

Political orientations and its impact on industrial relations



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The following content will evaluate how and to what extent workplace representatives in the current era are important in trade unions.

“ Trade unions are organisations that represent people at work and are principally concerned with protecting its members in the employment relationship.” (Salamon. 1987. 81). A trade union consists of a group of workers who come together to organise and represent their interests in order to be more conversant and powerful when it comes down to cooperating with their employers.

The trade unions or labour unions originated when groups of workers came together to form an organisation that works towards their well being (Edwards, March, 2003). The significance of the trade unions lie in the fact that they can negotiate wages, rules of hiring, recruitment and firing, working conditions, workplace security and safety policies, employee benefits, compliant processes, promotion policies, retirement benefits, etc. with the employers and the government on behalf of their members (Dine, 2007). The trade unions gain their strength due to the numbers of members who join them. Thus, providing the unions with the power to sometimes dictate terms to employers, governments and other parties and may influence the political, economic and social climate within a country (Dine, 2007). The unions also by virtue of their positions exercise power and influence on their members as well as non-members (Edwards, March, 2003). The essay will look at “ Trade Unions in UK and USA: Political Orientations and Its Impact on the Industrial Relations” aims to “ compare and contrast the political orientation of trade unions of the United kingdom and the United States of America and evaluate their differential impact on the industrial

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relations systems in both the countries". In an attempt to achieve this aim, this essay looked at the trade unions in the UK and the Labour Unions in the USA and made a comparative analysis of the differences and similarities between the two with regard to their political orientations. And, tried to analyze how these similarities and differences in their political orientations impacted the systems of industrial relations that existed in both the countries. The essay thus aimed at providing explanatory insights into understanding the relations that existed between the political orientations of trade / labour unions and the industrial relations systems of a country.

The trade unions originated in Europe and spread across of different countries around the world during the industrial revolution (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000). The trade unions in the United Kingdom were established as early as 1867 and aimed at improving the socio-economic situation of members of the working class (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000). It soon turned into a movement that resulted in the formation of the present day Labour Party in the UK (McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell, April, 2008). With changing times and governments in the country, trade unions saw an upheaval in their power orientation, membership trends and structure (Josselin, January, 2001). What began as a movement by the blue collared industrial workers, are now being supported and participated in by white collared shop workers and office workers in the UK (Poole, 2003). Some of the main trade unions in the UK include the National Union of Mineworkers, the National Union of Agricultural Workers, the Association of Cotton Spinners, the Operative Society of Bricklayers, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the National Union of Gasworkers & General Labourers, the National Union of Railwaymen

and the Transport and General Workers Union, etc (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000). These unions are members of larger bodies known as the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) (Reid, April, 2005).

In the USA, the trade unions are known as the labour unions. These are similar to trade unions in the UK, however comparatively smaller in size of memberships. The Labour Unions in the United States exert its power or influence through its allegiance within the Democratic Party and other like minded organisations (Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1994). The members belonging to the labour unions include public sector employees such as law-enforcements officers, educators, etc (Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1994). These unions similar to the unions of the UK aim at improving the working conditions of their members along with negotiations for better wages, working conditions benefits, post retirement benefits, security and safety of workers, etc. Some of the examples of labour union organisations in the USA include the American Federation of Labor, the Workingman's Party, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Knights of Labor, the United Mine Workers, the Congress for Industrial Organisations, etc ((Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1994). These unions fall under the umbrella of two major labour unions namely: the Change to Win Federation (CtW Federation) and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) (Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1994).

The aims or goals of the trade / labour unions in both the countries and in other parts of the world remain similar and yet there are differences in the way these unions / organisations are organised, structured, functioned and <https://assignbuster.com/political-orientations-and-its-impact-on-industrial-relations/>

negotiated their power of influence. Black had suggested that trade unions, however big or small, have the ability to change the politico-socio-economic environment of a country and this is the reason for their power (Black, July, 2005). With the advent of media and worldwide communication systems, these unions are gaining further strength and the ability to influence governments, private business enterprises and the masses (Yates, May, 2009). Hence it is interesting to understand how these organisations exert or apply its power if at all on the political climate of a country and influence the systems of industrial relations.

Comparison of Political Orientations of the Trade / Labour Unions

The trade unions in the UK and the Labour Unions of the USA share similarities and dissimilarities that impact their political orientations. In the UK, the trade unions find expression in the country's politics through the Labour Party (Hyman, 2001). In the USA, on the other hand, the labour unions express themselves through the Democratic Party (Hyman, 2001). Weiss had suggested that the governments in countries are generally influenced and limited by the political, economic and welfare organisations with the countries (Weiss, 2004). Trade / labour unions are among the bodies that have the capability to influence the way a government makes policies on different subjects especially those which have the ability to directly or indirectly affect the workers of the country (Weiss, 2004).

The free economy of the USA makes it difficult for the policy makers of the country to balance between the demands of the labour unions and those of the corporate enterprises (Frege and Kelly, November, 2004). In the light of <https://assignbuster.com/political-orientations-and-its-impact-on-industrial-relations/>

the recent economic recession that hit the country in 2008, the political circles found it difficult to find a mid way between governmental regulations on worker benefits and corporate losses to meet those regulations. In the UK however, trade unions have had a significant influence on the way the economic and social development policies were laid out by the government (Clark, April, 2009). It is only in recent years, when the UK government has started to open up its economy to make it more liberal, have the political orientations of the trade unions lost their strong hold (Armingeon, March, 2006). It is interesting to understand here is that the Labour Party, which has strong ties with the trade unions, is the ruling party in the UK. The social orientation of the trade unions in the UK has resulted in the 'centre-left' orientation of the present ruling party in the country. In the USA on the other hand, the Democratic Party, the ruling party adopts a liberal approach. It however is similarly oriented ('centre-left') as the Labour Party of the UK. The question that can be asked at this point is whether the orientations of the ruling parties in the two countries can be attributed to the political orientations of the trade / labour unions in both the countries. With changing times, the memberships of the trade / labour unions have taken a hit (Croucher and Cotton, January, 2009). This has not only impacted their ability to influence but also their own organisational strength (Kubicek, 2004). Both the countries, UK and USA, have liberal economies, making it difficult for the unions in the present day context to completely influence the rules, policies and strategies that govern the markets and consequently the political scenario (Jose, 2002). Thus it can be stated that the political orientations of the trade / labour unions in the two countries have definite influence over the way in which the rules and policies are made by the

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governments in the two countries and that these impact the industrial relations systems.

Impact on the Industrial Relations Systems

The strength of the labour / trade unions lay in their ability to negotiate better working terms with the employers and get the governments in different countries to form labour laws that were labour oriented (Kelly and Willman, 2004). In the face of the changing times and the post communist era, the role of the labour / trade unions has started to dwindle (Clark, Delaney and Frost, March, 2003; Wahl, 2004). The question that remains is whether the labour / trade unions and their political orientations still have the ability to impact and influence the industrial relations systems in different countries.

In UK, over the recent years, there have been fall in the membership of the trade unions (Crowley and Ost, 2001). One of the most commonly cited reason for this is the inability of these unions to use their political orientations and negotiating powers to benefit the workers (Frege and Kelly, 2003). Similar issues have been identified in the US as well. Studies have shown that the trade / labour unions are not being able to offer the collective bargaining coverage to all jobs in a country (Kubicek, 2004). This is not only reducing the faith that workers had on the labour / trade unions but also the influence that these unions had on the systems of industrial relations. There have been different causes cited for the diminishing influence and impact of the labour / trade unions in the UK and the USA. Kubicek had found that the labour / trade unions were lacking in a definite labour agenda and resources (Kubicek, 2004). Crowley and Ost had suggested that the trade / labour

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unions are now merely regarded as the reflection of the former socialist endeavours and thought to no longer function as agents of the worker welfare (Crolwey and Ost, 2001). However, there have been instances where the political orientations of the unions have helped in preventing the government in turning completely capitalistic in its approach in the present day (The Trade Union Movement, New Labour, and Working-Class Politics. Workers' Liberty). The economy of the UK and the changing economy of the USA (post the economic debacle) are changing the way the labour / trade unions and their political orientations are impacting the industrial relations systems in both the countries.

Thus in conclusion, it can be said that the uncertainties created by the economic conditions in the USA and the UK are impacting the political systems and thereby changing the influence of trade / labour unions and their political orientations. These changes and impacts are being felt in the formal organisational conditions as well as the power of the employers, collective bargaining and industrial relations systems. The final outcomes being exhibited are in the form of democracy and / or oligarchy through competition, opposition, internal bargaining and finally, decentralisation of the decision-making power.