Labor in a new coalition government that brought together the two main African political parties – the Kenya African National Union (KANU) led by Jomo Kenyatta and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) led by Ronald Ngala. In the process Mboya relinquished his KFL’s secretary-general’s post to his trusted lieutenant, Clement Lubembe who now became the object of opposition from the Mak’Anyengo-Akumu camp in the KFL.

***Post-Independence Struggles (1960s):*** Following independence in 1963, the government, initially supportive of trade unions, sought to consolidate them under its control. The Trade Unions Act of 1965, while providing a legal framework, also restricted union activities. This period saw unions like the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), established in 1957, advocating for better teacher salaries and working conditions.

***Consolidation and Challenges (1970s - 1990s):***

***Golden Age of Unionism****:* The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a period of relative strength for trade unions. The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), formed in 1965 as the national umbrella body, played a crucial role in collective bargaining, leading to significant improvements in wages and benefits for many workers. For instance, the powerful Amalgamated Union of Kenya Metal Workers (founded in 1964) successfully negotiated better wages and working hour regulations for metalworkers in this era.

***Internal Divisions and External Pressures****:* Despite gains, internal divisions based on ideology and ethnicity sometimes weakened unions. Additionally, the economic downturn of the 1980s and subsequent structural adjustment programs in the 1990s led to job losses in some sectors, impacting union membership and bargaining power.

***Adapting to a Changing Landscape (1990s - Present):***

***Privatization and New Challenges****:* Privatization of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s further weakened some established unions. However, new unions emerged to cater to the growing service sector. Notably, the Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS), established in 1999, represents the interests of government employees.

***The Fight Continues:*** Trade unions in Kenya continue to face challenges like casualization of labor, increased foreign direct investment with varying labor practices, and limited enforcement of labor laws. Despite these hurdles, unions like the Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN), founded in 1976, continue to advocate for better pay, working conditions, and professional development for nurses.

**Structure of a Trade Union**

A typical trade union structure involves:

* **Branch:** The most basic unit, representing workers in a particular workplace or industry sector.
* **Regional/Sectoral Levels:** Groups of branches with common interests may form regional or sectoral committees.
* **National Executive Committee:** Elected representatives from branches or regional committees who oversee the union's national operations.
* **General Secretary:** The chief executive officer responsible for the day-to-day administration of the union.
* **President:** Elected official who leads the union and represents it in negotiations and public forums.

**Types of Trade Unions (Affiliations)**

**Enterprise Unions:** Represent workers in a single company or organization.  
**Industry Unions:** Represent workers across a specific industry sector (e.g., textile workers, teachers).  
**General Unions:** Represent a broad range of workers across different sectors.

**Functions of Trade Unions in Industrial Relations**

**Collective Bargaining:** Negotiating with employers on behalf of members for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.  
**Grievance Redressal:** Assisting members in resolving workplace disputes with their employers.  
**Lobbying and Advocacy:** Influencing government policies related to labor laws, social security, and worker welfare.  
**Education and Training:** Providing members with training on their rights, negotiation skills, and safety procedures.  
**Social Activities:** Organizing social events and promoting solidarity among members.

**Conclusion**  
Trade unions have played a significant role in shaping Kenya's industrial relations landscape. Despite challenges, they continue to be a vital force in ensuring fair treatment and decent work for Kenyan workers.