

# The Politics of Teacher Unions: Strategies and Effects

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**Abstract:** This study investigated how the politics of teacher unions affect teacher benefits. The study sought to investigate the political strategies that teacher unions employ in order to fight for the benefits of teachers and the teachers' awareness of these union activities. This study was carried out among teachers in public primary and secondary schools in Western Kenya. The respondents included classroom teachers in primary and secondary schools, school heads and principals as well as a teacher union official.

This study adopted Dewey's Pragmatic paradigm where workable methods are used for problem solving. A concurrent mixed method design was adopted so that both quantitative and qualitative data could be collected at the same time. This allowed for collection of both the feelings and attitudes of respondents as well as collection of a wide range of opinions from many respondents through survey for generalization. Quantitatively, 114 filled survey questionnaires were gathered from respondents with data on political strategies used by teacher unions, union accessibility to members, general feeling about unions by teachers and benefits that members derive from unions. 9 interviews with school heads and union leader were conducted to obtain the qualitative data. To triangulate the data collected, documents analysis of union correspondence and government documents was also carried out. Findings revealed that teacher unions effectively used both coercive and diplomatic strategies in fighting for benefits for teachers despite challenges that faced them. These political strategies included staging strikes and negotiating Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA) that improved teachers' salaries, allowances, health benefits among others. Findings revealed the political power of unions lie in numerical numbers of teachers and the financial resources from union dues. However, having observed that unions only recruit salaried members, I would recommend further research on the possibility of in cooperating non-salaried teachers in order to give the union more power for negotiation.

**Key Words:** Teacher Unions, Politics, Teacher Benefits, Collective Bargaining Agreement

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the political strategies that teacher unions use when engaging the teachers' employer in Kenya and the effect of these strategies. Empirical studies have noted that teachers' rights have been infringed upon by those in management of their affairs and this has necessitated the formation of teacher unions that cushion them against such malpractices (McCollow, 2017). As such, these teacher unions have become the go between that pressurizes the government – who is the employer- as they negotiate for the teachers' rights and dues. The unions adopt civil as well as radical

strategies in their negotiation with the government. While there have been dissenting voices against the activism of teacher unions, it has emerged that teacher unions are integral not only in fighting for the rights of teachers but also in improving the education standards in the country. Extensive research has focused on the strategies that teacher unions employ in negotiation however, this paper aims to inform on the various political strategies that the teacher unions use in driving their agenda on behalf of the teacher and the effects that the said strategies have on teachers and on education.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher unions are organizations that are formed by teachers under a common employer to fight for better conditions and terms of work (Lilja, 2014). Traditionally, teaching has been seen as a semi-professional work and the teacher unions have endeavored to make teaching be recognized as a profession in itself. In Kenya, the Teachers Service Commission is mandated to manage teachers' affairs in terms of employment, transfer and even discipline. However, teacher unions have been on the forefront of championing policies in the education sector contrary to the assertion that they only fight for members' remuneration (Berkovich, 2011). In Kenya, the major teacher unions are Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and Kenya Union of Post Primary Teachers (KUPPET). A recent entrant as an outfit for teacher advocacy is Kenya Women Teachers Association (KEWOTA). As noted by (Winkler et al., 2012) teacher unions in Kenya have not just based their efforts on improving the working conditions of teachers but they have also helped shape educational policy.

Politics encompasses all the activities that involve acquiring and using power in order to influence decisions that affect a society (Hornby et al., 2015). Indeed, trade unionism in Africa played a vital role in emancipation from colonial rule as they were used as outfits that voiced the disagreement with the colonial education policies. As allies with powerful local labour movements like Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and globally with the International Labour Organization (ILO), teacher unions in Kenya have mastered a grit in their negotiation strategies as well as have backing from these partners whenever the force of the government squares on them. (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010) further postulates that trade unions use their power resources in terms of their huge membership and financial base to push and influence policy and resource allocation. In this regard,

the teacher unions surpasses their economic role and become political entities (Cowen & Strunk, 2014; Lumby & Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (Great Britain, 2015)

### III. POLITICAL STRATEGIES

Politics is integral in sharing of limited resources. As such financial resources and manpower have become vital tools in the acquisition of power. Hornby et al., (2015) alludes to politics as, "The activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society." In getting political power, the unions recruit members from the teaching fraternity and these members contribute union dues that provide a financial base for running union operations thus basic tools of power are achieved. Parsons, (1963) asserts that political power arises when entities or persons have the capacity to get things done in the face of opposition from opposing forces. As they negotiate with the government, unions employ both coercive and diplomatic strategies in order to push the agenda (Haugaard, n.d.). Among the political strategies used by the unions include; association with political parties, a large number of members, huge financial base and the use of the media.

#### 3.1 Association with political parties

An entity that seeks to build a powerful base of influence for bargaining must be ready to build coalitions and networks as well as align themselves with more powerful players (Lumby & Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Great Britain 2015). This is the case of teacher unions because they need even more backing if they are to succeed against the powerful government. As teacher unions align with these political parties, they gain more credence and empathy from the people and more pressure is turned on the government to give into the demand of the teachers. The political parties use the promise of more potential voters should the unions succeed in this symbiotic association. In Kenya, KUPPET and KNUT also belong to COTU as an umbrella trade union. When the teacher organizations are agitating for member benefits, COTU the mother organ supports them vocally and this adds to their credibility and power. Global affiliations with ILO as mandated in their constitution further helps the union with international exposure to current and more effective ways of negotiations and swinging power towards the agenda of the teachers (International Labour Office, 2018). By positioning themselves with these like-minded entities, teacher unions influence policies that affect teacher benefits (Bernards, 2019). Gichuru (2017) notes that teacher unions affiliations with these powerful organizations puts more pressure on the government and this helps the teachers cause.

It has also been observed that union officials have sought for and succeeded in being elected in national offices. As members of parliament for example, these unionists give voice to teacher demands and help shape education policy at the point of creation- parliament. In education committees,

such elected members are better placed to provide insights on what is best for the teachers with the available resources. They help approve budgets for employment of more teachers, build more classes so that teachers have smaller classes etcetera.

#### 3.2 Huge membership

As legally constituted bodies, teacher unions are allowed to recruit members who share in the ideologies of collective bargaining. The unions then with elected officials and properly set organs have the authority to negotiate on behalf of the teachers. With the huge membership providing the backing, the union is able to impose their will against the government in the form of teacher strikes. These strikes are coercive avenues that the unions use whenever talks on the diplomatic table grind to a halt. With learners at home and teachers in the streets, public apathy towards the government forces the governments hand and a return to the negotiation table (Mahlangu, 2013). With the unions usually having a myriad of demands to be met, the government with limited resources, a trade in for priority goals and objectives is normally considered and a ceasefire called. The power to bring the government to such a comprise comes from the teachers who withdraw their services and forces the government's hand amid threats and grandstanding. This is confirmed by (Potrac & Jones, 2009) who maintain that power does not reside in a singular person in authority or office but some of the power transfers to the people are administered upon. This confirms that the union derives their power from the members even as they use the membership to dispense authority.

#### 3.3 Huge financial base

Teacher unions have a huge financial power that comes from member union dues and agency fees from non-members. As mandated by the union constitution, a monthly percentage of member's basic salary is paid to the union to run its activities on a check-off basis by the teacher's employer. These are union dues. When the union successfully negotiates for salary increments for teachers, the salary increment award goes to even non members of the union and so the cost of this negotiation is levied on these non-members as well and these are the union agency fees. With these monies collected monthly, the union has a huge financial base that it uses to run its daily activities. From these resources, the union is also able to sustain a considerable strike or go slow whenever civil negotiations with the government stall. In addition, the union is able to sustain protracted cases in court with this financial muscle. Most recently, however, unions and the government have resorted to Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA) where agents of the government and the union officials meet to peacefully negotiate terms and conditions of service for teachers for a defined period of time (Gernigon et al., 2000; Internationales Arbeitsamt, 2015). In Kenya, the latter has been used in order to quell frequent teacher strikes and improve quality of teaching and learning in schools.

### 3.4 The Media

The media has been and still is a powerful tool for sharing information. Unions use both the mainstream media and also the social media to spread their ideologies with the aim of reaching as many people as possible. Over the years, teacher unions have called press conferences to issue strike notices to the teachers' employers and during these sessions, they have painted the government as unfeeling and inhuman in their treatment of the plight of teachers. More recently, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook have been extensively used by the unions to counter government policies that they deem inappropriate. Through these media platforms, the union is able to reach the members directly and call them to meetings, spread information and influence other education stakeholders.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

In this study, I adopted Dewey's pragmatic paradigm as a way of generating workable solutions to the social problems present (Maddux & Donnett, 2015). The data collected integrated both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a mixed method design. As stated by (Trainor & Graue, 2013) a research on complex social issues calls for multiple methods. Moreover, (Cohen et al., 2018) as well as (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) insist that collecting, analyzing and the fusion of quantitative and qualitative data in one study harnesses the strengths of the two paradigms at the expense of their weaknesses. When using the mixed method design, it is argued that one forgoes methodological prejudices of either paradigms involved (Terrell, 2012)

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously from participants in a concurrent mixed method design for the purpose of comparing and merging the results obtained (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). As argued by (Punch, 2016) while the quantitative data explains the statistical results, qualitative data gives a general understanding of the research problem.

### 4.1 Sampling and Data collection methods

The study was conducted in a selected county in Western Kenya. The sample teachers selected for interview was drawn from membership of both KUPPET and KNUT. The participants involved union leaders as well as teachers who were then assigned pseudo-names to mask their identities. Teachers were purposively selected from both Primary and Secondary schools in order to target members of both unions (Tolmie et al., 2011). It is important to note that Primary school teachers in Kenya are predominantly members of KNUT while Secondary School teachers are predominantly in KUPPET.

Semi structured interviews were administered to school managers; 4 school head teachers in primary schools and 4 principals in secondary school. These were chosen due to their ease of access in terms of accessibility to the researcher. 114 questionnaires were administered to classroom teachers in

order to collect their views on the union effectiveness in negotiation. 1 union official was also interviewed in order to collect views on the political strategies employed by the teacher unions in negotiation.

Table 1: Sample of participants

Category of respondent	Number	Reason Selected
(Gender parity, Sec. & Primary, lower and upper classes)	114 questionnaires dully filled collected	To collect views on the effect (positive or negative) of union negotiation
Head Teachers / Principals	8 Principals and Headteachers, from both primary and secondary schools (Affiliated to both KNUT and KUPPET respectively)	To collect views from school managers who are agents of the employer at the school level
Union Leaders (County Executive Secretary)	1 person	To collect information on the political strategies that the unions engage in during negotiation.

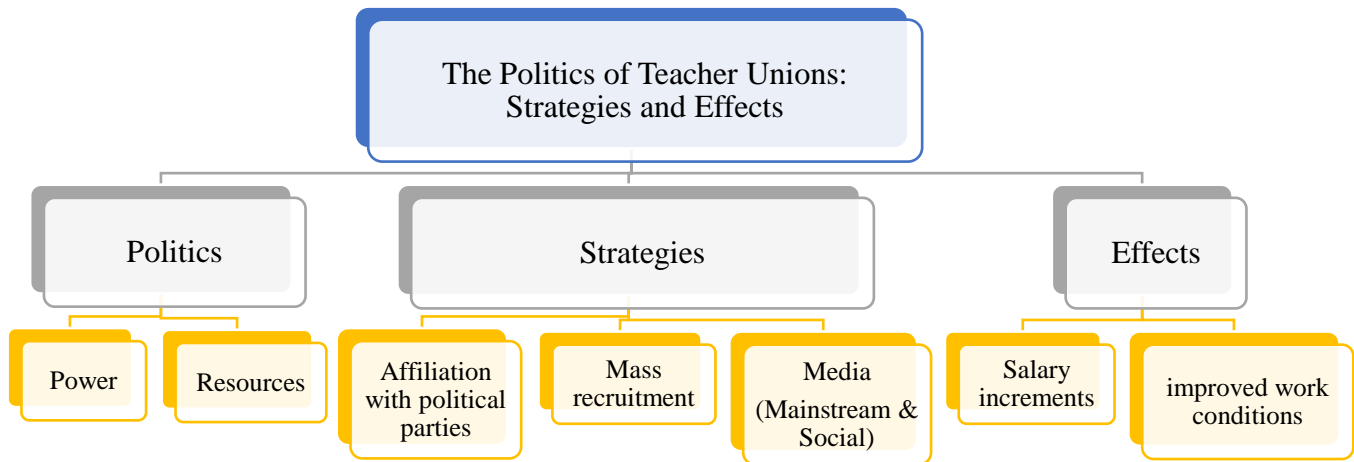
The research site was a county in western Kenya because of its proximity to the researcher hence minimal transport cost to the researcher. From the table 1 above, research participants included classroom teachers, manager of institutions as well as union official. The duration of data collection was one month. The large number of teachers selected in the survey was to provide enough information in order to generalize the results of union politics and strategies, be they negative or positive. The Executive Secretary of the union County Branch, powerful office of the union, was selected in order to collect information on the political strategies that the union employs in negotiation with the teacher's employer and the effects of these negotiations.

Since both interviews and survey were used in data collection, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the field. In addition, a document analysis protocol was administered in order to collect information from the constitutions of KUPPET and KNUT. These multiple methods were then instrumental in triangulation and validation of research data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Flick (2014) argues that interviews are used to collect opinions, beliefs and thoughts of the respondents; it also gives room for further interrogation and probe of the interviewee in order for more detail to be captured. It also gives the interviewer the flexibility to restructure their question in order to avoid misinterpretation (Kothari C. R, 2008).

The choice of survey was arrived at because of the large number of participants needed in order to draw conclusive generalizations within a short period of time. Since questionnaires did not require the presence of the researcher, the participants are able to fill them without feeling influenced in any way (Cohen et al., 2018).

The tree diagram below shows the breakdown of the research question to constructs, concepts and units of this research.

Figure1: Breakdown of research questions to constructs concepts and units.



Among the documents that were analyzed included the unions' constitutions as well as copies of the CBA. Evidences of union political strategies such as affiliations with like-minded entities were gathered as well as the outcomes of the negotiation processes were documented in the CBA. This supported (Flick, 2014) assertion that traces of ideas and information about experiences in life are documented. The information collected became essential in triangulation with other information already collected.

#### 4.2 Data recording

While interviewing participants, audio recording was done as well as recording by hand with the help of the interview guide. All these were done with consent of the research participants. Recording helps the researcher to listen to the interviews again and again for accurate transcription of information collected. Besides, (Creswell & Creswell, 2013) point out that audio recording is one of the surest ways of avoiding loss of data as well as proof against tampering. Deggs & Hernandez (2018) further advocate for shorthand notetaking as invaluable ways of recording data keeping.

#### 4.3 Data analysis procedures

Since the methodology involved both qualitative and quantitative data, data analysis occurred separately for the data collected in each method. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for quantitative data to generate meanings and interpretations. Summaries of patterns in data was done by standard deviations. As a result, graphs and charts were generated to show a clear picture of the description of data. From these graphs and charts, evidence based conclusions were then drawn. The qualitative data was first transcribed then coded and themes created to form summarized ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Linkages and

relationships were then made from the data before the results were tabulated for interpretation (Creswell, 2009)

#### 4.4 Validity and reliability

Consistency, truthfulness and transparency in handling the data collected from the field is key in generating informative interpretations. This is especially so while handling qualitative data. Piloting of the research tools before embarking on collection of the quantitative data is integral in determining whether the questions would get the required responses that answers the research question. The quantitative data collected was processed to produce patterns and variables by running it through SPSS.

#### 4.5 Ethical concerns

The do's and don't's that a researcher is faced with constitutes ethical concerns (Cohen et al., 2018). Topmost among the things required of the researcher are confidentiality of the information provided as well as keeping the anonymity of their respondents (Hennink et al., 2011). The researcher has to obtain informed consent from their prospective research participants in order to maintain the credibility of the data collection process. To achieve this, the data collected in this study did not contravene the norms, culture, political persuasions or creed of the people in the research site (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, the purpose of the research was clearly explained to the participants before they participated in the research process. Consent for carrying out this research was obtained from relevant government bodies as well as gatekeepers at the research site. Finally, as a moral obligation to the research participants, they were informed that further ethical procedures would be adhered to in dissemination of the research findings (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015)

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This paper was exploring the political strategies that teacher unions use and the effects that come as a result. The findings emanate from the analysis of the questionnaires, interviews conducted as well as from document analysis. The analysis is presented in themes which include the political strategies of unions as well as positive benefits that accrue to the union membership as well as other effects. On the whole, findings reveal that teacher unions are essential in making the working environment better despite the challenges that they face from the government as they fight for these improved terms and conditions. Findings also reveal that radical methods like strikes being employed by unions in the past to push the government, tripartite legal agreements among the teacher unions, the teacher employer organ and the government is a better way of negotiating going forward.

4.6 Coercive negotiation by teacher unions

When diplomatic ways of negotiation collapse, the teacher unions often resort to forceful strategies in order to push the government to concede to their demands. Coercive strategies manifest themselves in the form of strikes and go slows with the teachers avoiding teaching or going to schools altogether in protest over poor terms of service or poor working

conditions (Subramanien & Joseph, 2019). This is aimed at acquiring bargaining power with public apathy turned to the government and empathy with the teachers. Data indicated that both KUPPET and KNUT used strikes in negotiation. These unions issued legal strike notices and served the employer with them 21 days before commencement of the strikes (Warneck, 2007). Of note is that teacher unions do not just strike for teacher benefits, a recent boycott from training on the new curriculum organized by KNUT in 2019 points to this. KNUT argued that the four-day training was rushed and the teachers would be ill-equipped to deal with the rigors of the new curriculum hence poor learning outcomes would be observed.

Over the years in Kenya, several strikes have been called by teacher unions in order to improve their terms of service. However, it has been noted that these strikes yielded minimal benefits to the teachers. Most of these strikes culminated in empty political promises from the government, a fact that laid base for further teacher strikes. A case in point was the 1997 Legal Notice number 534 which was reneged on by parliament after the then president Daniel Moi, on seeking re-election, had awarded teachers a hefty payrise. The table highlights some of the past teacher strikes in Kenya.

Table 2: Teacher Strikes in Kenya

Year /Duration	Reason for strike	Outcome	Actual benefit for teachers	Union Secretary General(s)
1 <sup>st</sup> – 3 <sup>rd</sup> November 1966	Teachers demanded an exclusive body to address their issues	-Establishment of Teachers Service Commission	- Formation of TSC	Joseph Kioni
October 1997 (Lasted over 3 weeks)	Teachers demanded a 300% pay rise	-Promise of 150-200% increase in pay	-The pay was effected for just 1 year then rescinded	Ambrose Adeya Adongo
January 2009	Teachers demanded a lump sum payment of Ksh.19 billion.	-The government could only pay 17.3 billion in phases	- Salary increment for teachers	Lawrence Majali
2013 (Lasted 24 days)	Teachers demand several allowances	- Government promised Ksh 13.5M to be paid in two phases	- Teachers gained commuter and hardship allowances.	Okuta Osiany
5 <sup>th</sup> to 19 <sup>th</sup> January 2015	Teachers demanded for Improved salaries and allowances	-Court ordered basic salary increment of 50-60% to be implemented in 4 years	The president declared he could not and would not pay for the hefty salary perks.	Wilson Sossion (KNUT) Akelo Misori (KUPPET)

Table 2 above highlights some of the teacher strikes that have occurred in Kenya. It has to be noted that the frequency of their occurrence meant that learning was greatly affected in the schools across the country. Among the driving factor for the gains that the strikes might have brought to the teachers was the charisma and negotiation skills of the union secretary generals. Amid the intimidation by the government, unionists like Ambrose Adongo stood firm and raised for the teachers some of the biggest gains in Kenyan teacher union history albeit for a period of time. The fact that the gains through strikes can be rescinded by the government as was in the case of the 2015 strike clearly shows that other forms of negotiation like CBA need to be given more thought.

Data from the survey indicated that among the options of strikes, going to courts for arbitration and CBA, a majority 63.1% agreed that the latter was the best form of negotiation as opposed to strikes at 30.4% and going to courts at 13.6%.

Table 3: Choice of Courts, Strikes and CBA (Source: Quantitative data)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Courts	14	13.6%
Strikes	31	30.4%
CBA	65	63.1%

From the data above, it can be deduced that teachers perceive that strikes may not be the most effective way of getting better

terms and conditions of service. The government threats of sacking of teachers, arresting union officials and withholding teachers' pay coupled with unfulfilled pledges may have contributed to this (Kaberia, 2012). Also, recent success with CBA may have contributed to the high percentage of 63.1%.

#### 4.7 Diplomatic negotiation by teacher unions

Teacher unions explore peaceful ways of negotiation with the employer even before escalating to coercive techniques. These negotiations culminate in a CBA that is legally binding to both parties. The teachers' grievance cases are negotiated in good faith and a legal document is drafted and presented to the industrial court. The grievances are mainly on remuneration, working hours and other concessions agreed upon by both parties (Gernigon et al., 2000). When a CBA is agreed upon, teachers are legally bound by its terms and no strike can occur within the time-frame of the CBA.

Data revealed that in 2017, the two teachers' unions KUPPET and KNUT signed a four-year CBA that negotiated for an improved basic pay and allowances for teachers in Kenya. Data from the survey indicated that 63% of the teachers believed that CBA were effective in teacher-employer negotiations as opposed to 30% who argued for industrial action. 14% of the teachers surveyed suggested that going to court was effective. However, it is important to note that some of these strategies complement each other. For example a CBA has to be deposited in court in order to be legally enforceable.

#### 4.8 Effects of negotiations

According to (Han, 2019) negotiations by teacher unions should result in benefits for example better remuneration, health benefits and even professional development. Data reveals that this indeed is the case however, there are also certain negative results that come with coercive teacher negotiations. Mugho (2017) asserts that it is the duty of teacher unions to advocate for teacher empowerment, teacher professional development, job satisfaction and overall better working conditions. These assertions on teacher satisfaction have also been echoed by (Marinette & Ed, 2017) who observed that better working conditions for teachers translates to better learning outcomes. Data reveals that teacher unions negotiations in Kenya have over the years improved teachers' basic salary and also allowances. A recent CBA signed by the teachers' unions and the TSC 2017 saw teachers benefit in terms of improved basic pay. The CBA that was to be implemented in four phases was welcomed by the teachers. İnci ÖZTÜRK & Fidan (2015) further submit that the CBA adopts teacher appraisal tools and management which are important components in preparing teachers for promotion at the work place. It however must be noted that among the challenges faced by teachers during these negotiations are false promises by the government who go back on their offer after strikes are called off and also intimidation by way of holding salaries of teachers. A survey carried out on the teachers on the success of teacher unions revealed the data tabulated below.

Table 4: Success of Unions

Choice of teachers	Frequency	Percentages
No	39	37.9%
Yes	64	62.1%
Total	103	100

## V. CONCLUSION

As already mentioned in the introduction, teacher unions engage in various political strategies to achieve better allowances, better pay and improved working conditions for their members. Picketing, alliances with political parties and use of the media—both mainstream and social—have been important tools that teacher unions use to agitate for the teachers' rights. As already indicated by literature, these strategies have forced the employer's hand many times and failed on some occasions as well. However, it has also been observed that diplomatic channels of negotiations have also been employed by the unions in order to achieve their agenda. Overall, the political power of the union lies in the teachers' huge numbers.

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