

**SPEECH BY HANNAH OWUSU-KORANTENG (ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR OF WACAM) DELIVERED AT THE 5<sup>TH</sup> NATIONAL WOMEN'S  
CONFERENCE**

The Chairperson,

Sister delegates

Invited guest

Ladies and gentlemen

The topic in relation to the - **Theme Count Us In** - presents an opportunity to discuss the engagement between unions and managements as part of the broader ideological struggle between labour and capital.

Trade union or labour union is an organisation of workers who have come together to achieve common goals such as protecting the integrity of its trade, improving safety standards, achieving higher pay and benefits such as health care and retirement and better working conditions.

However, the drive to unite all 'labouring men and women' under the umbrella of unions for a common purpose of protecting workers' interests has sometimes been misdirected to serve the interest of the oppressive class. There are examples of Yellow unions that are either set up by managements or controlled to serve the interest of capital.

It is significant to note that in Ghana, the first industrial action under the British colony was a strike by the country's miners in 1919. This led to a series of successful collective actions by workers. Permanent organisations were formed as well. Unions like the Gold and Silver Smith's Association, the Colony and Ashanti Motor Union, and the Carpenters and Masons Union were all founded in the 1920s. The response from the colonial government was to outlaw workers' strikes.

Sustained workers struggles led to the enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1941, legalising the formation of trade unions in the colony but with a different objective. The Colonial administration encouraged the establishment of a national labour movement to avoid the kind of labour struggles that had accompanied the industrial revolution in Europe and North America. This gave birth to the Gold Coast Trade Union Congress on September 8, 1945 with an initial membership of 6,030 and fourteen affiliates at the offices of the Railway African Employees Union in Sekondi.

### **Women in Trade Unions**

Women have not been as active as expected in trade union activities. In identifying the obstacles of women participation in trade unions, it is important to ask these three critical questions in relation to the low women participation:

Is it because women cannot participate?

Is it because women do not want to participate?

Or is it because nobody asked women to participate?

Effective participation in social change processes is a function of 'Load and Power'. The 'Load' denotes citizens' responsibilities in relation to social and economic survival and 'Power' denotes the level of power possessed by citizens' groups to effect change in a positive way. For citizens in general to participate effectively, they should possess economic power to decrease the 'Load' or increase their political power through organisation to overcome the

problem of individual resource constraints and thus promote effective participation in decision-making process.

Trade unionism is perceived as a man's world where women have been at the background in its core business. This notwithstanding, women were very instrumental in the early beginnings of trades' union in the Americas. Elizabeth Faue<sup>1</sup> in tracing the transformation of American labour movement from community forms of solidarity to bureaucratic unionism indicates that gender is central to understanding the shift in women shaping labour and political organisations to unionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially the labour movement was rooted in community organisations and networks in which women were active, both as members and as leaders. This community orientation reclaimed family, relief, and education as political ground for a labour movement seeking to re-establish itself. After the losses of the 1920s society began to perceive women as threats to men seeking work; thus women lost their places in union leadership, in working-class culture and on labour's political agenda.

Although trade unions had been an important component in a democratic society for decades, the special interests of women workers were not served by the unions. Strikes and negotiations were a beer-and-sandwiches job almost exclusively conducted by and for "the brothers". Meetings were at night, when most women were at home engaged in ironing shirts, engaging in childcare and carrying out household chores. Women were expected to play the domestic roles at home appearing to be okay and indifferent of their surroundings while the men were perceived and respected as the honourable breadwinners who pay next to no attention to the needs of women and the family even when they are colleagues in the same establishment. Thus the male image became the face of trade unions.

During the Second World War, most women were at work against the wishes of the trade unions. Traditionally, unions argued that men needed to earn a "family wage" sufficient to keep a wife and children and this should not be undercut by women claiming male skilled jobs and equal pay- a woman's place was in the home. Employment was segregated. Men then were employed in heavy industry, women in the low-paid business of care, secretarial and administrative work and the service sector.

Even with the loss of status of women in core trade union business and under very precarious arrangements, working women continued to play remarkable roles in bargaining during collective disputes in the tailoring and textile companies.

### **The feats of women leaders**

There are countless women who despite the stereotypes have crushed the glass ceiling to excel in their fields of competences and in the labour movement.

- Agnes Burnes Wieck, was the first president of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners (WAPM), who expanded the role of women to that of equals in their social justice struggle. Under Wieck's leadership, the WAPM were the primary organisers for the Progressive Miners of America (PMA) in Southern Illinois and often proved to be more militant than their male counterparts in the PMA. However, the efforts to organise the miners were often met with violence. Shootings, beatings and bombings were all-too-common events during that period.
- Today, the average British trade unionist is a young, degree-educated, woman working in the professions. Women have become vital to the survival of unions and this was

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Faue (1992). *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945*. Volume 51 | Number 6 (Fall 1992)

proven by Frances O'Grady aged 52 who emerged as the first general secretary of the Trades Union Congress<sup>2</sup> (TUC) the umbrella body for 54 affiliated unions, as its first female general secretary in 144 years in 2013. Frances was a single mother of two and has proven that unionism is taking a new dimension in today's politics.

- For female officials, a trade union career, unlike 30 years ago, can offer variety, security and good terms and conditions. Scarlet Harris, 36, TUC women's officer, worked in the male-dominated National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (**RMT**) led by Bob Crow had this to say: "When I first started, I was the only woman in the industrial relations department. Bob Crow was really supportive. I was also well looked after when I was pregnant," she says.
- Natalie Jacottet, 32, read philosophy at university and joined the Communication Workers Union (CWU). She has been head of research since 2009. "I was lucky as these jobs don't come up very often. My motivation was to work somewhere where I care about what we do."

In Ghana, Trade Unionism is taking a dramatic turn for the better in terms of women in leadership.

- In 2012, for the first time in the 67 years history of trades union, Sister Georgina Opoku Amankwa was elected unopposed as the Chairperson of the TUC, Ghana.
- Again for the first time in the history of Ghana, Sister Comfort Agabaa of the Construction and Building Materials Workers Union of TUC Ghana became the first female Deputy General Secretary of the union in 2012.
- Sister Veronica Ayikwei Kofie, became the first woman to head one of the departments of TUC, Ghana.

With these achievements, we would have expected that women would have had greater influence in Trade Unions in Ghana today than the existing situation. Negative perceptions of women who contest for positions in Trade Unions and doubts about women's leadership capabilities to lead trade unions tend to dampen the spirit of women who want to commit themselves to the fight for a new world where workers' rights would be respected.

Women have accepted the stereotype and engaged in self-fulfilling prophesy by not offering themselves for leadership roles in trade unions. The few women, who braved the odds to survive and succeed have to endure intimidation, discrimination and name calling.

### **The way forward**

Women in trade unions must first and foremost understand that working in the union means participating in a class struggle against parasitic class of capitalists and their representatives who survive on the toil and sweat of workers (labour). When we are conscious of our class interests, then we can be counted in the struggle to defend them.

We live in a knowledge-based world where competition of ideas and competences decide the direction for an organisation. Women in Trade unions must equip themselves with the knowledge, organisational and leadership skills and professional competences which would be needed in providing answers to the critical questions of their unions. In effect, women trade unionists should expand their influence in the trade union movement by resolving the union's problems and also contribute to national development.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tuc.org.uk>

As a nation, we do not seem to have answers to the enormous social, economic and environmental problems associated mining in general and with small scale/illegal mining operations. The women in the Ghana Mine Workers' Union have opportunity to put their organisational and leadership skills to test by extending trade union organisation to the informal sector of the mining industry (small scale/ illegal miners) which would create an opportunity for occupational health and safety and environmental (SHE) knowledge to be extended to sector which is bedevilled with many problems especially galamsey operators. As women, we have the compassion and natural endowments for the protection of the environment, lives and water bodies. We should have the courage to tackle tough issues of our union and our nation and should not be afraid to make mistakes.

We have thousands of workers out there in the communities who are eager to protect their rights. Our trade unions are also confronted with dwindling memberships. We live in communities that have huge legacy issues to deal with and that certainly have implications for social wellbeing and quality of life for citizens including workers. Our role in the informal sector of the mining industry would help stem the tide of the dwindling membership and also help us improve the union's financial standing in addition to protecting lives and the environment.

The Ghana Mine Workers' Union which was founded on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1944 in Abosso near Tarkwa with a membership of 16,047 in 2012, representing senior and junior workers in the mining sector of Ghana is recognised as a very strong and vibrant trade union. It is commendable that women are being provided the needed support and encouragement in GMWU to become the face of a union which operates in a male-dominated industry. In 2012, the female population was 981 and reduced to 689 in 2014 which translates into 32.8% point reduction.

It is said that, '**If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.**' We must learn to support each other and build networks to support our advocacy objectives and refrain from unhealthy competitions that pull us back.

Women have a role to play in ensuring that they struggle along their male counterpart to eliminate discrimination of any form, particularly against women. Women have a role to play in increase the fortitudes of the union. Our strength lies in our numbers.

Solidarity for ever!

Thank You.