

The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU)

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Abstract

Workers were one of the most important actors during the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. The Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (here after CELU), which represented the country's organized workers, had already begun to resist employers and state authorities before the revolution broke out. The revolution was therefore used by the CELU as a welcome opportunity to petition the state and make its demands heard. This paper therefore attempts to reconstruct the impact of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution on the labour relations in general and the CELU in particular. Since this is a qualitative study, data for the study was collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews. The collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings show that the military and the civilian left groups used CELU as a battle ground during the revolution. In addition, the military dismantled and reorganized the CELU in line with the new socialist model.

Keywords: Revolution, Collective bargaining, Labour, Strike, Lock out

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1. Introduction

The year 1974 witnessed profound and occasionally violent political and social change in Ethiopia's history because of the collapse of the centuries-old monarchy.¹ It marked a turning point in Ethiopia's modern history, although popular resistance to the age-old monarchy had already begun in the 1960s.² Although most accounts of the Ethiopian Revolution consider the mutiny of the non-commissioned officers of the 24th Brigade of the 4th Division at Negelle Borana on January 12, 1974, as the beginning of the revolutionary events, it was in mid-February of the same year that the popular masses began to participate in the revolution and attack the crippling crown.³

In February 1974, however, general discontent grew and violent riots broke out among both the military and the civilian population.⁴ The concerted action of the military on the one hand and the civilian left on the other pushed the revolution to its peak and brought down the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I. The civilian left consisted of radical students, teachers, workers (proletarians), urban petty bourgeois, and lumpen proletarians, among others. It was from these sections of the popular masses that the boldest and most sustained challenges to the age-old monarchy emanated.⁵ The causes and the course of the Ethiopian revolution have been described in a very illuminating way by a number of writers. Therefore, this article limited itself mainly to assessing the impact of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution on CELU as one of the major actors during the revolution.

Needless to say, for a long time Ethiopian workers were denied the right to organize and their employment was characterized by a kind of servant-master relationship. However, after the end of the World War II, they began to organize and demand better wages and benefits from employers. Although they were not recognized for a long time, the labour unions emerged from traditional associations: Mahiber, Edir and Meredaja. Though Ethiopia has been a member of the International Labor Organization (ILO) since 1923, the government refused to recognize unions until 1962.⁶ With the promulgation of Decree No. 49/1962 on September 5, 1962, any traditional association formed at the factory level was recognized and transformed into a legal labour union. In due course, with the help of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the Ethiopian

¹Marina Ottaway, "Social Classes and Corporate Interests in Ethiopian Revolution," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1976, p. 469; Colin Legum, *Ethiopia: The Fall of Emperor Haile Selassie I's Empire* (London: Africa Contemporary Record Ltd, 1975), p. 30; Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Review of African Political Economy, 1975), p. 104.

²Addis, p. 103.

³Heinz Käufeler, *Modernization, Legitimacy and Social Movement: A Study of Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Revolution in Iran and Ethiopia* (Zurich: University of Zurich, 1988), p. 112; Rene Lefort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution, Translated by A.M Berrett*, (London: Zed Press, 1983), p. 159; John Markakis and NegaAyele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa: Shama PLC, 1978), p. 93; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 38; Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1978), p. 1.

⁴Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire...*, p. 2; Andargachew, p. 38.

⁵Legum, p. 32; Lefort, p. 55.

⁶Thomas C. Killion, "Workers, Capital and the State in the Ethiopian Region, 1919-1974," PhD Dissertation, University of Stanford: Department of History, 1985, p. 449; R. Stutz, "The Developing Industrial Relation System in Ethiopia," A Teaching Material, Addis Ababa University: Department of Economics, 1967, p. 31.

Confederation of Trade Unions (CELU) was organized on April 9, 1963.¹ Subsequently, a number of local associations became aware of the benefits and rights guaranteed by the decree and joined CELU to increase their strength and bargaining power with employers. Subsequently, a number of labor disputes were submitted to the labour relations board. This was the beginning of the protracted confrontation between the CELU and the government that plunged their relationship into a prolonged crisis.²

This sudden surge of labour unions activity was not without problems. Since labour laws were not fair to both unions and employers, frequent clashes occurred in each local union.³ Moreover, while the labour decree gave workers' organizations legal recognition, it amputated their role in political affairs.⁴ For example, Article 22, subsection C of the decree states, "...employers' associations and labour unions shall not pursue political aims or engage in any political activities."⁵

As a result, any labour movement undertaken by the labour unions was interpreted in political terms and easily suppressed by the government. As a result, the CELU's struggle to improve socioeconomic benefits for its members and strengthen its bargaining power through a general strike could not be realized until the outbreak of the 1974 revolution. In a number of parastatals and state-owned enterprises, the conspiracy of state agencies had prevented the formation of strong unions. For a long time, the CELU was virtually under the strict supervision of the state and was unable to improve the socioeconomic conditions of its members. Thus, its attempt to organize a general strike in July 1963 and in December 1969 was futile. The formation of unions was also considered illegitimate by both employers and the government. The government frequently dismissed union leaders and activists, leading to unsuccessful occasional strikes and lockouts at local union level in the country. This undoubtedly affected the strength of unions in the country in general and at the factory level in particular.⁶ By the 1970s, however, the union federation gained popular legitimacy and support and began to attract the attention of students and emerging political groups. Despite its enormous limitations, CELU's political appeal was enhanced. First, because it was one of the well organized institutions in the country, and second, because its urban-industrial constituency made it an obvious vehicle for the Marxist-oriented student movement, which represented the most politicized social stratum in the country.⁷ However, the revolution erupted while the CELU was still under tight control and at the same time looking for an opportunity to express its cumulated grievances. Consequently, it welcomed the revolution as a good opportunity to realize its corporate interests, even if it eventually pursued political goals as well.

From its inception until the eve of the Ethiopian Revolution, the organizational structure of the CELU was not very strong and was constantly constrained by government regulations. Although the workers tried to voice their grievances at the local and national levels, they failed to improve their socio-economic and political conditions. Therefore, the workers had already decided to take advantage of the 1974 riots at the right time to petition the government for socioeconomic justice and the enforcement of their corporate interests.⁸

Therefore, in order to identify and analyze the proper role of CELU and the challenge it faced in the Ethiopian Revolution, it is essential to assess the relationship between the workers and the petty-bourgeois radicals. The petty-bourgeois radicals can be roughly divided into two groups: the civilian left and the military left. The military left was dominated by the non-commissioned officers and soldiers. The civilian left, on the other hand, encompassed the largest section of the society, including white-collar workers, students, teachers, the urban petty bourgeoisie, and the emerging political groups that began to appear on the scene in mid-1974 through their underground press and leaflets.⁹

During the revolution, the CELU managed to forge alliance with students and burgeoning political groups in its fight against the monarchy and later against the military. For example, from February 18, 1974, to September 15, 1974, the white-collar workers who dominated the CELU led the workers against the monarchy. From September 15, 1974, to December 6, 1975, radical students allied with the white-collar workers succeeded in capturing the CELU as the center of resistance against the military. From December 6, 1975 to January 8, 1977, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM), and the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) used CELU as a battleground to seize control of the

¹Killion, p. 454; Stutz, p. 114; DestaAlemu, "The Ethiopian Trade Union Movement Pre and Post Ethiopian Revolution," In An. A. Gromyko (ed) *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of the Ethiopian Studies, Vol. 1* (Moscow: Nauka Publisher, 1988), p. 135.

²Arnold Zack, "New Labor Relations in Ethiopia," A Seminar Paper, Haile Selassie I University: Department of Economics, 1964, p. 12.

³Stutz, p. 115.

⁴Desta, p. 137.

⁵*NegaritGazetta* No. 18, Decree No. 49/1962, September 5, 1962.

⁶Killion, p. 552; Seleshi Sisaye, "Labor in Contemporary Ethiopia: The Case of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Union and its General Strike," A Paper Presented to the 71st Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in New York City, September, 1976, p. 7; Patrick Glikes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia*, (London: Julian Friedmann LTD, 1975), p. 166; Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 177.

⁷Killion, p. 450.

⁸Keller, p.177; Gilkes, p. 166; *YelteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber*, "Ye ItyopiyaSerategnochEnqeseqasie," Vol. 1, 1976, p. 96.

⁹Killion, pp. 546-547.

workers and establish a workers' party, which was seen at the time as a fundamental step toward the formation of a socialist Ethiopian state.

2. CELU staged the first General Strike in its History

The outbreak of the 1974 revolution brought Ethiopian workers out of their extreme torpor and provoked them to go on a general strike led by the CELU, which added to the intensity of the revolution. Thus, it can be said that the outbreak of the revolution contributed a lot to the CELU to undertake the first general strike in its history. On February 18, 1974, teachers went on strike for higher wages and in protest of the education reform (Sector Review). On the same day, cab drivers also went on strike against a 50% increase in the price of gasoline. The teachers and cab drivers were also supported by students, unemployed youth and some segments of the urban population, who took control of the streets of Addis Ababa to voice their common demands and express their cumulative displeasure and bring traffic to a standstill. The main factor that led the urban population to support cab drivers was the economic crisis that prevailed in the country.¹ This widespread demonstration paralyzed the economic and administrative structure of the capital. Police forces were too hesitant to quell the mass uprising. In fact, the security of the country was very precarious because of the mutiny of the army for a salary increase since January of the same year. Consequently, the emperor announced in his televised address that his imperial government reduced the gasoline price increase from 50% to 25% on February 23, 1974.²

The cab drivers' strike undoubtedly played a significant role in forcing the government to change its decision in response to the public discontent, probably for the first time in the country's history. The strike can also be considered as one of the main public grievances that forced Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold and his cabinet to resign in February 27, 1974. Although the CELU did not play a significant role in coordinating the strike, it bluntly denounced the subsequent police repression and the government's undemocratic actions against the demonstrators. More importantly, the February popular uprising not only demonstrated that the ruling class was incapable of continuing to rule in its old way, but also represented a genuine milestone in modern Ethiopian history.³

Although the CELU did not play a significant role in the social unrest that paralyzed the country in February 1974 due to the government's constant intimidation, it planned a general strike for early March. In the first week of March 1974, the CELU began to participate in the popular uprising. The General Council of the CELU met from February 23 to March 1 and discussed the situation of the country in general and the government's indifferent attitude toward workers' demands in particular. At the end of the meeting, the General Council adopted a resolution that included a list of sixteen demands. Representing Ethiopian workers, seventeen executive members of the General Council, led by the deputy president, Alem Abdi, signed the resolution in March third and presented it to the Ministry of National Community Development (MNCD) and Prime Minister *Lij* Endalkachew Makonnen, who came to power on February 28, 1974, following the resignation of former Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold. In addition to the above demands, the CELU warned the government with a general strike if these demands were not adequately met within 48 hours.⁴

They hoped that the general strike would ultimately improve the socioeconomic conditions of the workers and strengthen their bargaining power. The sixteen lists of demands encompassed workers' corporate interests that focused on minimum wages, salary scale, salary adjustments, exemption from income tax on workers' retirement funds, pension systems, amending regulations on layoffs without adequate cause or justification, strikes, and labour publications. The list also included some of the demands of the civil left: free education, price control, temporary employment, job opportunities and priority and the formation of new unions.⁵

The outbreak of the revolution and the subsequent general strike helped CELU to organize a number of local unions and increase its membership. In this regard, Seleshi noted that by early February 1974, the CELU had 161 affiliated unions with a total of 55,216 dues-paying members and about 40,000 potential members. Within five months, however, CELU membership increased by about 30%. Lefort went on to argue that the CELU was not seeking radical reforms, as stated in its resolution, but rather aimed at increasing the power of the organization by using the opportunity as an advantage.⁶ However, among the sixteen lists of demands, some of the demands in number 4, which is about price control, in number 5, which is about sector review, in number 12, which is about employment opportunities and priorities for Ethiopians, and in number 15, which is about free

¹Markakis and Nega, p. 100; Addis, p.105; Käufeler, p. 113; Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire...*, p. 3.

²Lefort, p. 53; Käufeler, p. 113; Melaku Abate, "A History of the Role of Teachers in the Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-77," MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2006, p. 35.

³Addis, p. 98.

⁴*Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiberMegelechawoch*, IES/MS2390/01/05, *Yekatit* 12, 1966 E.C, pp. 1-6; pp. 1-6; *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber*, "Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochEnqeseqasie..." pp. 98-104; Ethiopian Herald, Vol. XXX, No. 975, March 7, 1974, p. 1.

⁵*Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber*, "Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochEnqeseqasie..."pp. 102-103; *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiberMegelechawoch*, IES/MS 2390/01/05, *Yekatit*22, 1966 E.C.pp. 4-5.

⁶Lefort, p. 55; Seleshi, p. 6.

education, are purely radical political agendas.¹

Be that as it may, the government, especially the prime minister, hesitated to solve the problem with the pretext that most of the demands require the decision of the Council of Ministers, but the cabinet was not yet formed. Most importantly, the prime minister belittled CELU's determination to conduct a general strike because it has never conducted a general strike, although it has threatened the government more than twice. As a result, his government failed to take the CELU's threat for a general strike seriously and respond appropriately. Nevertheless, he worked hard to place the Ground Forces, Territorial Army and Police under a single command to control the precarious security situation in the country.² The threatening letter was sent to the prime minister while CELU's president, Beyene Solomon was in Europe to attend the World Peace Conference and the International Labour Organization (ILO) meeting. Upon his return, the government ordered the president to call off the general strike. But Beyene did not try to convince the members of the General Council to cancel the general strike; instead, he worked with them to make it happen.³

The prime minister together with some other ministers gave a series of policy decisions on the sixteen lists of demands and strongly urged members of the confederation to abide by these decisions and call off the strike on 6 March 1974. In their statement, the Council of Ministers specifically referred to each demand and said that either decision would be made on each item within three to six months or that draft legislation would be submitted to the Parliament in cases where legal provisions were needed. Be that as it may, Endalkachew's last-minute attempt to negotiate was rejected by the confederation, and some 100,000 determined workers participated in the first general strike, which took place from March 7 to 10, 1974, and left the country in an even more precarious position than ever before. The general strike showed the extent to which workers were radicalized, especially white-collar workers. Since it was the first general strike in the CELU's history, the workers took the opportunity to demonstrate their militant and radical attitude toward the government. In addition to its corporate interests, the CELU also voiced purely political goals on behalf of teachers, students and the general public.⁴

However, Seleshi, Ottaway, and Lefort argued that CELU was not ready for radical reforms, but rather was working hard to fulfill its own corporate interests and advocate the formation of more unions in both parastatal and statal industrial enterprises. Seleshi further pointed out that the general strike was only to improve the socioeconomic and material conditions of workers and did not target radical political issues. He described the political questions raised in the general strike as simply general issues.⁵ Ottaway and Lefort also argued that the CELU was not attracted to radical reform, but aimed only to fulfill its corporate interests and increase its bargaining power.⁶ Ottaway further emphasized that "...the CELU leadership was clearly not yet interested in launching a revolutionary labour movement." Rather, the CELU leadership sought in the general strike to redress its specific grievances primarily wage increases to adjust for inflation and government recognition of workers' right to strike and organize. The CELU president also noted that the strike had no political objectives.⁷

In contrast to the aforementioned arguments, however, the 1974 revolution and the subsequent general strike strengthened the militancy of the workers and led them to advocate very radical ideas in their demonstrations. For example, they demanded the removal of the managers of several industrial companies, free education, price controls, freedom of expression and strike. These were all radical issues raised by the workers, and some of them were also put forward by other civil left groups. In fact, the general strike in itself can be considered as a radical step that was strongly influenced by the tides of the revolution, because the CELU had never held a general strike before. Likewise, Patrick Gilkes noted that the general strike increased workers' militancy and intensified radicalism in Ethiopia. He further noted that "...such a radicalization of the industrial proletariat is of considerable importance considering the class divisions of the Ethiopian state and introduce a new dimension into the political possibilities."⁸ The CELU's radical movement was exhibited in the four day general strike. KifluTadesse, an insider, in his book, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, Part I*, argued that "...the role of the Ethiopian workers at this stage of the movement became more pronounced when the Ethiopian working class, led by its more radical wing of labour leaders, staged a four day strike."⁹ Bahru also argued that the CELU's four-day general strike testified to its

¹*Ibid.*

²Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet...*, p. 137, Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire...*, p.35.

³Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet ...*, p. 140.

⁴Killion, p. 550; Seleshi, p.8; Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet...*, p. 139; *Addis Zemen* 33th Year, No. 362, Megabit 13, 1966 E.C.

⁵Seleshi, p. 8.

⁶Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire...*, p.43; Lefort, p. 55.

⁷*YalteyopiyaSerategochAndinetMahiber, "Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochEnqeseqasie..."*, p. 139; Lefort, p.142; *Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. XXX, No. 976, March 12, 1974, p. 1.

⁸Gilkes, pp. 168-169.

⁹KifluTadesse, *The Generation, Part I: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party from the Early Beginning to 1975* (Trenton: Independent Publisher, 1993), p. 111.

transformation from a state of extreme inertia or lethargy into a militant organization.¹ Markakis and Nega further noted that even the radical socioeconomic and political reforms of the *Derg* regime were all demanded by the radical popular movement.² Thus, it can be said that the 1974 revolution and the general strike that followed not only marked the zenith of the workers' organized actions in defense of their rights, but also showed how much they were influenced and radicalized by the ideologies of other civil left groups.

Notwithstanding the serious damage to the country's economy, the general strike strengthened workers' unity for collective action, at least for a short time, and helped CELU increase the number of affiliated unions. It also forced the government to accept the workers' demands, even if they were not fully implemented. Thus, in March 10, 1974, an agreement was reached between the government and the leaders of the trade union federation at Jubilee Palace. Emperor Haile Selassie I approved the agreement, which was decided the day before to end the CELU's four-day strike. Some top CELU officials and fourteen members of the Chamber of Deputies attended the meeting.³ Thereupon, the president of CELU called on all members to resume their work as of March 11, 1974.⁴

Be that as it may, the government again refused to abide by the agreement reached earlier at the end of the general strike. Thus, the General Council of CELU held a meeting from July 6 to 10, 1974, and passed a resolution on the state of the country. The General Council agreed that the government was still indifferent to the workers' problems and that the promises were only on paper. Of course, most of the workers' demands had not been met by the end of June. At the end of the meeting, the General Council wrote a letter to the prime minister's office expressing its dissatisfaction with the government's very slow response to the workers' demands. In its letter, the General Council stressed that if the government did not solve the problems by the end of August, it would submit the matter to the General Council, which will meet in early September, to take further strict decisions, including a general strike.⁵ At this time also the president of CELU, Beyene Solomon, after many years of service and of course before the expiration of his third term, submitted a letter of resignation to the General Council because of personal problems for the coming February 1975.⁶

3. The Infiltration of the Civilian Leftist Groups into CELU and the Radicalization of its Members

The CELU demanded the unconditional dissolution of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) and campaigned for the establishment of a Provisional People's Government (PPG) on 15 September 1974. This was one of the occasions when workers showed their radical stance in the revolution. The influence of the two leftist parties founded by students, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM), or *Meison* (in its Amharic name) was very strong. Indeed, the workers had been skeptical of the *Derg* since its formation on 28 June 1974. The *Derg* proclaimed a new ideology, *Iteyopiya Tiqdem* (Ethiopia First), and sought full control of state power in August 1974. The coming of the *Derg* on the fore front of controlling state power was not greeted with enthusiasm by the public in general or the workers in particular. Although the CELU supported some of the *Derg's* radical actions against the old monarchical establishment, it did not like the military's push for power. The underground press *Democracia* (Democracy), a notable clandestine weekly that began appearing in late June 1974, also attacked the *Derg's* position as the sole representative of the popular movement. Another underground newspaper of the left, *Yesefiw Hezeb Demts* (Voice of the Broad Masses), also began its attacks on the *Derg* in mid-1974. These underground newspapers expressed that the revolution was not only carried out by the military, but by Ethiopians from all walks of life. Nevertheless, while the workers were preparing eagerly for the General Council meeting, the *Derg* took power and deposed Emperor Haile Selassie I on September 12, 1974.⁷

On the same day, the *Derg* transformed itself from a coordinating committee into a Provisional Military Administrative Council and appointed Merid Azmach Asfawossen, the son of Emperor Haile Selassie I, as crown prince by Proclamation No. 1 of September 1974. It also dissolved the parliament until the people elected their true representatives in a truly democratic process. Be that as it may, Article 8 of the proclamation was completely against the rights of the workers. It states that "... it is here by prohibited, for the duration of this proclamation, to conspire against the motto 'Ethiopia First', to engage in any strike, hold unauthorized demonstration or assembly or engage in any act that may disturb public peace and security."⁸ Article 9 of the

¹BahruZewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2002), p. 231.

²Markakis and Nega, pp. 153-154.

³Ethiopian Herald, Vol. XXX, No. 976, March 12, 1974, 1.

⁴Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet*p. 139.

⁵*Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber*; "Ye ItyopiyaSerategnochEnqseqasie....," pp. 104-106; Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet*...., p. 141.

⁶Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuledet*...., pp. 141-142; *Addis Zemen*, 34th Year, No. 496, *Nehasie* 26, 1966 E.C., p. 1.

⁷*Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiberMeglechawoch*, IES/MS 2390/01/49, 1965, pp. 1-2; *Democracia*, IES/MS, 1775/01/3.2, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1968, pp. 1-8; Markakis and Nega, p. 141.

⁸*Negarit Gazeta* 34th year, No. 1, Proclamation No.1 of 1974, September 12, 1974

same proclamation also states that a military tribunal will be established to try those who violate the provisions mentioned in Article 8.¹

Relations between the *Derg* and the CELU deteriorated from the first day the *Derg* came to power. The main reason for their disagreement was Proclamation No. 1 of 1974. Since the annual meeting of the General Council was already scheduled for September 15 and 16, 1974, the president of the CELU wrote a letter to the office of the provisional military government on September 14, 1974. However, the government refused to accept his letter, dismissing it as anti-revolutionary propaganda.² Despite the indifferent attitude of the PMAC, the General Council of the CELU met and passed a resolution on the situation of the country on 15 September 1974. At the same time when the meeting was held, the PMAC issued Proclamation No. 2 of 1974, confirming its powers as head of government and head of state until the formation of a permanent government, as stated in Article 6 of Proclamation No. 1 of 1974.³ These proclamations angered not only the CELU, but also other civilian left groups. The idea of a people's government was voiced by the civilian left during the reshuffling of Endalkachew's cabinet, but it began to be heavily orchestrated after the *Derg* took power.⁴

In its resolution, the General Council called for the immediate dissolution of the PAMC and the establishment of a PPG in its place. It also called for the reinstatement of all democratic rights previously banned by the *Derg* and the postponement of the "Development through Cooperation Campaign Program" or commonly referred to as *Zemecha* program until power is transferred to civilians. The resolution also condemned the revised constitution and the appointment of Merid Azmach Asefawossen as crown prince and head of state.

Following the announcement of the resolution, the government arrested three top CELU leaders, including Beyene Solomon (CELU president), FissehaTzionTekeie (CELU secretary), and Gidey Gebre (vice president of the CELU branch in Eritrea) on September 23, 1974, on suspicion of thwarting the revolution.⁵ The CELU responded by calling for a general strike, which was to take place on 25 September 1974. However, it did not take place because the PMAC conspired and issued stern warnings to the CELU and its members at all levels. Before the day of the general strike, however, university students adopted the CELU resolution and went on strike on September 17 and 18, 1974.⁶

After considering the resolution announced by the General Council, the *Derg* brought the president and the signatories of the resolution to the 4th Army Division for further interrogation. Some *Derg* members, led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, attacked union leaders and denounced the resolution, claiming that it was written by remnants of the old regime and recruits of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The *Derg* called on CELU leaders to withdraw their resolution and communicate this to their members. However, the CELU leaders advised that they could not do so, as this was the responsibility of the General Council, and simply agreed to convene the General Council for September 19, 1974, so that the *Derg* members could make their wishes known. So the General Council was convened and Major Endale Tesema issued a similarly stern warning, and the meeting ended without consensus.⁷ Nevertheless, the participants agreed to meet on September 23 to reach a viable decision. However, on the same day, before the meeting began, Major Debela Dinsa and a gun-wielding lieutenant arrived and again took the president and the secretary to the headquarters of the Fourth Army Division. Although the top leaders were taken to jail, the meeting was conducted under the leadership of Alem Abdi, the vice president, and a general strike was decided for September 25, 1974.⁸

Be that as it may, the *Derg* infiltrated the CELU by convincing Alem Abdi to withdraw the general strike without the knowledge of the General Council. Hoping to become president of the CELU, Alem accepted what the *Derg* promised him and wrote a circular to a number of local unions demanding that the general strike be postponed indefinitely, in total violation of the resolution. As a result, some local unions stopped working while others continued to work. This led to general confusion among the local unions and the general strike was unsuccessful. Thereafter, some local union leaders began to openly oppose Alem.⁹ The ideological conflict between the civilian radicals and the military was also played out among CELU members and further complicating CELU's internal politics and exacerbating personal rivalries that had already existed. Tensions within CELU's leadership were so great that it virtually ceased to function. The turbulent meetings were often marked by unprecedented insults.¹⁰

After the arrest of the old leadership, two antagonistic factions emerged among the General Council members to take control of CELU. The first group was led by former Vice President Alem Abdi, who had allied

¹*Ibid.*

²Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuldet...*, p.144.

³*NegaritGazeta*34 Year, No. 2, 1974, September 15, 1974.

⁴Bahru, pp. 236-237.

⁵Markakis and Nega, p. 142; Lefort, p. 71.

⁶Andaregachew, p.73; Markakis and Nega, p. 141.

⁷Beyene Solomon, *Fighters for Democracy...*, p. 151.

⁸Marina and DavidOttaway, *Ethiopia: Empire...*, p. 59; Beyene Solomon, *Ye IteyopiyaSerategnochAndinetMahiber: Wuldet...*, p. 50.

⁹Beyene Solomon, *Fighters for Democracy...*, pp. 151-153.

¹⁰Agitu, p. 31.

with the *Derg* to maintain CELU's historical dependence on the state. Alem was supported by a few unions outside the capital, including the H.V.A Metahara Sugar Factory Union and the Ethio-Djibouti Railway Workers' Union. In Addis Ababa, however, the majority of local unions opposed Alem and the *Derg* under the leadership of the radical white-collar workers and their student allies, who sought to seize control of CELU from the remnants of its old bureaucrats. Moreover, these radical local union leaders formed a committee led by Markos Hagos to challenge Alem and control the confederation. They showed open resentment against the *Derg* and arranged a meeting that took place in the CELU hall from May 14 to 17, 1975. At the beginning of the meeting, they asked Alem to chair the meeting, but he refused on the grounds that the meeting was illegal. At that point, they took him out of his office and locked him in the photocopy room. However, Markos Hagos and his supporters decided to release Alem when the commander of the fifth police station agreed to bail him out. Immediately after his release, Alem reported the situation to the *Derg*. Subsequently, some *Derg* members such as Major Endale Tesema, Teka Tullu, Debella Dinsa and Demisse Deressa intervened and canceled the meeting after a heated confrontation with the workers.¹

The *Derg* responded by closing CELU headquarters on May 19, 1975, and also ordered that local unions could continue to operate separately but that CELU would reopen after workers elected new legal representatives. Failing to manipulate the CELU, the *Derg* had the organization dissolved by throwing its old leadership into prison. At the same time, it tried to penetrate the local unions and the CELU with his own agents in order to divide and suppress the workers' opposition. Workers' strikes and demonstrations were considered insurrections and dealt with harshly.²

The *Derg's* actions, however, were fiercely opposed by members of local unions, students, teachers, and other civil left groups. Fearing CELU's close ties to civilian radical groups, the *Derg* allowed CELU to continue operating under the leadership of provisionally elected committee after a nearly ten-day closure. It was Birhanu Bayeh, a member of the *Derg*, who on May 30, 1975, called some 300 union leaders representing 265 local unions and elected some 13 provisional committee members to facilitate the election of "true union leaders" for the confederation. Although the election was democratic, the radical majority elected Markos Hagos, the leader of the Insurance Companies Employees Union and a member of the EPRP, as president. In June, the new leadership of CELU passed a resolution condemning Alem and the old leadership as reactionary and demanding the right to organize all industrial workers, including the nationalized ones.³

As a result of the infiltration of EPRP members into the provisional committee, an immediate opposition to the *Derg* was launched within a few weeks. The EPRP used one of its members, Markos Hagos, to influence the decision of the CELU and attack the *Derg* regime. Thus, the provisional committee headed by Markos Hagos met from June 1 to 4, 1975, and adopted a resolution with 14 points. In addition, the provisional committee threatened the *Derg* that it would call a general strike for September 12, 1975, if its 14 demands were not adequately met.⁴ Regarding this, Christopher Clapham also argued that EPRP which considered itself as the vanguard party of the working class had strong links with CELU. More importantly, after the *Derg* seized power on September 12, 1974, the EPRP called for the immediate establishment of a civilian government, a demand later echoed by CELU. After that, the demands of EPRP and CELU were practically identical and the number of EPRP sympathizers within the confederation grew to an unimagined extent.⁵

White collar radicals and their EPRP allies felt strong enough to openly challenge the *Derg* and control of the state in September of that year. On the first anniversary of Emperor Haile Selassie I's abdication, CELU members again demonstrated for popular democracy and against the *Derg*. The last General Council of the CELU was held from September 18 to 21, 1975, when 183 unions voted in favor of a resolution condemning the *Derg* for bringing the economy under the control of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. The resolution demanded that state power be controlled by the masses, with all democratic rights such as freedom of speech and press, the right to organize, assemble, strike and demonstrate. The *Derg* was also accused of allowing the revolution to deviate from its normal course and fail to meet the economic needs of the proletariat. It also warned that it would immediately call for a general strike if action was taken against the CELU or any other union that disseminated this resolution.⁶

However, the military disregarded CELU's warning and on September 25, 1975, shot seven Ethiopian Air Line (EAL) employees who were captured distributing the resolution at the airport. The deceased were all condemned as EPRP members. Of course, the EPRP had a number of active members in the Ethiopian Air Line

¹Beyene Solomon, *Ye Ityopiya Serategnoch Andinet Mahiber: Wuldet...*, pp. 197-198; Markakis and Nega, p. 173; Democracia, No. 7, 1967; Ethiopian Herald, Vol. XXX, No. 1254, February 6, 1975.

²Beyene Solomon, *Ye Ityopiya Serategnoch Andinet Mahiber: Wuldet...*, pp. 199-200.

³Killion, pp. 565-566; Marina and David Ottaway, pp. 100-112; Beyene Solomon, *Ye Ityopiya Serategnoch Mahiber: Wuldet...*, pp. 199-200; Ethiopian Herald, Vol. XXX, No. 1254, February 6, 1975.

⁴Beyene Solomon, *Ye Ityopiya Serategnoch Mahiber: Wuldet...*, pp. 200-208.

⁵Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 54-55.

⁶Lefort, pp. 136-138; Marina and David Ottaway, pp. 111-112; CELU General Assembly Resolution 21-9-1975.

Workers' Union. Although the strike was not materialized, the leaders of the union responded by calling for a general strike. The EPRP also supported the strike. Subsequently, the *Derg* declared a martial law on 30 September 1975. A state of emergency was then imposed and indiscriminate arrests were made. Workers, students and other members of the civil left were thrown into prison.¹

In 1975 and 1976, the CELU was under the influence of many radical civilian groups and the military, which controlled power. Consequently, the CELU was used as a battleground during the protracted conflict between the civilian left groups and the military for control of state power. As a result, the CELU was unable to play a leading role during the revolution. Many civilian radicals, including the white collar workers, held that a socialist state could not be viable in Ethiopia until popular democratic institutions were established through a 'national democratic revolution' involving a coalition government of all progressive forces. The contradictions between this ideological position and the reality of military control over state power led to an increasing fragmentation of the civilian left, including the CELU.²

Be that as it may, two major student based factions, the EPRP and the AESM, emerged as political parties in late 1975. Ethiopian workers, still under the leadership of the CELU, were drawn into this impending civil war on the side of the EPRP. There were a number of reasons for the involvement of the confederation on the side of the EPRP against the *Derg*. The most important was the objective alliance between the material interests of organized urban workers and the petty-bourgeois EPRP cadres. Moreover, the *Derg's* reforms benefited the peasants and lumpen proletarians, who made up 90% of the population, while leaving out the urban petty bourgeoisie and workers. For the CELU, the *Derg's* program seemed to have little or no positive impact on empowering workers at all levels. Workers had no stake in management, no stake in state power, and their right to organize and strike continued to be restricted by the socialist state. Urban workers thus had compelling reasons to agree with the EPRP's critique of the *Derg* as a military junta moved along by the revolutionary wave and having taken power to obstruct the revolution and divert it to its own ends.³

4. The Demise of CELU

The demise of CELU and its organizational structure was mainly caused by the revolution. It was the *Derg* regime that hijacked the revolution and abolished the organizational structure of the CELU, replacing it with a new model of workers' organization. The PMAC promulgated a new labour law, Proclamation No. 64/1975 on 6 December 1975. The proclamation abolished the CELU and its structure and replaced it with a new workers' organization organized along socialist socio-economic principles, the All Ethiopian Trade Unions (AETU). It can be said that the proclamation was the obituary of the CELU, for it could not recover from its demise thereafter. The military government emphasized that harmonious relations between labor and management could be realized through strict adherence to the socialist order. Although it lowered the number of members required to form a union from 50 to 20, it could not resolve the issue of minimum wages and pension arrangements, which had long been demanded by workers.⁴

The new proclamation dissolved not only the CELU, but also the local unions. On the other hand, it led to the creation of nine industrial federations over all industrial unions by bringing various companies on board. The structure of the new national labour organization was formed based on the concept of democratic centralism through a hierarchy controlled from the top down, in contrast to the previous organizational structure of the CELU, which was bottom-up. Barely outlined, the new organization was intended to facilitate the regime's efforts to control the labour movement, as the law stipulated that "the lower unions are subordinate to the higher ones and that the lower unions are obliged to accept and implement the decisions of the higher unions."⁵ The *Derg* then proceeded to impose a leadership of its own choice on the higher levels, while also continuing its efforts to undermine workers' solidarity at the base. The regime's open attack on labour emanated from its aspiration to set up a workers' party and build a socialist state.

The preamble to the proclamation emphasized the need for socialist unity and increased productivity in line with the nationalist slogan *Iteyopiya Tikdem*, but the articles of the text outlined an essentially adversarial system of collective bargaining that reflected the continuation of capitalist relations of production. This adversarial system gave the state the right to control all major industries. Consequently, workers have no opportunity to improve their position through independent action, and they have no influence over management. Although collective bargaining agreements were made mandatory, workers still had no say in management, and their right to self-organization and strike was more restricted than ever before. These contradictions, exacerbated by repressive political measures in the fall of 1975, prompted radical employees to step up their opposition to the

¹Markakis and Nega, p. 174.

²KifluTadesse, *The Generation, Part I:...*, p. 119.

³Killion, p. 562.

⁴*NegaritGazeta* 35th Year, No. 11, Proclamation No. 64/1975, 6th December 1975, p. 71.

⁵Markakis and Nega, p. 174; Desta, pp. 139-140; *NegaritGazeta*, 35th Year, No. 11, Proclamation No. 64/1975, 6th December 1975, pp. 71-72.

Derg.¹

In addition, the new labour proclamation was not well received by workers. The provisional chairman of CELU, Markos Hagos, and some leaders of the local unions condemned the proclamation and secretly called for a general strike. Unfortunately, the strike did not materialize due to lack of coordination. In fact, the *Derg* also discovered the secret meeting and immediately engaged in disseminating propaganda against the strike and its possible consequences. Thus, the strike failed and some of the union leaders were arrested. Nevertheless, this was one of the occasions when the workers expressed their radical attitude towards the military regime.²

The proclamation was also fiercely attacked by the underground publications *Democracia* and *Labader*. These underground publications wrote lengthy articles against the Proclamation. Both focused on the organizational structure introduced by the new law. They attacked the law in the context of the minimum wage and pension entitlements. In general, they referred to it as a “code of slavery law”.³

As a student based organization, the EPRP could have benefited from the age-old connection between radical students and white collar workers to easily infiltrate the CELU and use it as a strong support in its struggle against the *Derg*. The ideological rivalry between the military and the civilian left groups led to the introduction of much more radical policies that were very difficult to implement by either side. In order to gain control of the working class and emerge as the revolutionary vanguard in the country, both the civilian left groups and the military used the CELU as a battleground. Consequently, the leadership of the CELU was at the epicenter of the attack that emanated from both sides. The radical demands of the civilian radicals on one side and the radical grip of power by the military on the other drove the revolution to extremes. As a result, Ottawa further argued that the radicalization process was two-way: “The civilians radicalized the military and the military radicalized the civilians, including the workers.”⁴

Be that as it may, the CELU could not play a leading role in the revolution because its leadership was divided and other civilian left groups and the military intervened with their own political interests. CELU leaders were politically unable to lead the workers and take political power in the country. Moreover, both the military and other civilian left groups used the workers as a means of struggle for their political ambitions. Therefore, the working class in general and the CELU in particular did not play a leading role in the 1974 revolution as expected. In this regard, Lefort has clearly noted that “...the leading role of the working class was a matter of dogma and the formation of the great proletarian party whose absence, universally regretted, was used to explain the limitations of the February movement, and constituted a heavy obligation for every revolutionary worthy of the name”⁵

Although the CELU had been highly infiltrated by the EPRP since 1975, it was unable to bring about a change in the political capabilities of the leadership, but instead split the leadership into two antagonistic groups. Consequently, the CELU became a battleground between the EPRP and the *Derg*, which struggled to gain control of the working class and emerge as genuine revolutionary in the country. Nevertheless, the *Derg*, which took full power purged the EPRP infiltrators and controlled the CELU.⁶

Thus, the ideological and organizational struggle of the CELU was eventually dissolved by the *Derg* and replaced by a new organization, the AETU on 8 January 1977. The meeting was attended by 65 union representatives, representing a total of more than 200,000 workers from all over the country.⁷ Of course, the AESM used its alliance with the *Derg* to bring its cadres under the control of the old CELU members, who were reorganized into the AETU in early 1977. But later these cadres became victims of the Red Terror and the White Terror proclaimed by the *Derg* and the EPRP, respectively.⁸ Among others, Markos Hagos, the provisional leader of CELU and a member of the EPRP, was killed by the *Derg* along with other workers.⁹ The first two leaders of the AETU, Tewodros Bekele and Temesgen Madebo, as well as a prominent member, Kebede Gebremikael, were also killed by the EPRP.¹⁰ Thus, the CELU failed to play a leading role in the Ethiopian revolution because of internal and external problems. Internally, the CELU was characterized by power rivalries among its leaders, a loose organizational structure, and illiterates among its staff. Externally, the infiltration of antagonistic civilian leftist groups and the intervention of the military not only infiltrated the CELU with its divisive ideology, but also used it as a battlefield. As a result, CELU became an underdog and eventually ceased to exist. This in turn

¹Lefort, pp. 136-138; Marina and David Ottaway, pp. 111-112; Killion, p. 568.

²Beyene Solomon, *Fighters for Democracy...*, p. 166.

³KifluTadesse, *The Generation, Part II: Ethiopia; Transformation and Conflict; The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), p. 19; *Labader*, IES/MS 1775/02/1, Tir 8, 1968 E.C, pp. 1-2; *Democracia*, 1775/02/1.24, Tir 21, 1967, p. 9; In fact, KifluTadesse was working in the confederation as coordinator. Thus, his account is an insider view.

⁴Marina and David Ottaway, p. 11.

⁵Lefort, pp. 102-103.

⁶Lefort, p. 170.

⁷Desta, p. 140.

⁸Killion, p. 569.

⁹*Labader*, IES/MS 1775/02/2.

¹⁰The All Ethiopian Trade Unions Educational and Information Department, *May Day 1978 Bulletin*, 1978, p.19.

has led to distrust and division still being the essence of labour organization in Ethiopia. This also led to the confederation remaining subordinate to the state.

Conclusion

The working class was one of the main actors during the Ethiopian Revolution. Even though most of the radical ideas of the revolution were orchestrated by the white-collar workers, the blue collar workers were also militant and expressed their demands bluntly. From February 18, 1974 to January 8, 1977, Ethiopian workers struggled against both the imperial and military regimes to protect the democratic rights of the popular masses in general and the corporate interests of its members in particular. The CELU, as a national workers' organization, played an important role in the events that led to the overthrow of the imperial regime and in hardening the struggle against the *Derg* regime; however, its leadership became subordinate and could not fulfill the aspirations of the members. The struggle reached its climax during the four-day general strike that took place from March 7 to 11, 1974.

As one of the most important organized institutions in the country, the CELU was used not only by the students but also by the emerging political parties in their struggle against the *Derg* as the center of resistance and pushed the revolution to its peak. However, because the CELU leadership was unable to lead the radical workers in the right direction that would benefit the workers socially, economically and politically, it failed to emerge victorious at the end of the revolution. The split of the CELU leadership into two antagonistic factions and the intervention of the civilian left groups and the military contributed much to the CELU's inability to play a leading role during the revolution.

The failure of the CELU to have a leading role during the revolution may be attributed to its loose internal organization, its uneducated staffs, its uncoordinated and unwise relations with other radical civilians, and, of course, its historical subordination to the state. Although the CELU played an important role during the revolution, it was unable to fundamentally change the country's democratization process in general and the socioeconomic and political life of its members in particular. Eventually, the CELU was restructured and renamed AETU on 8 January 1977, on the basis of the socialist socioeconomic and political principles, and was forced to subordinate itself to a new incarnation of the military regime. This meant the end of CELU's existence as an organization representing all Ethiopian workers.

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