



A nexus between labour aristocracy and trade unions' militancy in Kenya, 1990-2022

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the interplay between labour aristocracy and trade unions' militancy in Kenya from 1990 to 2022. The specific focus is on the extent to which labour aristocracy contributed to the diminished trade union militancy. The research was anchored on a historical design guided by the Marxist theory of labour aristocracy and the interpretivistic philosophy. The target population constituted persons and institutions involved in industrial relations in Kenya, among them trade unionists, formal sector employees, labour experts and government officials. Respondents were sampled purposively and through snowballing. Data collection methods included oral interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, archival data, and secondary literature. The collected data was analyzed thematically. The study findings indicate that, labour aristocracy was the causal impetus to the absence of militancy in the majority of trade unions in Kenya. Trade union leaderships increasingly became compliant to the dictates of the government and employers turning into reformists, at the expense of workers who suffered from poor pay and other punitive labour policies. Trade union leaders were allegedly compromised by employers and the government to pacify union radicalism from shop stewards. The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), despite its representational role in strategic boards, commissions and taskforces on behalf of workers, oversaw the passage and adoption of punitive labour policies. To entrench conservatism, union elections were shambolic. This perpetuated the status quo. To leverage labour aristocracy, the article recommends the revitalization of trade unions by embracing democracy, empowering of rank-and-file and ensuring financial independence.

Keywords: Industrial Relations, Kenya, Labour Aristocracy, Trade Union Militancy, Trade Union Conservatism

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary role of trade unions worldwide has been to safeguard workers' welfare particularly in regards to, fair remuneration, conducive working environment, and protection from punitive and unfriendly labour laws and policies. For proper articulation of the listed mandates, trade unions ought to be independent and devoid of state and employer meddling or likely compromises. This, however, has not been always the case, as trade union leaderships occasionally became targets of state and employer manipulations. Such, was executed mostly through outright bribery or creation of splinter organizations for the pacification of labour militancy. The result has been, the emergence of an aristocracy of labour in union leadership ranks. Notably, the British labour movement is associated with the rise of labour aristocracy. The unions were accused by the classical Marxists for allowing themselves to be bribed by the bourgeoisie thus, killing labour consciousness. To the Marxists, the bribed top stratum of the labour movement detached themselves from majority who were poorly paid workers, and instead, aligned with the bourgeoisie (Moorhouse, 1978; Barbalet, 1987).

In Africa, both the Marxist and Liberal Scholars attest that, the concept of labour aristocracy became rooted in the post-colonial period. The model became central in explaining the state-union relationships that were grafted on co-optation and state meddling. Trade unions became, by and large, appendages of the regimes. African skilled and semi-skilled, as well as top civil servants (proletariat proper), constituted an aristocracy of labour as they earned three or more times, and had greater bargaining power because of their closeness to owners and the political elites. This disconnected



them from the poorly paid majority of the unskilled labourers (Arrighi & Saul, 1968). Contemporary Africa still encounters fragmentations within the labour force mostly between top union leadership versus the rank and file. The former has always been associated with reformism while the latter with militancy (McIlroy, 2014).

In the Kenyan context, the labour movement was depicted as the one bedeviled by dichotomy in terms of interests dictated by income strata. The privileged upper segment in the formal sector, with higher disposable income, constituted an aristocracy of labour (Stichter, 1977). Within the same segment, are top union officials who have been accused of prioritizing personal interests and the need for survival as opposed to workers' collective well-being. The top trade union officials were notorious in striking secret alliances with employers and government. Consequently, this led to the emergence of elitist and compromised labour leaders (Nyongesa & Boit, 2026).

These studies, notwithstanding, several gaps remain glaring especially regarding the extent to which the labour movement in Kenya exhibited labour aristocracy. There is scanty justification as to which trade unions were compromised. Equally missing, is an explicit nexus between labour aristocracy and diminished trade union militancy in Kenya. This article examines the interplay between labour aristocracy and trade unions' militancy in Kenya from 1990 to 2022. The study brings to the fore salient instances when union leaders appeared compromised. The article also provides measures adopted by several trade unions to curb labour aristocracy.

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. To interrogate the extent to which labour aristocracy impacted trade union militancy in Kenya, 1990-2022.
- ii. To examine the mechanisms adopted by several trade unions in Kenya to overcome labour aristocracy, 1990-2022.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Marxist theory of Labour Aristocracy guided the study. The theory was first coined by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels while investigating the nose-diving union militancy in British labour movement in the mid-19th Century. The conceptual argument of the theory is that, certain workers, especially, in the upper stratum, are more concerned with upholding and maintaining their skewed advantages and privileges, as opposed to the agitation for improved conditions of the entire workforce (McLennan, 1981). The standout elements within the theory are, bribery of the upper stratum by the bourgeoisie; detachment of the upper stratum from the rest of workers; rise of reformism in the upper stratum; and change in the lifestyle to that reminiscent of the bourgeoisie (Moorhouse, 1978).

The adoption of this theory is informed by the need to interrogate the alleged state and employer manipulation of trade unions' leaderships, through bribes and other privileges. This, consequently accounted for the rise of conservatism. Majority of trade unions in Kenya embraced non-radical approach while dealing with employers despite workers suffering, as a result of punitive labour policies and poor remuneration and working conditions. The absence of trade union militancy through strikes and other labour agitations, could well be explained in the mirror of the labour aristocracy theory.

2.2 Empirical Review

The article builds on an empirical review of various literature based on the two objectives.

2.2.1 Labour Aristocracy and Trade Union Militancy in Kenya, 1990-2022

The discourse surrounding labour aristocracy has been ongoing for a while despite attracting criticisms from non-Marxist sociologists and historians. Labour aristocracy as a concept was first used by classical Marxists to describe conservatism that characterized the British labour movement from the 1840s. It was used to refer to the privileged upper stratum of the working class, mostly artisans, who tended to detach themselves from the rest of the ordinary workers. At the centre, was colonial super-profit that was used to bribe the upper stratum of skilled workers. Instead of supporting revolutionary and class struggle against the capitalists, they entered alliances with the bourgeoisie, thus turning into reformists (Moorehouse, 1978; Parpart, 1984).

In Africa, studies have revealed the existence of two factions within the work force. One segment, which comprised majorly skilled workers, received preferential treatment in terms of higher salaries and other privileges, as opposed to the other faction, which constitute unskilled workers. The former, because of their close proximity to the capitalist owners, delinked itself from the latter, hence becoming an obstacle to labour consciousness and agitations (Arrighi & Saul, 1968). This postulation was shared by Freund (1984). According to him, a small stratum of African workers isolated themselves into relatively depoliticized unions, which, by shear of their bargaining ability, secured enormous wages. This, however, was not the case with the ordinary manual workers, who remained poorly remunerated.

In the Kenyan context, little academic inquiries have been done on the subject matter. However, Sharon Stichter in her study, acknowledged that working class in Kenya was compartmentalized into two sections, one comprising the formal sector, and the other the informal sector. According to her, within the formal sector, lay a non-revolutionary upper layer of workers who were privileged thus, constituting an aristocracy of labour (Stichter, 1976-77). Post-colonial also exhibited rampant cases of union conservatism. The co-optation of trade unions in Kenya by post-colonial regimes, was the causal factor to the rampant compromising of trade union leaderships. Trade union officials used unions as springboard to catapult themselves into political limelight, and in the process, prioritizing personal interests and survival as opposed to collective welfare of workers (Nyongesa & Boit, 2026).

Despite charged labour militancy in post-World War II colonial Kenya, the rise of patron-clientelism after independence and persistent state meddling, saw trade unionists become compromised. There was a departure from colonial agitation for workers' welfare, as the state and employers devised residue mechanisms that intended to control unions. According to (Sandbrook, 1972), this resulted in union malfunctioning. Trade unions were consequently, co-opted by the KANU regime. The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) became compliant to the dictates of the government despite the economic hardships that workers were subjected too under the neo-liberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s (Gona, 2003). The co-optation of COTU left a docile labour movement. Leaders were bribed with money, business contracts and positions in government and boards turning them into state loyalists. This killed trade unions' militancy (Otenyo, 2016).

2.2.2 Mechanisms adopted by Trade Unions in Kenya to overcome Labour Aristocracy, 1990-2022

In championing workers' welfare, trade unions ought to possess some degree of autonomy. This entails their capacity to legally pursue a strike action without otherwise, being influenced by employers or government. While addressing trade unions in Britain, V. I Allen, emphasized on the need for unions to exert pressure on employers and government as an avenue of influencing their decisions (Allen, 1961). By the use of strikes, boycotts, threats to strike, and any other confrontational strategy, employers would definitely yield to workers' demands. The bottom-line in Allen's argument is that, trade union must be revolutionary in their approach, if not, they risk being compromised.

Successful trade unionism in some Latin America and African countries was necessitated by militancy. In Brazil and South Africa, militancy accounted for the growth of trade unions from underground clandestine entities into mammoth social movements (Love, 1995). In Brazil, through strike actions, they secured benefits to their members and even became integral in the political transformation, culminating in the election of a trade unionist, Lula da Silva, as president (French, 2009). They demanded for better education, health, roads as well as the democratization (Love, 1995). In Nigeria, the militant tradition of the labour movement turned the labour movement into combative mass movement, especially in the struggle against economic liberalization, neo-colonialism and dictatorship albeit, repression from political establishment (Freund, 1988). Feather (1963) underscores the revitalization of the labour movement through a vibrant union constitution with clear cut flow of information from grass-root and term or age-limits, would guarantee trade union vibrancy.

McIlroy (2014) contends that, conservatism in trade unions can be on the part of leadership or even rank-and-file. To him, all entities must work against reformism because castigating of leaders alone cannot be effective in overcoming labour aristocracy. This argument resonates with the findings of Wabila (2016). Wabila established that the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), managed to ward off state corporatism because of militant members. They often turned violent towards union officials at any slight imagination of betrayal. This commanded commitment and vitality to teachers' course. Matanga (2000) affirms that, for civil society organizations, including trade unions to surmount any form of compromise, the nature of their leadership is key. To him, organizations led by officials who are anti-establishment tend to be more radical and assertive in agitating for their goals. This implies that in order to counter labour aristocracy in trade unions, leadership had to be held to account on their decisions through union elections.

2.3 Knowledge Gaps

This research acknowledges the existence of limited scholarly works pertaining labour aristocracy in Kenya. In fact, the available studies are restricted to colonial and early post-colonial epochs, hence have limited relevance on contemporary Kenya. The works of Stichter (1976-77) and Sandbrook (1975) are among the few available works. Majority of the contemporary literature are foreign in nature and therefore, their applicability to Kenyan case bears subjectivity. Other studies listed, though are based on Kenya, do not address themselves to the labour aristocracy debate. Indeed, they avoid the phrase "labour aristocracy" and instead, circumvent around an absence of trade union protest without extrapolating on the causal impetus as well as the way out by trade unions. This leave the subject matter being addressed in a general wavelength.

In addition, trade unions as actors, are not sufficiently analyzed. Instead, emphasis is laid on top earning workers. This is a gap that this study also addresses by placing centrality on trade unions and militancy. The measures



adopted by some trade unions to mitigate labour aristocracy in the Kenyan context, are also provided, which previous studies had none. By so doing, the present study bridges the mentioned gaps and at the same time enlarging the historiography relating to labour aristocracy in Africa and globally.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Philosophical Underpinning

This is a qualitative historical research that was underpinned on the philosophy of interpretivism. By this philosophy, the researcher took the position that reality is socially constructed and is subjective, and in this line, was set to understand the meanings and interpretations that the respondents had assigned to their experiences (Lapan *et al*, 2011). This entailed how the state and employers managed to co-op and compromise trade union leaders to suppress labour consciousness.

3.2 Research Design

The article adopts a historical research design, mainly to get a deeper understanding of the evolution of labour aristocracy both globally and in the Kenyan context, and how trade union militancy kept on diminishing. Moreover, the design also enabled the researcher to cover long term shifts, trends and patterns in the area of study. In this case, the shifts and trends in industrial relations, especially labour aristocracy and trade union responses, were taken into consideration (Leedy & Jeanne, 2001).

3.3 Study Area

The study was confined to Kenya, in which Kenyan trade unions, government institutions, Kenyan workers both in the formal and informal set up, public as well as private firms' management, among other entities of interest to this study were accessed. The choice for Kenya as a study area was informed by an apparent shift in trade union militancy throughout the post-colonial era, where majority of trade unions embraced conservatism despite persistent complaints from members of poor representation.

3.4 Target Population

The study targeted persons and institutions involved in industrial relations in Kenya. Among them were, trade unions, union leaders, workers belonging to different trade unions, labour experts and government officials.

3.5 Sampling and Sample Size

Two sampling techniques; purposive and snowballing were adopted. The study at the beginning adopted the purposive sampling in which key individuals and institutions known of having significant pieces of information in industrial relations matters in Kenya were identified as respondents (Patton, 2002). The key respondents could later refer the researcher to other respondents, hence the adoption of snowballing sampling too. The sample size of 11 respondents and 1 FGD was used. The figure was arrived at after attaining saturation during the interviews. In this regard, the researcher stopped collecting more data after realizing a degree of repetition (Mwita, 2022).

3.6 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The researcher consulted both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through archival sources, interview guides (oral interviews) and focus group discussions schedules or guides. Secondary data was acquired from books, theses, MA projects, journal articles, internet, reports and newspapers. The interview transcripts were subjected to triangulation alongside other primary and secondary data to remove biases.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed thematically because of theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2006). There was coding of primary data collected through archives, oral interviews and FGDs, as well as the secondary data. The researcher subjected interview transcripts to triangulation to root out biased and inconsistent data (Nunnes *et al*, 2019). Themes were then generated based on each unique code and the specific objectives. The writing was based on the established themes.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines relating to respect, honesty, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were observed. The research was initially approved by Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. The research permit was obtained from the National Commission of Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Labour Aristocracy and Trade Union Militancy in Kenya, 1990-2022

The study notes that, majority of trade unions in Kenya exhibited the behavior and characteristics reminiscent of labour aristocrats. Leadership in several trade unions were compromised by the state, which is the key employer, through enticement with money and other superficial privileges. Consequently, punitive and outrageous policies, touching on labour were imposed on workers, with minimal or no altercation from trade unions. Wilson Sossion in his own words submitted:

“Other than Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) and the Kenya Medical and Practitioners and Dentists Union (KMPDU), most trade unions in Kenya have been compromised. Their bargaining with employers are vested with personal interests and those of the employers. They have detached themselves from the Marxist philosophy that calls for militancy and assumed social unionism where they agree on what the employer wants and that is not representation. Corruption in trade unions is worse than corruption in government. It is deeply entrenched in COTU and KUPPET” (Interview, Wilson Sossion, Former Secretary General, Kenya National Union of Teachers, 28/2/2026, at Nairobi).

Such perspective was in consonance with the findings of Nyongesa and Boit (2026), who reaffirmed that, trade unionists in Kenya had absconded their cardinal responsibility of being defenders and agitators of workers’ rights. According to them, union leaders turned into elitists, opting to cement alliances with the political class for personal interests and survival. Archival materials reviewed, depicted trade unions to have initially, been militant and confrontational, however, upon their co-optation, they turned conservative (KNA, BS/2/4/1975).

In the 1990s, amidst stringent austerity measures (Structural Adjustment Programmes) imposed on Kenya by the World Bank and IMF, the labour movement chose compliance instead of altercation. The policies which accounted for massive retrenchment of workers, increased unemployment, salary cuts, change in labour contracts, outsourcing of labour, and the diminished workers’ purchasing power attracted protest from rank and file. COTU leadership, to the contrary, could not openly castigate the state. The shop stewards who occasionally staged public protest through placards in state functions, were rebuffed and even denounced by senior union officials (Gona, 2003). This act was a testament of endemic aristocracy of labour within trade union leaderships, which chose preservation of personal interests and their allegiance to the state as opposed to the social and economic ramifications that befell workers.

COTU leadership was equally non-committal in condemning the rampant violations of workers’ rights within the Export Processing Zones (EPZ). Despite enjoying a wide range of privileges among them, 10 years tax holiday and the window to repatriate profits by the owners, the zones limited workers in regard to labour standards (Manda, 2004). A respondent cited, failure to observe minimum wages, failure to confirm workers on permanent terms, protracted working hours, and low pay and occasional denial of right to unionization (Interview, Isaac Mbinga, COTU Administrative secretary, 27/11/2025, at Nairobi). The study noted that, despite COTU being aware of such abuses, it did little to combat the vices. The government and COTU opted not to antagonize management of EPZ as they played significant role Kenya’s export (Gona, 2003).

Another respondent argued that, corruption within COTU leadership accounted for the absence of militancy, especially, in regard to countering the EPZ violations (Interview, Samuel Wambulwa, former civil servant and trade unionist, 28/3/2026, at Kuywa). A study sponsored by the Kenya Human Rights Commission condemned COTU for colluding with the government to oversee the abuse of the rights of EPZ employees. This emanated from the 2003 strike by EPZ workers, who complained of sexual harassment, low wages, unfair dismissals, as well as poor health and safety standards. The government, while dismissing the strike as illegal, termed it as barbaric and act of hooliganism. COTU on its part, sided with the government by distancing itself from the strike. This laid ground for massive sacking of employees involved (Kamungi, 2004). This finding is in tandem with Moorhouse (1978) and Parpart (1984) regarding trade union conservatism as the benchmark of labour aristocracy.

Labour aristocracy in the 1990s was also occasioned by co-optation of COTU by the Moi regime. President Moi in his speech in 1988, praised COTU for creating a well-balanced industrial relation, and as such, he called on COTU to be affiliated as an arm of KANU (*Daily Nation*, September 25, 1988). As it turned out, top COTU leadership, led by the secretary general, Joseph Mugalla, supported the move by the president. The merger became formal in 1989 after ratification by COTU. Bribery which characterized the Moi regime, saw trade union loyalists rewarded with positions and contracts. The leaders, not only coalesced into labour aristocrats but also became avenues of defending the regime by suppressing dissenting voices from shop stewards (Otenyo, 2016). Workers were left at the mercy of the elite political class. Only the giant teachers’ union, Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) stood firm against co-optation



overtures by KANU in the 1980s and 1990s. Other vibrant trade unions, Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS) and University Academic Staff (UAS) were, however, deregistered (Watila, 2016; *The Weekly Review*, July 25, 1980).

At the same time, COTU, despite enjoying power of representing workers in various boards, taskforces and parastatals, could not influence the drafting of friendly policies for workers. COTU had membership, for example, in National Social Security Fund (NSSF), Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC), National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB), National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), among others. The umbrella union, instead of safeguarding the interests of workers, remained compliant to corruption which saw workers lose their pension and medical benefits following the introduction of cost-sharing in early 1990s (Otenyo, 2016). This finding is in line with those of Arrighi and Saul (1968) who castigated African union leadership for disconnecting from the shop stewards, hence becoming an obstacle to labour consciousness and agitations

The action of COTU was opposite with the labour movement in South Africa. Trade unions in South Africa capitalized on their membership in key parastatals or boards to formulate friendly labour policies. Policies were discussed with union inputs before being tabled in Parliament, thus guaranteeing workers' interests (Buhlungu, 2001). This saw trade unions exercise enormous influence in drawing up labour and societal policies. Trade unions became vibrant and militant, as opposed to Kenyan ones that coalesced into an aristocracy of labour.

Trade union leaders also had a tendency of endearing themselves to the regime in power for alleged personal gain and convenience. The leadership of COTU and the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education (KUPPET) were castigated for aligning with the government as their members suffered from harsh policies imposed by the government. COTU secretary general Francis Atwoli's affiliation with every government in power was blamed for creating room for compromise, thus stifling the union's ability to fully advocate for workers (*The Elephant*, June 5, 2026).

In an FGD comprising public service employees, COTU was accused of having minimal input as the affiliates had a burden of advocating for better wages. The umbrella union only resurfaced to benefit through membership contributions (FGD of Public Service employees, 2/12/2025, at Chwele).

Controversial policies such as the Housing Levy, were also imposed on Kenyan workers because some trade unionists had secured membership in the management boards. In 2019, COTU and KNUT opposed the proposed introduction of the housing levy. They even filed a case in court seeking an injunction. In a turn of events, the two decided to support the programme upon being promised membership on its board (Misoru & Onyando, 2020). The levy was later adopted with unions less concerned despite outcry from workers. A respondent who equally admonished trade unions for entrenching aristocracy of labour noted in his own words...

"Who will raise the voice for the ordinary Kenyan worker when every other voice is silenced or pressured into staying quiet? Who speaks for the ordinary Kenyan Worker when their salaries and pay slips get raided endlessly with more and more deductions to the point they cannot be recognized anymore? Who speaks for the Kenyan worker when their salaries are delayed for months without any justifications at all?" (Interview, Fazul Mohammed, Former NGO Regulator, 18/12/2025, at Nairobi).

Labour aristocracy was also aggravated by the absence of democracy and vitality to trade unions' constitutions. Richard Kidner avers that, trade unions ought to operate in a way synonymous to state democracy, where members freely vote for their leaders (Kidner, 1984). Buhlungu (2001) links trade union conservatism to the rise of cultic full time national officials, who disregard rank- and-file by centralizing all union decision making in themselves. According to him, they abuse the union constitution with impunity as they are accountable to no one. The case of imperial powers held by national offices of trade unions in Kenya, accounted for increased labour aristocracy. It was difficult to hold corrupt and ineffective leaders to account since elections were non-existent, and if held, were totally shambolic. Such practices eroded democracy and edified cultic leadership (Gona, 2003).

In the same vein, a respondent submitted that *"corrupt union officials would mutilate the union constitution or collude with government officials presiding over union elections to compromise the election to guarantee a status quo. This according to the respondent who cited COTU and KUPPET, created cultic leadership devoid of checks and balance, thus accentuating the aristocracy of labour"* (Interview, Moffat Okisai former KUPPET executive secretary, Busia Branch, 7/12/2025, at Busia).

This sentiment resonates the accusations raised by a consortium of trade unionists in 2001, who accused COTU national leadership for hiking nomination fees from between Kshs. 80, 000 to Kshs. 500,000, mainly to lock-out competition. In a joint statement read by Makokha Wambulisa, they alleged that the new contestants were forced to pay while the corrupt incumbent paid nothing (Daily Nation, Tuesday February 27, 2001).

Moreover, this study took cognizance of labour aristocracy in trade unions' leadership that was disguised as 'good working relations with the government.' In mature democracies, trade unions gravitated towards a particular political party or regime without surrendering their cardinal mandate they owe workers. The case is South Africa where despite working closely with African National Congress (ANC), the labour movement always remained militant (Desai

& Habib, 1997). This cannot, however, be the case with Kenyan trade unions. While defending his union, KUPPET secretary general Akello Misoro averred that the power of modern trade unions lie in the logic of persuasion than traditional militant approach, a factor why KUPPET worked closely with the government (Misoro & Onyando, 2020). This was corroborated by KNUT Secretary General, Collins Oyuu who noted:

“The modern unionism should be more of boardroom engagement than being perpetually on streets in the name of strikes. In the current era negotiation is the most effective channel of pursuing members’ demands. Thus, the absence of trade union radicalism characterized by threats of strikes or actual strikes, did not make union leadership appear compromised” (Interview, Collins Oyuu, KNUT secretary general, 25/11/2025, at Nairobi).

Such were among the defense mechanisms cited by the unionists to cover up corrupt deals. During these working collaboration between top union officials and state bureaucracies, the labour militancy and consciousness was often captured and tamed (Otenyo, 2016). Even in South Africa, trade unionists were always cautioned of ‘social partnership’ particularly involving trade unionists and the government or employers. According to Buhlungu (2001), these occasionally created room for union compromise especially at the national level where individual quest for wealth accumulation accounted for conservatism.

Social partnerships in Kenya were at time anchored on tripartite agreements involving the umbrella union COTU, the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) and the government of Kenya. In such arrangement, the state prevailed upon trade unions to shun strikes or radicalism as was the case in 1990s. In 1990, for example, as part of the charter signed with the government, COTU committed to ensure non-involvement of trade unions in opposition politics. The intention was to stop radicalism in the labour movement (Aluchio, 1998).

The charter, however, lasted briefly as COTU took advantage of the multi-party politics to pursue independence from the ruling party KANU. This was associated with personal interests in the aftermath of the 1992 general election. Joseph Mugalla, the secretary general of COTU, felt shortchanged in government appointments that the Moi regime had promised him and the top union officials (Nairobi Business Monthly, May 6, 2020).

These developments reaffirm that all along, reformism in COTU leadership was informed by the bribes and privileges attached. As it turned, Mugalla became offensive and called for a meeting on April 23, 1993 at Solidarity Building. COTU stewards and branch secretaries took advantage of the situation to unanimously endorse strike action. They demanded for 100% salary increment and the dropping of Prof. George Saitoti as the minister for Finance. The escalation of rivalry between Mugalla and KANU saw president Moi skip Labour Day celebrations of May 1, 1993, the day the strike began. Mugalla was later arrested for inciting workers to heckle the labour Minister Philip Masinde who had represented the president in the celebrations. He was later released without charges (Weekly Review, May 7, 1993). Samuel Wambulwa submitted,

“Joseph Mugalla, the COTU secretary general was accustomed to privileges and bribes that KANU rewarded him and his close allies. The calling of the strike must have been their ploy to hoodwink the Moi government after short-changing them. It was a bargaining chip to demonstrate to Moi of COTU’s relevance in maintaining industrial peace” (Interview, Samuel Wambulwa, Former civil servant and trade unionist, 28/3/2026 at Kuywa). *The aftermath of the strike was a government orchestrated coup against Mugalla, though he was later reinstated by the court* (Nairobi Business Monthly, May 6, 2020).

He later committed his allegiance to the government and consequently oversaw massive retrenchments in the public service that began in the mid-1990s. KANU’s meddling and patronage in COTU, though, came to an end in 2001 following pressure from the US government, COTU leadership remained an appendage of the elite political class (Ibid).

COTU leadership even in the post-Moi era remained non-radical. The union continued to exhibit open predisposition towards the government and thus maintained conservatism. Despite the Kibaki regime opening up freedom and space for civil society organizations, including trade unions, COTU under Francis Atwoli as the secretary general was often castigated for abandoning workers. Such perception informs the heckling of Atwoli during the Labour Day celebrations on May 1, 2013. Workers called him traitor for always prioritizing personal gains and those of politicians as opposed to workers (Daily Nation, May 2, 2013).

Atwoli was even castigated by the media for his enormous wealth and lifestyle. He was called the ‘king of bling opulence’ to present a contrast between his lifestyle which was reminiscent of aristocrats and bourgeoisie to that of workers he represented (Otenyo, 2016).

KUPPET and KNUT national officials were equally admonished by their members for hiding in ‘social partnership’ with the government to allow the silencing of unionism. In an FGD, teachers discredited national officials for embracing the culture of tokenism through their collusion with the government to defeat their primary obligation of championing for their members’ welfare (FGD with a section of teachers



held at Teremi Boys 25/3/2026). Such argument, corroborate assertions by the Kenya Teachers Pressure Group (KTPG) that decried perennial corruption and embezzlement of teachers' money by cartels in KUPPET and KNUT alongside the Teachers Service Commission (TSC). The pressure group also linked fragmentation and non-militancy within the two unions to political allegiance to the government, which consequently weakened their power to collective bargaining (Education News, August 24, 2024).

The study notes that, militancy in the teachers' unions became eroded especially with the exit of a combative KNUT secretary general Wilson Sosion in June, 2021. Sosion's exit was orchestrated by the state because of hardline position in bargaining. The government even withheld money deducted from KNUT members through check-off to blackmail Sosion. KNUT turned into a reformist entity under Sosion's successor and state-loyalist secretary general, Collins Oyu. Together with other controversial KUPPET national office, they signed a non-monetary CBA in 2021 (Daily Nation, Tuesday, July 13, 2021).

The two unions kept on praising the government oblivious of economic hardships members went through. They rarely called for strikes unless under pressure from shop stewards. Labour aristocracy also became prevalent in Kenya through the founding of splinter trade unions under state sponsorship. John Foster, a Marxist scholar observed that labour aristocracy could also be construed as a fluid process of social control, and as such it was a creation of the bourgeoisie to systematically subdue and curb any revolutionary activities within the work force (Foster, 1974).

The government of Kenya is alleged to have masterminded the formation of rival trade unions to counter the vibrancy of the existing ones. The objective was that, in the long run, they become fragmented, thus killing their militancy (Interview, Hesbon Otieno, KNUT deputy Secretary General, 20/11/2025, at Nairobi).

According to Otieno, the formation of the KUPPET in 1998 was a meticulous plan by the government,

to water down the influence of the then giant teachers' union, KNUT. Such allegations were refuted by KUPPET executive secretary, Akello Misor, who cited marginalization of post-primary teachers by KNUT leadership (Interview, Akello Misor, KUPPET National Executive Secretary, 26/11/2025, at Nairobi). The study established that indeed, KUPPET's registration received government support. As early as 1994, the government had started laying grounds to cut off KNUT influence, which was to be executed through a rival union (Daily Nation, July 14, 1994).

KUPPET was formed in the aftermath of the 28-day teachers strike led by KNUT. The founder Tom Chariga approached the government for the registration of KUPPET. President Moi, therefore, endorsed the formation of KUPPET mainly to manage KNUT militancy that was occasioned by its monopoly (Misor & Onyando, 2020).

Intra-union rivalry between KNUT and KUPPET diluted the militancy and vibrancy the teachers had, to the benefit of the state. Competition for membership and state attention caused a clear dichotomy as KNUT complained of the loss of over 20, 000 members to KUPPET in 2012 alone. KNUT blamed the government for orchestrating such massive exodus (Misor & Onyando, 2020; Daily Nation, July 5, 2013). According to a respondent, the rivalry gradually weakened the cherished unity that KNUT enjoyed which had cemented its militancy to take on the state. The two were since then, used by the state to counter each other. Bribes and other privileges were given as rewards to the loyal union officials (Interview, Makarios Wakoko, UASU Chairman, Kibabii University Chapter, 22/12/2025, at Kibabii).

The KUPPET executive secretary shared similar opinion. He said:

"In 2012 both unions had called for a strike over the harmonization of commuter allowances. However, midway on a Sunday, KNUT called off the strike after meeting the finance minister Njeri Githae and signed the agreement. KUPPET had to look for the minister to sign what it had not negotiated with the minister who was even not keen to grant KUPPET audience" (Interview, Akello Misor, KUPPET Executive Secretary, 26/12/2025, at Nairobi).

Consequently, labour aristocracy took roots in the teachers' unions. The two rarely agreed on strike road map nor key demands. Once one union mobilized its members to strike action, the other engaged the government secretly to reach a deal which occasionally involved bribes, thus rendering further striking, inconsequential (Otenyo 2016).

4.1.2 Mechanisms adopted by Trade Unions in Kenya to overcome Labour Aristocracy, 1990-2022

The study also notes that, not all trade unionists in Kenya belonged to an aristocracy of labour. There were unions that were vibrant, courtesy of leadership, financial strength, good organization, and militant membership (Watila, 2016). The centrality in the findings is that only bribed and non-revolutionary unionists fit in the description. This resonates with the postulations of Lenin, one of the classical Marxist, who considered bribery as a key element of distinguishing labour aristocrats and the core of the working class (Lenin, 1973). KNUT, UASU, and KMPDU, at one time manifested militancy following the failure by the government to compromise their leadership.

The study established that these unions enjoyed strong grass-root or shop-floor organization which meant top union leaderships implemented decisions emanating from members. KNUT, for example, managed to evade president Moi's overture to co-op it because of the militant shop stewards who could not hesitate to turn violent on the union leadership for alleged betrayal (Watila, 2016). There were several occasions when the union's secretary general Ambrose Adongo openly told president Moi to forget with plans to compromise KNUT officials because members could easily lynch them (Daily Nation, October 1, 1997).

This corroborates with the findings of Matanga (2000) and French (2009) regarding the role of members in manufacturing trade union militancy. According to Jedida Rutele, during the 1997 strike,

the government made several direct and indirect contacts with Adongo and the rest of the National Executive Council to call off the strike. Rewards were also promised. However, fearing the agitated members who had been mobilized to the streets, they could not bow to the government pressure. They remained steadfast, culminating in the signing of the legal notice No 534. By this notice teachers received a salary award of 300% (Interview, Jedida Rutele, KNUT administrative officer, 19/11/2025, at Nairobi).

The absence of well empowered rank and file in unions among them COTU and KUPPET can be attested to have contributed to alleged labour aristocracy in their ranks (McIlroy, 2014). The national officials centralized all decision making in their hands, leaving no one to hold them accountable.

The reorganization of the union through periodical and credible elections also guaranteed accountability and as such, union leaders, out of fear of being voted out, would maintain contact with the grass-root by agitating for their welfare. This, in the long run minimized cases of labour aristocracy (Watila, 2016). Unions were supposed to have well defined structures to cut on cultic leadership that always had the tendency of entrenching labour aristocracy. Financial endowment by trade unions equally reduced on cases of compromise by the employer or government (Ibid). This resonates with the findings of Pereira (1996). According to him, elaborate democratic credentials in Brazilian and South African trade unions accounted for their militancy that saw them overcome state control.

Wakoko, a respondent informed the study that, UASU as a lecturers' union cherished democracy through fair and periodical elections. Union officials who were suspected to advance the agenda of the government and university management as opposed to those of the lecturers stood no chance of re-election (Interview, Makarios Wakoko, UASU Chaiman, Kibabii University Chapter, 22/12/2025, at Kibabii University).

Revitalization of the labour movement through a vibrant union constitution with clear cut flow of information from grass-root and term or age-limits also helped mitigate labour aristocracy in trade unions (Feather, 1963). The study noted that unions among them, KNUT, had a robust constitution with leadership age-limit of 60 years to minimize the creation of cultic leadership which was considered the foundation of labour compromise and complacency. This gave it a synergy as new crop of militant leaders, rose to catapult the union further, while being loyal to teachers (Interview, Mark Oseno, Former KNUT Busia Branch Secretary General, 19/11/2025, at Nairobi). Oseno's postulation resonates with Freund (1988), who linked the union militancy in Nigeria, to vibrant leadership that was ideologically-rooted in militant tradition despite persistent repression from the state.

The preceding discussion brings to the fore the entrenched labour aristocracy that explicitly caused a decline in union militancy in Kenya. Through the guidance of the labour aristocracy theory and the philosophy of interpretivism, salient cases of bribery, use of privileges, creation of splinter unions, and co-optation have been brought out as the causal impetus to the rise of labour aristocracy. Trade unions, led by COTU, killed labour consciousness as a result of being compromised by the state. Strikes and any labour activism were replaced by the defense of the employer at the detriment of workers. There were however, unions that maintained their militancy, because of membership militancy, observance of their constitution, among other factors in play.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that, labour aristocracy was one of the key factors behind the diminished trade union militancy in Kenya from 1990 to 2022. The leadership of several trade unions developed a predisposition towards the government and employers, allegedly, because of economic materialism. The umbrella union COTU was deeply entrenched with labour aristocrats, who prioritized wealth accumulation and personal survival to the detriment of workers. The union embraced reformism as dissent voices from the rank and file were stumbled upon. This was to please the government and private employers. Workers were left on their own especially in 1990s and early 2000, following the adoption of neo-liberal policies. Strikes were paralyzed and union constitutions mutilated. Union democracy became shamolic as national union officials in cahoots with labour ministry manipulated election outcomes to guarantee the status quo. Tokenism eroded leadership such that, despite sitting in strategic taskforces, boards, commissions and parastatals on behalf of workers, minimal friendly policies to workers were adopted. Splinter unions were also founded



by the government to weaken vibrant and militant unions such as KNUT. The article concludes further that, to mitigate labour aristocracy in trade unions, amalgamation of factors were to be considered. They included, advancement of trade union democracy, good leadership and revitalization through a robust union constitution that clearly states terms or age-limits. It has also been demonstrated that trade union militancy could be enhanced through union members. Militant members held leaders to account by removing corrupt and pro-establishment ones through elections as well as denying them audience on trade union issues.

5.2 Recommendations

The study advocates for union revitalization by emphasizing on transparency and vitality to their constitutions. This entails guaranteeing democratic principles including elections and incorporation of rank and files in trade union decision making. At the same time the study calls for a new brand of unionism and new unionists who would genuinely pursue and embrace militancy as opposed to patron-clientelism from state bureaucracies. COTU's current leadership appears to have overstayed its benefit thus has remained an arena of cultic leadership that has entrenched labour aristocracy through regime and state capture. In addition, the study calls for a distinct workers' political party as the case with other democracies, so as to stimulate issue-based politics with workers' demands forming the basis of political campaign and coalition building. The party would also pave way for social movement unionism where the labour movement influences national policies beyond labour such as war on corruption, public debts, unemployment, inflation as well as good governance. Finally, the study proposes for the formation of an alternative trade union federation to leverage the monopoly of COTU which remains pro-establishment. A neutral and alternative trade union federation would embody militancy and create a distinct identity for the new unionism and unionists.

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