From service model unionism to social movement unionism in Mauritius and Rodrigues: a critical review of practice and trends.

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Abstract

Purpose: The literature on the service or ‘servicing’ model of unionism has lately stressed not only a trend pointing to a gradual movement away from this approach to unionism, but also the necessity for the union movement to seriously consider the adoption of an organizing form of activity, and even better, of gearing their services towards the newer, “social movement” form of unionism in the wake of the pressures of globalization.

Design/Methodology: A nationwide study was conducted with a broad spectrum of objectives, and this paper draws from the study to present findings on the orientation of unions along this so-called conceptual continuum (moving from Servicing to Organising to Social movement unionism) of approaches and to discuss the policies and approaches used by unions as they go about their business of serving their members.

Findings: The most salient finding is that the highest form of social movement unionism is to be observed not in Mauritius, but in Rodrigues. The paper discusses the explanation for this, based on data collected from field work both in Rodrigues and on the mainland, and proposes strategies for mainland unions to begin their modernization effort in view of moving further away from the traditional servicing model, even if it is clear that moving away from the servicing model poses an identity threat to the union community whose leaders have succeeded in establishing a militant image mainly by responding to members’ demands for securing higher pay and better benefits.

Managerial implications: The union movement in Mauritius and Rodrigues is currently at an identity crossroads, and the future orientation of unions appears to be yet unclear. What is clear, though, is that the traditional servicing approach is well-entrenched, in that unions conceive of themselves globally as service organization, existing to serve their members’ needs for better pay, benefits and working conditions, and for grievance handling. The idea that the union’s lifeblood is its membership has oriented these organizations to the limited servicing role, but, in the current context of globalization-led strategies for cost-cutting and flexibility, it appears that the worldwide trend is towards a rejection of the “mere” service role to an increasingly wider, more relevant approach to serving members’ needs more holistically as well as “serving” the organization itself, and wider society as well.

Originality: Firstly, the debate concerning the unionism of the future, or what unionism model will most effectively address the concerns of a changing society has not been very rich and this paper proposes to bring the discussion in the foreground; additionally, the paper highlights the potential of a small-island state for setting the example for larger, more advanced economies that are seemingly stuck in an ineffective servicing model of unionism.

Keywords: Service model unionism; social movement unionism; Mauritius; Rodrigues.
Introduction

The World Bank and the IMF have classified Mauritius as an ‘industrialising’ economy in the upper middle income group. On other economic fronts Mauritius has been compared to South East Asian and Indian counterparts, and it rather fancies itself as the “dragon” of the Indian Ocean. The island was successively colonized by the French, then the British, from whom it gained independence in 1968. The setting up of a new nation, rising from the ashes of slavery and indentured labour, is conceptualized in the Mauritian psyche as the fruit of bitter battles fought by budding politicians who were inspired by labour, or working-class unionism. Till today, Mauritius and its dependencies (mainly, Rodrigues island) retain much of their ‘welfare state’ principles in politics and Government. Civil society, including unions, are quick to brandish the warning stick at any attempts to ‘dismantle’ this hard-won status. Trade unions operate within quite distinct country-based industrial relations traditions and frameworks (Stewart, 1994), and the type of union movement is the outcome of different historical struggles between capital and labour. The union movement in Mauritius and Rodrigues has itself a deeply historical rationale for its adoption of a purely servicing role vis-à-vis the working class, given that the latter has, after all, its anthropological roots in slavery and indenture labour. The master-and-servant role relations are perhaps not totally erased from the collective memory of Mauritians, and herein lies the challenge of the union movement of the 21st century: For, in the current context of globalisation-led strategies for cost-cutting and flexibility, it appears that the worldwide trend is towards a rejection of the “mere” service role to an increasingly wider, more relevant approach to serving members’ needs more holistically as well as “serving” the organization itself, and wider society as well. So, in spite of having faithfully followed the traditions of unionism, workers’ organizations must now find new ways to ensure their own survival and in so doing, safeguard the rights of workers. This may not be easy, given that every orientation or focus has its own basic idea, a view of society, and its own set of values regarding its role vis-à-vis members and the worker community. This explains how and why the major part of service unionism lies in a different arena to that of the social union movement. This paper draws from the national study of unions in Mauritius and Rodrigues that sought to bring some light to a movement that had so far been characterized by a fragmentation of structures, actions, and policies. From a relatively low national unionization rate (12%) to a multiplication of small unions, to a largely traditional bread-and-butter issues orientation (University of Mauritius, 2002; Baguant and Ramgutty Wong, 2006; Ramgutty-Wong, 2004), the state of employment
relations in Mauritius is ripe for a synthesized analysis into its historically-determined policies and actions and the latter’s relevance and pertinence in a world of changing business, social, and economic structures. As such, the traditional servicing model employed so far is clearly running out of steam, and existing research establishes this trend, but the move away from this model, either towards an ‘organising’ or a ‘social movement’ form of unionism is still in its infancy, albeit a promising one. The national study on unions shows that it is precisely this servicing orientation that offers the most explanatory power to the relatively narrow current role of the union movement, at least as far as the mainland’s movement is concerned, and here we attempt to dissect the reasons for which a “social movement” orientation of sorts seems to have taken off so effectively in the dependency of Rodrigues and so much less on the mainland of Mauritius. We attempt to show that the Rodriguan brand of SMU, which seeks to undertake an overall responsibility for bettering society, effectively playing an active role in the struggle for the future, may hold the answer for mainland union movement crossroads predicament.

Background to the study

Dunlop’s (1958) framework still remains the dominant model for studying industrial relations systems, and Mauritius’s evolution in industrial relations matters is no exception. It is not difficult to see why the outcomes of low unionization rate, fragmented structures and relatively weak political influence have happened on Mauritius, if we apply this conceptual model. Dunlop starts with the idea that industrial relations are those relations and rules which exist, or are agreed upon, between three sets of actors, namely: employers, employees/workers, and the state (legislators and agencies responsible for the relations between the two). These three actors maintain relations with one another within an environment made up of three tightly connected contexts: the technological context, the market or economic context, and the political context (the relative distribution of power between the actors), respectively. These contexts are dynamic forces, bringing about change in the relationships and the results of the interactions between the actors. The rules, which are the most important objects of study in employment relations, are the product of mutual cooperation and opposition between the actors.

The system is complemented by an ideology which binds the separate actors to one another, each of the actors may have its own ideology, but if no form of consensus exists between them, there cannot be a stable system of industrial relations.
However, at a given level of analysis, the roles of the various actors may differ; unions may play a critical role in one subsystem and virtually none in another. In some national systems, for instance within certain Latin American countries, other actors such as the military or some organized religious institutions may play influential roles. One of the criticisms of the Dunlop model has also related to its static nature, failing to specify how change occurs in industrial relations systems, and why unions follow quite different orientations or ‘schools’ in relation to other actors. Hence the interest in the variations of orientations, classified roughly into service, organizing, or social movement types of unionism.

A trade union accentuates the collective rather than the individual power resources of employees, on the premise of “concerted behaviour” being the essence of unionism (Ulman, 1990). Hyman (1975) defines trade unions from a different perspective, suggesting that unions are ‘secondary’ organizing bodies, since workers are already primarily organized by those to whom they sell their labour. Within this perspective, an understanding of the power available to unions and their ability to be proactive or reactive differs significantly, and indeed, the history of unionism abounds with examples of struggles and strifes against not only employers over pay and working conditions, but also against the state, for the right to exist and to exert power. Particular contexts and times have shaped, and been shaped, over history, by such struggles and their resultant victories and defeats, and our Dunlop model does not offer the flexibility to analyse and describe these adequately. Marx (1976) was of course also interested in the power structure of society and propounded that unions could be an instrument of power of the working class against the ruling capitalist system. Also related to power structures, on the American continent, Hoxie (1919) suggested that unions were opportunistic bodies that reacted to whatever labour market situations existed at any particular moment, perhaps correctly heralding in the highly political status that many large unions in the US enjoy today. Another perhaps more widely and contemporarily accepted definition is given paradoxically much earlier by Sidney and Beatrice Webb(1920), who suggested that the main role of unions was to extend representative democracy to the work sphere through collective bargaining, in effect leading to what was thereafter called ‘industrial democracy’ or ‘workplace democracy.’ The very concept of collective bargaining was intended to mean that employers and representatives of employees are supposed to meet and negotiate as equals, even though the dominant perception of the concept is that of labour
seeking and striving to obtain concessions from management and to limit the latter’s prerogatives.

In the US, UK and Australia, the union movements have adopted what is known as the “organising model” in which the union’s main purpose is the empowerment of workers in defining and pursuing their own interests, via the unions’ efforts to foster activism and leadership in members. This is in contrast to the “servicing” model, where the role of the union is to deliver services to a dependent membership. A different (but complementary) approach is “social movement unionism” (SMU), which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, the Philippines and Poland. This form of unionism goes beyond workplace struggles over wages and working conditions to encompass campaigns about the life and living conditions, such as housing, health, education, social policy, tax, etc. Unions’ workplace structures are linked to the communities in which the workers and their families live, challenging employers and governments alike. As unions campaign on citizenship issues of concrete concern to members, they gain credibility and visibility, and their actions –strikes and other protests –tend to receive stronger support from individuals and communities. This SMU has also taken hold in other parts of the world including the industrial world. Increasingly, the idea that unions should be more than “mere” interest groups, that they should be no longer be captive partners in the cost-reduction employer agenda, is profoundly changing the nature of the labour movement worldwide (Waterman, 1993). The concept was originally developed by scholars in an effort to understand militant industrial unions emerging in the newly industrializing countries mentioned above. (Lambert, 1990; Lambert and Webster, 1988; Seidman, 1994; Webster, 1988). The conceptual framework for a SMU was developed to examine a new and innovative form of unionism which would reveal the limits of (conventional) metropolitan industrial sociology (Van Holdt, 2000). Indeed, Moody (1997), Waterman (1993), Lopez (2000), and Robinson (2000) were others who later applied the idea to newer forms of unionism in the industrial world.

The success of the social union movement is dependent on the interplay between its overall political commitment and its members’ concrete interests, work and daily life. It is in effect in the concrete working day of individual workers that the social movement takes its point of departure. For this reason the movement works in a goal-oriented way towards strengthening democracy within the movement, all the while making use of political tools like campaigns, analyses of social topics, opinion polls, focus groups, all on subjects of
importance to working people. Each individual worker is important in this movement, and this is how it is couched in the future. Just as each person will increasingly want to be part of a community, be valued as an individual at work, and to stand and take a place in guiding change for a better future, so the union movement will ensure that each member has a place to stand and influence the future of the movement itself. (Larsen, 2000). Certainly the starting point is labour policy, but the social movement plays a significant part in such political fields as education, industrial, economic, health, social and transport policy. Even though the concept emerged in the specific socio-economic and political contexts referred to above, its core concept is universal. It distinguishes itself from traditional servicing unionism especially in its concern for the wider sphere, and its strong emphasis on democracy and workers’ control and influence (Webster, 2008).

Research design and methodology

At the beginning of the year-and-a-half project in 2007, in-depth ethnographic interviews were conducted with fourteen individuals considered to be major players/thinkers in the field of industrial relations, with the dual purpose of capturing their attitudes and perceptions on the union movement and of being aided in determining a comprehensive and pertinent framework for the design of the data collection strategy. Following this, the Registrar of Associations was contacted in view of obtaining the list of unions registered in Mauritius, with addresses and telephone numbers. Unfortunately, it become apparent that out of the 331 unions listed, a large number was not affiliated to any Federation or Confederation, in effect leading to a first conclusion that there existed two categories of unions: one that was affiliated to a Federation, and another that was not. Secondly, the available list was “as at” 2005, and so would not have current presidents (who we wanted to contact). There were also no telephone numbers or email addresses. This meant that current union leaders would be almost impossible to locate via the post, and that time and resources might be fruitlessly spent in trying to locate current presidents, even if a reasonable sample were used. With the assistance of presidents of the thirteen Federations and Confederations, an updated list was nevertheless compiled, which led to a final count of 246 affiliated unions and 85 non-affiliated unions, which itself included enormous double- and triple-counts since a number of individual unions, being affiliated to more than one Federation/Confederation, was included several times. This “non-affiliated list”, being smaller, was managed in such as way as to have a maximum number of reliable addresses, and a postal questionnaire was thus sent to
each of these unions. Unfortunately, when only eight questionnaires came back, it was obvious that the postal survey was not going to be a reliable contact method for the rest of the population, and so the entire design was altered to conducting individual in-depth ethnographic interviews of all the presidents of Federations and Confederations of Mauritius, as representing their affiliates. This would also guarantee that every single president would be met and that the maximum information, both of a quantitative and qualitative nature, would be gathered. All thirteen interviews were conducted jointly by the researcher and the research assistant. All responses were content analysed into the following emergent themes:

Evolution of employers; management, governance and decision-making trends; the economy and globalisation; trade union leadership; civil society; inter-union dialogue; unionization rate; gender; new employment legislation; and the future of the union movement.

Additionally, the key informant survey having repeatedly highlighted the ‘specificity’ of Rodrigues, a “large” dependency of Mauritius, in terms of its socio-economic and cultural conditions linked to the work of unions, and several respondents having pointed to the desirability of the research team to “go and see for yourselves”, we decided to design and conduct a Rodrigues-specific survey. A list was made up of all unions on the island and a week-long field visit was organized around individual meetings with all the union leaders. Once again, no reliable list of unions operating in Rodrigues was available from the Registry of Associations, and once again our partner on the project, the Government Servants’ Association (GSA) helped to construct an approximate list with contact details, and included “key informants” on Rodrigues island. Surprises being the lot of this methodology, once on the island, our meeting with the Industrial Relations Officer of the Commission for Industrial Relations produced yet another list of “Rodriguan” unions (as opposed to our constructed list of unions affiliated to Mauritian Federations, with a “branch” in Rodrigues). Thinking on our feet, appointments were quickly made and optimization of our resources being now a priority, we interviewed sixteen “pure” Rodriguan union leaders and key informants and left out the ‘branches,’ out of a total of twenty individuals to be interviewed (in contrast to the original eight). The interview schedule comprised the following question categories:

The organization (when founded, objectives, roles, activities); about Rodrigues island-history, culture; the History of the union movement in Rodrigues; Legal and institutional provisions (the new employment legislations); unionization rate in Rodrigues;
investments, business and SMEs in Rodrigues; social issues; gender and ethnicity; structures, objectives and goals of unions; and unions as agents of development and change.

However, combined with the fact many union leaders, thrilled at the first-ever opportunity to express their views on these issues, expounded at length on some or other issue representing their own preoccupations, and the completely novel ideas and information emerging naturally from the data, the initial themes used for the interviews could not be maintained for analysis purposes. Instead, the following structure was finally arrived at:

- The most relevant institutions
- The specificity of Rodrigues
- Unions of the private sector
- Unions of the public sector
- Unions of the co-operatives sector

Findings

Mauritius

The creation of unions in Mauritius arose in mostly an *ad hoc* manner, as the need arose and the opportunity presented itself, the primary aim being to have a large number of trade unions which would be equivalent to a strong voice. This was not a bad idea in itself but the resulting structure of the movement today is unwieldy and fragmented, and in fact does not help in creating unified force. The issue during the research design stage with regard to the two categories of unions – affiliated and non-affiliated – was completely borne out when data was being collected and analysed, and bears an ideological face: non-affiliated unions, generally not expressing much militancy, do not perceive the need to be affiliated to any Federation, have tepid views regarding sense of identity as a union, and have no qualms about being close to political parties. Affiliates, represented by their Federations, on the other hand, hold firmly on to their values of independence and identity, believe in “the cause” and generally scorn the non-affiliated unions for their weakness, passivity and naïve political associations. Additionally, all Federation leaders were very vocal in condemning the new employment legislation for its anti-democratic orientation, whereas the non-affiliated union leaders either openly stated their support thereof, or admitted to not being well informed of
same. A few even stated that it was “too early” to comment on the new legislations. We found that non-affiliated union leaders’ views were generally rather lay and non-technical, suggesting that their non-mainstream existence seems to have an adverse effect on their capability to acquire and analyse information astutely and objectively and to fully comprehend the scope of such developments as new legislation, or indeed, of their role or mission within the overall scope of things. Another significant difference between the two categories was the greater use by the non-affiliates of various bureaux for the purpose of conciliation and mediation and general dispute settlement matters (The Labour and Industrial Relations Division of the Ministry, and the Industrial Relations Commission; The Occupational Health and Safety Division; the Employment Division, and the Registry of Associations). Interestingly, non-affiliates generally preferred union actions in favour of the individual worker as opposed to watchdog actions for protecting and promoting socio-economic development in the country. Rather, the strictly service role was confirmed when non-affiliates (predominantly) state that all non-affiliated unions ought to co-operate with each other to “promote a close connection with government to maintain peace and economic progress”. Also, non-affiliated union leaders were more concerned about the low unionization rate (12 percent) than were the others and even appeared to be reciting some political euphemism about union power equating with membership strength. According to the Federation presidents, for their part, the role potency of unions is made extremely difficult by the “backward” and highly autocratic styles of a large number of employers in Mauritius, often aided by the state, which explained the low unionization rate. They claim that their actions are therefore strongly watchdog-type, oriented to ensuring at least that laws, procedures and institutional mechanisms that protect workers’ rights according to ILO standards were adhered to, and to continually being on the lookout for management attempts to exploit workers in terms of low pay, job insecurity and poor working conditions. They claim that employers’ attitudes have not evolved much over the years, despite their management degrees and MBAs, and that too many persist in adopting dismissive attitudes towards workers and unions, and are insincere when they profess ‘partnership’ and ‘dialogue’. Several examples were stated to illustrate the outright union-bashing and worker intimidation tactics, such as the forced and illegal signing of a no-union document by employees, to harassment and intimidation of union leaders by the management, especially in certain “hot spots” or sectors, such as the new ICT sector, in textiles, and in some hotels. The lack of transparency in decision-making and refusal to share information with unions
was also decried as representing indirect and intimidating threats of plant closure and layoffs, thus serving to paint a picture of irresponsibility of union leaders. Consistently, the union leaders we interviewed were adamant that they needed to, and would forge on with this focus, but admitted their chagrin at the inherent and persistent factors leading—according to them—to a low membership rate nationally. These have been presented above. Unfortunately this came across as something of a fixation, as if unions were waiting for something to happen that would enable them to improve their membership size, especially by penetrating such sectors as textiles, and ICT. The paradox is intriguing: whereas it seems clear that the core agenda of unions—pay, working conditions and job security (in effect, a purely servicing agenda)—has historically, persistently, and predictably—remained unfulfilled and increasingly so, given cost-minimising, globalization-related business practices, unions seem to insist on maintaining this quasi-futile agenda. Why then are they surprised that workers do not seem enthusiastic about joining unions? Certainly, what both categories of unions seem agreed on is a quasi-nil interest in an ‘organising’ form of unionism, which seeks to promote activism and develops members for leadership. This is where we conclude to the entrenched old school servicing model the entire movement seems to embrace, since its philosophy as well as its actions echoes the very definitions of the past, by Beatrice and Sidney Webb (1920), to the effect that unions exist to fight for workplace democracy, and for obtaining concessions from management. Perhaps, too, we can credit them with being opportunistic, since they are, after all, reacting to the labour market situation, increasingly characterized by job insecurity. The fact remains, however, that few unions adopt any significant measure of social movement unionism.

**Rodrigues**

Prior to political autonomy in 2002, Rodrigues operated under a paternalistic Mauritius central government, who chose to support or not, and generally treated Rodrigues like a poor relative, leaving it un-empowered and resource-starved. From the very outset, there really were no structures present to enable economic and social autonomy of the island. For a population of 37 000 souls, the island receives an annual budget of about Rs. 1 billion. This is itself a bone of contention, with some claiming that no economic development can happen with such “peanuts” being meted out, and others arguing that the effective management of the island is key to handling what is considered an adequate budgetary provision. The general impression is that Mauritius gave Rodrigues its autonomy but with no vision, no guidance
and little structure to go forward. This ‘arrangement’ is perceived as a demonstration of insensitivity to and understanding of local needs and aspirations of the Rodriguan people. Our findings point to a general disapproval of the model of economic development. The type of development needed is said to be specific and distinct from that of Mauritius, the latter having, and still, relying on industrialization and exports. Now the Regional Assembly is being charged with lack of vision and communication with regard to long-term forecasts of investment, business development, and resource prioritization. Without realistic forecasts, the civil service remains the only hope for finding employment. In terms of infrastructural development and investment in human resource development, here too there appears to be little effort made. The very real ‘brain drain’ is also being felt, as excellent young men and women simply leave to find work in Mauritius.

Another item of ‘specificity’ rests on the authentic simplicity of the Rodriguan lifestyle. The resulting laid-back and easy-going culture of Rodrigues is said to be the key to attracting tourists from around the world, but according to our respondents this is draining away as well; acculturation is taking place whereby the Rodriguans are adopting European lifestyles, and whereby the youth are being driven away from the land and the sea, attracted by more modern lifestyles in Mauritius and overseas.

Unions are characterized as militant. However, the Chief Commissioner believes that unions do not represent a form of strength on the island and that they are not taken seriously either by government or the general public. There is also the notion that unions are dependent on political parties, without which they could not exist. This was vehemently rejected by union leaders responding to our questions. Without a thorough sociological study, the alleged closeness to political parties is extremely difficult to prove.

A serious grudge held by local workers is that those trade unions which only have a branch in Rodrigues do not always respond as sensitively and as efficiently as they ought to, given the geographical and cultural distance involved. For this reason, several small unions have been formed without any affiliation with the large Mauritian unions. Some do not even associate with the ‘platforme syndicale’ (an ad hoc grouping of unions). In addition, when it comes to the recognition of unions, wherein instances such as the IRC (Industrial Relations Commission) have to be called upon, it seems that undue delays are experienced whereas this could be simplified if representatives of this institution could make a move and come to Rodrigues whenever they are needed.
Gender is one issue where Rodrigues seems ahead of Mauritius. The Rodrigues national culture is characterized not only by more gender-neutrality (than Mauritius”), but also by a high degree of empowerment with regard to economic activity. As far as union work is concerned, even though the women and men interviewed stated that women preferred, voluntarily, not to take leadership positions, they were very much present and very active in the second row, especially in issues of national and societal interest, and their contributions were always openly and respectfully acknowledged by the union leaders interviewed.

In Rodrigues people are often grouped together to fight for a cause. The Rodrigues Council of Social Service is not a trade union as such but the fact remains that it gives great sense to the notion of association, or organization, just like a union does. This prompted us to investigate into this organization with a view to better understand the specificity of Rodrigues and how the population goes about organizing itself. The RCSS thus groups inhabitants of 96 village communities, and like unions and their delegates, it operates on a system of zoning by dividing the island into five manageable zones. It has established its objectives as:

- Helping in alleviating poverty and eradicating disease in villages;
- Facilitating community-based projects to enhance the quality of life of the people;
- Organising the construction of community centers in each village;
- Organising workshops and training sessions on key development issues; and
- Helping government and agencies in carrying out development projects.

People in Rodrigues are very keen to organize in order to improve their standard of living, and whether at the RCSS or in union structures, there is much emphasis on cleaning up the environment, on training of office bearers, and addressing AIDS and poverty issues, all the while going about day-to-day business of addressing specific issues of pay and working conditions, as far as they can. For instance, The Rodrigues RCA Primary School Employees’ union’s slogan is “Une Sourire sur toutes les lèvres.” (a smile on every face), clearly suggesting this holistic objective. The President nevertheless believes that to be able to give life to the slogan, the working environment of the staff has to be appropriate and motivating, and so the union is active on both micro workplace issues and more holistic “life” issues. The union can be said to be undertaking activities specific to Rodrigues. For instance, private
tuition takes on a different meaning (from what it is known as in Mauritius), since only the few weaker pupils are grouped in a class and coached for free.

Now, our survey suggests a general acceptance of the fact that workers (and especially union officials) of the private sector silently suffer various forms of managerial intimidation. For instance, workers of the hotel sector fear joining the only existing union because not only it is considered difficult to secure a job in a hotel but also because the management of this sector is known for its autocratic and intimidating style and its poor human relations (whether in dealing with the union or with employees themselves). This greatly deters workers from joining the union. What this means is that workers tend to have recourse to the union for workplace matters only when circumstances are extremely and unbearably dire. Interestingly, the general perception we got was of a greater combativeness of the leaders, when compared with their Mauritius counterparts. For example, due to the generally accepted notion that employers in the Construction, Metal, Wooden and Allied Industries were squarely exploiting employees and not violating their rights, this prompted the creation of a union, whose focus of action is above all safety and technical training of the employees. The President is very optimistic about the union’s role and future even though its membership base is poor (80 members, of the 3000 workers of the sector).

For its part, the Harbour Workers union focuses its action on issues of welfare and medical care, even though it was created out of a need to address cases of ill treatment by management and violation of workers’ rights.

The Rodrigues Government Employees Association (RGEA) union caters for all workers working in the public sector. The union sees itself as an agent of holistic change in Rodrigues. Its one main objective is to end the discrimination between Mauritius and Rodrigues. Within an overall vision of sustainable national development through stable employment, the RGEA is constantly struggling to investigate unfilled vacant positions in the civil service, helping people of having them struggle to survive on precarious short-term sources of revenue. As such, the union militates in collaboration with the “Movement Chômeurs” (the Unemployed Movement) as a pressure group to press upon Government to fill vacancies and create more jobs.

The Rodrigues Public Service Workers Union with 900 members believes that employees are not interested in bread-and-butter issues only but also in broader issues that affect society and the community in which these employees live. Accordingly, the union makes it a must
to expand its traditional objectives and incorporate the salient issues which touch the lives of the people, by pursuing the following objectives:

- To defend the rights of workers;
- To fight for better conditions of work;
- To address STDs, HIV/AIDS.
- To address the questionable quality of public services.
- To fighting against poverty;
- To address the issue of gender imbalance, and
- To organize workshops to train both trade unionist officials and workers.

Other sectors such as fishing, farming and other cottage industries are defined in Rodrigues in terms of the “co-operatives sector”. Here, a large number of women are active and have organized themselves with the objective of ensuring a stable market for their products.

**Discussion**

While it is clear that the trade union movement, both in Rodrigues and in Mauritius has a future, which scenario will it follow in these two islands? Will it be a mix of servicing and social movement unionism in Mauritius, where it appears that the servicing orientation that so historically entrenched, a professionalisation of the service model, or a distinct move to embrace SMU?

The Rodrigues chapter of the national study on unionism has served to throw valuable light on the specificity of Rodrigues island not only in employment and unionization terms but on broad national aspects as well. The vitality of the union or “organized” movement does bear a strong association with the national development stage of the country, as elsewhere in the world, but we can see that the very development of this island economy also depends on a healthy, productive, and expanding employment situation, which can really only be achieved through the active and collaborative efforts of all partners. Unions in Rodrigues have been found to be relatively combative on one hand, especially given the putative autocratic or exploitative tendencies of employers of the private sector in particular, as well as the difficulty of operating in an atmosphere of worker reluctance to join. On the other hand, union and “organization” leaders interviewed overwhelmingly demonstrate a high degree of patriotic fervour, considering themselves on a mission to assist the island lift itself out of the current developmental crisis. These values augur a favourable future of the
social movement Rodrigues. Their engagement in a wide range of issues, from micro workplace negotiations to national threats such as water shortage or HIV/AIDS, these leaders command respect and indeed can be held up as models of what social movement unionism of tomorrow might be for Mauritius as well. However, the factors that have led to the development of this orientation in Rodrigues are not fully present in Mauritius. What are the differences? Firstly, in terms of socio-economic factors, the militancy of the Mauritius movement at its roots for basic workplace-specific action has remained consistently high on the union agenda because of the significant economic and business developments since independence. Such developments have unfortunately not been met with their equivalent in terms of employment relations, human relations and HRM improvements. Unions’ agendas have consequently followed the parallel trend: the number of employers in Mauritius is significant, and for every attempt, and there have been many, at violating worker rights or practicing autocratic or repressive management, unions have responded with militancy. Their attention has been and is still is, captivated by workplace problems. In Rodrigues, conversely, the number of employers is small, since most revenue is generated from cottage industries and a huge informal sector.

Secondly, in political terms, the legacy of the first charismatic union leaders of Mauritius is one of extreme, passionate, combativeness and one that most of the main union leaders are keen to honour. Such is not the case in Rodrigues, the almost forgotten dependency, where the stakes of the sugar oligarchy were not even present, let alone their managerial styles. Thus, the union movement grew out of a mix of workplace issues and a preoccupation with survival, period.

Turning to national culture variations, we observe that the psyche of the workforce in Mauritius and in Rodrigues is shaped by national culture, as is perhaps the psyche of management as well. So, although we do not have data for Rodrigues, existing data on the national culture of Mauritius along Hofstede (1982) dimensions shows that in Mauritius, individualism is high. This is in stark contrast to the natural bonhomie and collective mindedness of the Rodriguan people. This is not the place to embark on a long debate about the roots of such high individualism in Mauritius, but suffice to say that the natural tendency to organize in Rodrigues may be attributed to their low individualism index, and that part of the explanation of low membership in Mauritius may be explained by the weak need to “associate” by Mauritians, possibly due to the strong class consciousness of the population.

We have seen that Rodriguans will organize, no matter what. Even when workplace issues
have been dealt with, unions and other associations continue to struggle on other, wider, fronts, and members continue to show support and allegiance to their unions even if workplace issues are no longer salient. The situation also implies that these organizations do not seem to follow an old-school union ideology (fighting for concessions from management) but instead are happy to be struggling for some cause, where causes exist or can be found. In Mauritius, however, causes seem to take the form of dead horses, and unions’ seem to be (un)happily flogging away. Collectivism in higher in Rodrigues and Individualism is higher in Mauritius. Very likely linked to the feeling of historical isolation and rejection, the national collective identity is radically much stronger in Rodrigues, than the history of past colonialism that it shares with Mauritius.

This of course is a generalisation, and some unions, such as the Government Servants’ Association (GSA), do go to some lengths to include wider worker interests in the action agenda, even if the primary focus remains on the worker and his/her workplace problems. Interestingly, the Rodrigues branch of the GSA follows is very own, Rodriguan model, as we have seen, by embracing a wide range of non-workplace issues. How then, can this be explained? To the extent that the spirit of unionism is far from dead on both islands, can we assume that the movement in Mauritius will continue to be a mere reflection of society and its historically-determined conditions, instead of being where the future is, and engineer the change proactively? The question is open as to whether social movement unionism in Rodrigues will be able to sustain itself, for instance, if national development takes an industrial turn, bringing in more employment and employers, and a predictably harsher business ethos? Does national culture determine the strength of the association spirit, or can national culture be crafted around certain core desirable values, such as solidarity, low individualism, and a belief in the value of organised action? For, whereas in Rodrigues, the union movement does not see itself as being in crisis, in Mauritius the situation is felt like an uncomfortable crossroads. Which direction will the movement take, given the foreseeable economic and business scenario? A lack of sophisticated reflection about the impact and role of unions from an ideological standpoint might end the movement in an irreversible position, as management lingo consistently – and must it be said, disparagingly – place unions in the past, urging them to be “modern” and “progressive” by aligning their actions with the business agenda of productivity and cost reduction strategies. The prospects of SMU in Mauritius really, for once, lie in the hands of the union leaders, but they must be willing to go against the current national ‘values’ and create a new value system, one based on human and
community development, of leadership for positive societal change, and on the desire to shift their militancy from micro struggles to holistic action.

**Conclusion and final remarks**

The new pieces of legislation, allegedly grounded in globalization-led realism, may be a point of departure for a deep and extensive reflection concerning the union movement of the future for Mauritius. The compositional shift in the labour market and the persistent macho management practices have clearly contributed to a shaking of the union movement’s base of power. As in other globalization-struck countries, the greater employment of non-manual workforces, the staff reductions in private companies, plant closures, the growth of SMEs, the increase in short-term contractual employment, the increased participation of female workers, and the expansion of difficult-to-organise service sector, have had general implications for the pattern and orientation in unionization.

The future offers changes that require that the trade union movement accommodates its activities and its orientation. The union movement in Mauritius and Rodrigues is a history of many successes and a few weaknesses, and its support to the democratic progress and improvement of lives of workers on both islands is indisputable. We conclude that it does not appear that the union movement need to rediscover itself or effect a total transformation. However, it must choose a scenario for the future. Will it persist in the servicing orientation?

We believe that the solid base of the movement is in a position to answer to what it stands for: a force for societal change – for the better. There may well be attractiveness in a service model, since ‘bread and butter’ issues must continuously and forever be on the agenda. After all, as Ramgutty-Wong found in 2004, if “basics” of employment are not quite right yet, “bread and butter” of proper wages, decent working conditions, and job security will still be high on unions’ agenda. Nevertheless, we are in the middle of social and economic change and globalisation, individualisation, technology, and knowledge-based production will characterize society and economy. These changes determine workers’ work, and their daily lives, and social movement unionism by the nature of its orientation, is positioned there where the future is formed, and to fight to ensure that the trends and tendencies of society and the economy will be of benefit to workers in general, if the union movement operates from the point of view of workers’ wide, life interests. In effect, if the union movement fights for the future, so that the movement takes on its immediate tasks and activities, but does so by depending to a great degree on the overall, global developments of the society and
the economy, it will gradually take on a social movement dimension. Especially in years to come, social cohesion, community spirit, peace, order, will be so high on every citizen’s and every politician’s agenda as to take precedence over the quantum of wages and salaries.

We have attempted to present some explanations that could simultaneously account for the emergence of SMU and for the dissimilarity between Rodriguan and Mauritian union movements. Of course, our analysis has focused on a particular diversity of national reality: that of Rodrigues versus that of Mauritius. Other studies have also discussed SMU in the context of national peculiarities, each coming up with their own version or brand. We realize that the wide variety of applications results in a certain degree of ambiguity in the use of the term SMU and some uncertainty in what constitutes the form of unionism we have observed in Mauritius as compared to the one in Rodrigues. We modestly admit that this analysis has its weaknesses and flaws, and should be regarded as incomplete.

Yet, this paper has described a novel approach to examining dynamics of development in two similar yet distinct societies. No reports have held up tiny Rodrigues as being a leader and Mauritius as the follower. In an effort to answer the big-picture question of democratic growth and the industrial relations system in the two islands, we have laid out the social movement unionism of Rodrigues as a candidate for leadership in industrial relations policy and action. The labour movement in each island has followed the socio-economic and political path of each island, as it has done so anywhere else in the world. Yet, social movement unionism, even in its Rodriguan form, may hold some answers to many of the questions our civil society and political leaders may have. This study has shown that national culture plays a major part in explaining the rise of social movement unionism (or not) and that high individualism and low solidarity will not foster social movement unionism.

Like any other social movement, unions face different challenges and opportunities at various stages of their lifecycle and so it is not easy to determine what will or may revitalize the union movement in Mauritius (and in Rodrigues) as they respond to changing socio-economic conditions. But the union movement is alive. The union movement must show results of its political work and make this visible and tangible for the individual worker who has more than a worker’s identity. Bottom line: it must prepare its basic concept and perspective of the future that gives –to itself and to all – a clear picture of what the union movement will do, and what it exists for. We have not attempted in this paper to prescribe the Rodriguan brand of SMU – it has its weaknesses – but the style can be used as a baseline for
reflection on the positioning of the union movement in both islands within the larger picture of a modern, industrialized, and humane society.

References


