

# DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the theoretical perspectives in employment relations and subsistence of unionisation. The general concept of unionisation and the analysis of theoretical perspectives in employment relations is discussed to contextualise this essay. The three theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper are the unitary perspective, radical perspective and the pluralist perspective which underpins this report. Elements of employment relations linked to the effects of unionisation are discussed since they form significant part of this essay. In conclusion, the author heralds that theories and techniques applied in employment relations are effectively based on the pluralist perspective as construed from the analysis.

**Keywords:** Unionisation, Employment Relations, Scientific Management, Unitary Perspective, Pluralist Perspective and Radical Perspective

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## 1 Introduction

The basic principles in labour relations could be considered as structured and substantiated by the theoretical perspectives applied in a workplace environment as outlined by Finnemore and Van der Merwe (1996). Conflict in a workplace environment is acknowledged as a normal part of the relationship between workers and employers, but a general understanding and cooperation between the workers and employers lies on work relations between these two parties to advance and achieve their objectives (Finnemore & Van der Merwe, 1996:7).

The pluralist tenets imply that employment relationships, as subsystems of the society, are in fact platforms in which the diverse and conflicting interests of employees and employers are harnessed towards compromise and consensus. The mutual benefit derived from these relationships make consensus the lifeblood of such a subsystem. It is therefore, important for the industrial institutions or organisations to develop people management strategies that enhance productivity levels for the employees as part of people management principle. Many employers benefit through diverse tools of solving work related problems which lead to improved employment relations (Ndala, 2002).

An exposition of the theoretical perspectives analysed in this article, will help explain and give an overview on how the main theoretical perspectives applied in labour relations could be interpreted in a distinct way. The article is arranged as follows: Section 2 discusses unionisation and consideration of scientific management principles in a work environment (private and public sector). Section 3

presents applicable theories in a unionised sector and is followed by Section 4 whereby the profound criticism of pluralism is discussed. In Section 5, the concept of employment relations in a unionised environment is discussed and the author provides conclusion of this paper under Section 6.

## 2 Unionisation and the consideration of scientific management principles in a work environment (private and public sector)

According to Gunnigle *et al.* (1998:431) unionisation may be referred to as an ongoing relationship amongst workers within an organisation or an institution. This workers' relationship aims to improve and sustain working conditions and the living standards in the workplace with a level of recognition from the institution or the employer. The extent of union recognition and level of union membership are critical factors impacting on the nature of employment relations. The South African public sector and the private sector are highly unionised (ADCORP, 2013). The majority of unionised members belong to the four trade union federations recognised in South Africa. The Public Service International (2012:1) indicates that, of the four main trade union federations in South Africa namely, (*in sequence from the largest to small*) the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA), the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) and the Confederation of South African Workers' Unions (CONSAWU), COSATU is the largest trade unions federations in South Africa with over two million members. These trade union

federations have members in both the public and the private sector who are involved in the coordinating Bargaining Council and negotiating structure for the public and private sector employees in South Africa (Nehawu website June: 2011).

Due to high level of unionisation in South Africa, unions' branches vary in size, strength, capacity as well as density (Wood & Glainster, 2008:439). Unions represent employees in many different positions and these members have different perspectives on many issues affecting organisation. Unions address political and educational issues. They seek to ensure job security and improve working conditions of their members as part of the unions' tasks and responsibilities (Trade Union Readcast, 2009:4-8).

Saundry *et al.* (2008:52) argue that even though unionisation is likely aligned to procedures and rule bound, due to the large union mass, disputes occur in the workplace which links the union members to negative charges. They further explain that in order to understand this context clearer, it is viewed that a large number of union members make management alert and vigilant about their use of discipline in the workplace. In this view, effective union representation could promote resolutions of issues that lead to formal lodging of disputes being laid, obliging management of institutions to follow fair and correct procedures. This may reduce the likelihood of sanctions posed to the union. As argued by Braverman (1974), degradation of work as introduced by capitalist (owners of production) resulted to exploitation of labour and unions emerged to represent workers.

The scientific management principles introduced by Taylor are contributing factors on the degradation of work (Opp, 2009:9). Taylor's importance as leader of the movement which gave the world, time and motion studies has to be set in historical context. The increasingly rationalised division of tasks and the mechanisation of work reached a point at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where the need to co-ordinate human work efforts, not surprisingly, invited the attention of those interested in applying scientific and engineering criteria to the human sphere as they had to the mechanical (Watson, 1987:33).

An indication acknowledged from the Sociology Dictionary Index (2010) is that, scientific management is a set of ideas which primarily involves simplifying and bringing workers' actions together so as to be most productive and generate highest profit for an organisation as developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor. This to a large extent fuelled unionisation in many trades and business organisations around the world due to the fact that various collective movements were opposed to the implementation of these principles (Abrahamson, 1997:504).

According to Watson's (1987:33) point of view, the application of scientific management suggests:

“The worker as basically an economic animal, a self-seeking non-social individual who prefers management to do their job-related thinking...” (Watson, 1987:33)

Based on Watson's (1987) opinion, the above notion is meant for efficient way of organising work and then ties the monetary rewards of the work to the level of output achieved by the individual employee. He further makes indication that, this would produce results which would benefit the employer and the employee alike, removing the likelihood of conflict and the need for labour unions.

Marx and Engels (1977) argue that human-beings achieve the fullness of their humanity through their labour. Through labour, a social process, the human world is created and this is the basis of Marx's materialism (Watson, 1987:52). Braverman (1974:85-138) describes the scientific management as the degradation of work in capitalism for accumulation of capital. The upsurge is exploitation of labour which leads to deskilling and intensification of work, more management control and less resistance with proliferation in productivity and profitability. Gani (1996:54-55) argues that Marxist theorists explain the membership of the union according to workers' unhappiness and disappointment to the present system as well as workers' political will to bring down the “exploitative order”. She further argues that in this sense workers criticise the dominant approach applied by the capitalistic elite being the unitary approach.

Nel and Holtzhausen (2008:5), strongly emphasise that since the early primarily sociological perspectives, the focus has much been on rule-making and work-control processes in an employment context. Steadily, different perspectives developed, and subsequently in the 1980s the definition and scope of industrial relations have attracted renewed interest and debate which led to the invention of the new term of industrial relations as employment relations. Employment relations imply the need for good working relations between the management of an institution and the trade union in an attempt to avoid and manage conflict (Nel and Holtzhausen, 2008). In employment relations, the three role-players involved is the trade union, employers' organisation and the state (Koçer & Hayter, 2011:26; Nel *et al.*, 2012:40).

Gough *et al.* (2006:30) argues that any analysis of employment relations needs to be understood in a context of broader theories about society and organisation. Complex society and organisation requires human to understand employment relations with an open mind.

### 3 Applicable theories in a unionised sector and the practice of trade unions

Henslin (1999:19) cites the need for theories to provide explanation that tie together many research

findings but avoid sweeping generalisation that attempt to account for everything. In explaining theoretical perspectives, he further states that a theory is an explanation of how two or more facts are related to one another and, thus, by providing a framework which fit observation, each theory interprets reality in a distinct way (Henslin, 1999:20).

According to the ILO-A (2011:1-6), the three major theoretical perspectives in industrial relations differ regarding interpretation and the manner in which they are analysed and applied in workplace relations. In sequence, these three theoretical perspectives are unitary perspective, pluralist perspective as well as the radical perspective. The role of unions, work place conflict and job regulation are primary aspects outlined and explained differently regarding how they are applied in each perspective. The radical perspective is also known as the conflict model, whilst the pluralist perspective views conflict as normal and natural in the workplace. The radical perspective is often associated with Marxism although it is not limited to it.

Conflict theory, which has variants such as Marxism and pluralism, assumes that there is a divide between the owners and controllers of capital and the working class. The owners and controllers of capital represent employers whereas those who sell their labour are employees. For the working class, collective action counters the power of capital since interests of the employers and employees differ. Conflict resolution tends to be of rational action in resolving differences between the employer and employees (ILO-A, 2011:1; Opp, 2009:9).

### **3.1 Unitary perspective**

The unitary perspective in employment relations assumes that employers and workers operate in teamwork for attainment of common objective within an organisation. This perspective views an organisation as a combined unit whereby employers and workers have equal understanding. Thus, all parties form one team with similar intention. In this regard, there is no need for 'third party' or union interventions. Unions are perceived as unnecessary and divide employee loyalty. The unitary perspective disputes that there is a meaningful role for conflict in the workplace. Unitarists posit that employer should set the rules and employees should cooperate in complying with the rules. If conflict does arise, it is seen as disruptive and regarded a fault of poor employee management or communication problems (Van Gramberg, 2002:208; ILO-A, 2011:6).

Unitarists emphasise team-work when conceptualising the nature of the employment relationship (Fox 1974:249). Since unitarists expect a harmonious workplace, comprising of committed and loyal employees, conflict is considered a threat and must be eliminated (Van Gramberg, 2002:208). The fundamental elements of the unitarist context includes

a commonality of interests between owners and workers, acceptance of the political, social and economic culture and focuses more on resolving conflicts than the actual cause of the conflict. This perspective is criticised for being viewed in denial of the existing basic antagonism in the employment relationship, though its tenets influence the attitudes and behaviour of employers towards employees (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001:772).

### **3.2 Pluralist perspective**

The pluralist perspective views the employing organisation as a coalition of individuals and groups with diverse objectives, values and interests. The underlying assumption with this perspective is that individuals in an organisation combine into a variety of distinct sectional groups, each with its own interest, objectives and leadership. The different groups in an organisation are competitive in terms of leadership, authority and loyalty. In this regard conflict put the organisation in a permanent state of dynamic tension (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2005:404). This is where mainly the trade unions fits-in and it is through pluralist perspective that unions have a platform to exercise their rights unlike when an institution or an employer applies or exercises the unitary perspective.

The observation made by Nel and Holtzhausen (2008:7) is that pluralist perspective recognises the mutual dependence of the two groups. The assumption made is that the conflict between management and labour is not therefore fundamental and unbridgeable so that the parties will fail to cooperate. In this regard, they argue that key lies in the regulation of the employment relationship. Hence this is how to institutionalise conflict in order to contain and control its impact on the parties and their relationships.

Pluralist perspective is perceived to be made up of strong, dynamic and various sub-groups. Each sub-group has its own objectives and leadership with rightful loyalties to represent their group. Usually the leadership of each sub-group represents their members on the basis of mandate determined by its members or primarily comprised of the set objectives (ILO-A 2011:1-6). It is further stated that the two predominant sub-groups in the pluralistic perspective is the management and workers' union.

The various roles of managerial staff members of an organisation and employee groups are the primary source of some form of competitive behavior or even conflict between management and labour. Management is responsible for the efficiency, productivity and profitability of the institution. The concerns of the individual employee are wider regarding job security and meaningful work. The competitive conflict between management and labour is seen as rational and expected to occur in the work environment. It results from industrial and organisational factors rather than from individual personal factors, such as a personality clash between a

supervisor and the subordinate (Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008:7).

Based on pluralism, on one hand the role of management or employer relates mainly towards influencing and bringing about togetherness within the institution, and is viewed little inclined to be obligatory and dominant. On the other hand, unions are regarded as the rightful representatives of the workers. Both management and the union negotiate through collective bargaining whereby differences which leads to conflict are resolved collectively. Conflict in this regard is perceived not to be a terrible incident. However it is viewed as an advancement towards a constructive solution concerning differences, only if is well handled (ILO-A, 2011:1-6).

An argument made by Gani (1996:54-65) is that, at the heart of trade unionism lies the decision of an individual to join the union. Keeping in mind why labour unions developed, it seems workers join and support unions because of dissatisfaction with their employment situation and status in society. Amongst other reasons issues of security is also at play (Trade Union Readcast, 2009:1). Drawing from Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, a vast range of unfulfilled needs of workers may induce or influence the decision to join or support a trade union, such as basic economic and security related needs, or even those related to social and self-fulfillment.

The basic objective of a trade union is to protect and promote the interest of the working class in general. For this reason, workers' reaction to the trade union membership will be related to their belief that membership will decrease their frustration and anxiety, improve their opportunities and lead to the achievement of better standard of living (Nel & Holtzhausen; 2008:49).

Huczynski and Buchanan (2001:773) identify the holders of pluralism as those who reject the unitarist belief that, employees have the same interests as management. Pluralists believe many parties within an organisation will have different goals to that of the organisation. A pluralist view sees conflict as inherent and purely being an inevitable course of action within the organisation. Thus, conflict can be resolved through compromise to the benefit of all. Unions have a legitimate role in the workplace.

According to Williams and Adam-Smith (2005) through pluralism, a belief is that conflict is supposed to occur in an organisation between employers and workers as the result of different intentions and interests from both parties. Interests of each party are negotiated collectively and accepted, leading towards decisions being made commonly between the competing parties. Differing views are considered to be rational and lead towards success of the relationship between employers and unions. Therefore, effective communication processes which allow workers to have their views and concerns voiced to the management should be made possible by the employer. This practice avoids and prevents damaging

the organisational performance between the two parties.

The pluralist frame of reference is a perspective which recognises the existence of a basic animosity in the employment relationship, and hence the inevitable potential for conflict. The concept of pluralism is derived from political theory, where it is used to capture the way in which states and governments have to mediate between a highly diverse range of competing interest groups when formulating their policies (Mzangwa, 2012). Having to accommodate the views of a diversity or plurality of interest, it means that political power is not exercised in a straight forward top down manner. The political power is more diffuse, linked to the respective influence of different interest groups over policy outcomes (Williams & Adam-Smith, 2005).

Pluralism recognises the potential for conflict, but tends to focus on how it can be contained by the development of procedures, collective bargaining arrangements in particular. Pluralist perspective allows workers to exercise their power based on decisions which affect them in the workplace. This is what makes employment relations valuable and constitutes towards collective bargaining being viewed as most effective process to control work relations. Thus, in this regard the Donovan Commission (1968:54) stated the following:

“Where it was properly undertaken, the collective bargaining is the most effective means of giving workers the right to representation in decisions affecting their working lives, a right which is or should be the prerogative of every worker in a democratic society” (Donovan Commission, 1968:54).

According to Flanders (1975), based on the practice of pluralist perspective which enables existence of collective bargaining, workers are able to voice out any work related matters affecting them in the workplace. In this case, managers of an organisation (employer) are able to control conflict which then allows them to keep conflict at limit and extend their control. With regard to employment relations, pluralism recognises that employers and employees may have different interests, which need to be reconciled if the organisation is to function effectively. The principal concern of pluralists is ensuring that any conflict that arises from these differences of interest is managed appropriately, and contained in a way that prevents it from causing too much disruption. Thus there is an emphasis on developing procedures that are designed to resolve conflict, in particular the establishment of bargaining relationships with trade unions, given the array, or plurality, of interests that potentially exist within the organisation.

The pluralist frame of reference was enormously influential in the development of employment relations as an academic field of study (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Hyman, 1989). The emphasis on employment relations as the “study of the institutions of job regulation” (Flanders 1975), noted above, was informed by a belief in the legitimacy of trade unions, and accorded a special role to collective bargaining as the means by which they secured their goals, something that became the ‘dominant paradigm’ (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003:7).

From a pluralist perspective, the solution was not, as the holders of unitary views would argue, to resist the encroachment of the unions as a means of reasserting managerial authority. Rather, stronger bargaining relationships between employers and unions should be encouraged, given the advantages of developing robust and effective procedures for containing, or institutionalising, conflict through the joint regulation of the workplace. According to one leading pluralist, the paradox, which management have found difficult to accept is, they can only regain control by sharing it (Flanders, 1975:172). Flanders (1975) argues that until the 1970s, the pluralist perspective exercised an important influence over both public policy and management attitudes towards employment relations, though not at the expense of the employers’ fundamentally unitary beliefs.

Flanders (1970), Clegg (1975), and Fox (1966) contributed towards establishing a distinction between unitary and pluralist “frames of reference” in employment relations. These frames of reference are perspectives that can be applied to employment relations (Blyton & Turnbull, 2004). Fox (1966:10) articulated them as “ideologies of management”, beliefs held by managers that influence their approach to employment relations. They can be likened to lenses used to “perceive and define” the nature of the employment relationship, thus influencing and shaping actions (Fox, 1974:271).

Evidence that the unitary perspective influences developments in contemporary employment relations is observed in a study of hotels conducted by Head and Lucas (2004) cited in Williams and Adam-Smith (2005) which found that employers (management) expressed hostility towards trade unions. Most senior managers, when asked about their views on the nature of the employment relationship, articulated a unitary perspective stressing the importance of common interest (Williams & Adam-Smith, 2005:13). Employers rejected the notion that there was hostility in the employment relationship instead they emphasised the extent to which their organisation was a “happy team”. In substantiation of such evidence Williams and Adam-Smith (2005) refer to research at a food company which attempted to secure the loyalty and cooperation of its employees, and thus rendered trade unions unnecessary by offering relatively good benefits.

### **3.3 Radical perspective**

The radical perspective is referred to as the Marxist approach. This notion rejects the pluralist frame of reference. Van Gramberg (2002:209) states that the Marxist view is to achieve annihilation of the suppressive social order and unions are seen as vehicles of this social revolution. Based on radical perspective, a belief is that almost certainty remains that conflict will constantly take place between employer and the workers due to occurrence of basic disparities. In this perspective, employers and workers are opposed to cooperate and a hostility principle prevails. Workers distinguish themselves as “us employees against those employers”, which shows that resistance of working together (Williams & Adam-Smith, 2005).

According to ILO-A (2011:1-6), observation of radical perspective in industrial relations is viewed as anchored with the character of capitalist society. Workplace relation is noticed against conditions underlying within the boundaries of interest between capital and the employees. Through this perspective disparities of power and economic affluence are perceived as the fundamental nature of the capitalist society. Thus, it is then just normal for unions to react on behalf of workers who are exploited by the capitalist, and in this regard, conflict is expected. At the institutions where joint regulation is applied, there would times of common understanding. Management’s position is not limited but enhanced as they presume continuation of capitalism than opposing it.

Williams and Adam-Smith (2005:14) indicate that during the late 1960s and the 1970s, a number of sociological studies of workplace employment relations were strongly influenced by the radical perspective. The radical perspective, which developed from a critique of pluralism, perhaps over-emphasises the degree of conflict and disorder in employment relations. Collective bargaining is assessed as promoting workers’ militancy within the confines presumed to be tolerable to the employers. Conflict is deemed to be legitimised in the organisation, which is contrary to the workers’ interests.

Based on radical perspective, unions implement their basic conservative practice of negotiation as they become entangled with management. They are anxious with the bureaucracy of management and in this regard they are viewed as not advancing issues of interest of their members. In the bargaining process, leadership of the union would prefer to pay more attention on establishing and improving a balanced relationship with employers. By so doing, the union is able to sustain the confidence and protection within the institution, rather than challenging it. The common interest of the workers is primarily to improve working conditions and to influence decisions in the workplace (Hyman, 1989).

#### 4 Profound criticism of pluralism

The main challenge to the pluralist employment relations orthodoxy of the 1960s and 1970s initially came from the development of radical perspectives on employment relations. These perspectives share with pluralism a belief in the essentially antagonistic nature of the employment relationship. However, they do not accept its assumption that conflict can be resolved by the development of procedures, or even the desirability of attempting to do so.

In criticising the pluralist perspective they argued that pluralism fails to address the issue of power adequately, assuming that, in an environment where bargaining relationships have been established, a balance of power exists between employers and unions. Employers, by virtue of their ownership and control over the production of goods or delivery of services, enjoy far greater power than even the most well organised union (Fox, 1974; Clegg, 1975). Adherents of the radical perspective contend that pluralism is an essentially conservative ideology, concerned with upholding the existing order in society rather than challenging it (Fox, 1974; Goldthorpe, 1977). Thus, while pluralism ostensibly appears to advance the interests of employees, by recognising the desirability of union organisation and collective bargaining, it ensures they are kept within narrow limits, and do not challenge the economic power of employers. Joint regulation contains conflict, resolves it, and thus ameliorates its potential for disruption in a way that helps the interests of capital rather than those of labour.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the pluralist orthodoxy developed in the context of the emergence of employment relations as an important public policy issue (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Hyman, 1989). Governments were concerned that particular characteristics of Britain's system of employment relations, most notably the growth of workplace bargaining between union representatives and managers, generated unnecessary levels of disruptive industrial conflict and inflationary wage increases.

The third key criticism against pluralism is that it neglects the important substantive outcomes for employees by focusing on procedural reform. In other words, pluralism is more concerned with the system of joint regulation than whether or not it produces anything worthwhile for employees. However, it is suggested that the radical approach places an unwarranted emphasis on conflict and disorder in employment relations (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Hyman, 1989).

Since the 1980s, the influence of radical perspectives has decreased or declined (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003), in the UK largely because of the marked deterioration in the level of trade union membership and organisation, decreasing strike levels, and the dwindling extent of collective bargaining activity. The main challenge to pluralist orthodoxy in

employment relations come from the changing forms of work and a resurgence of unitary thinking associated with the rise of human resource management techniques. Contemporary "human resource management follows the unitarist belief that effective management policies can align the interests of employees and employers and thereby remove conflicts of interest" (Budd, 2004:6).

#### 5 The concept of employment relations in a unionised environment

According to the theory of Marx and Engels (1977), employee relations could be interpreted as part of an extensive analysis of industrial society in particular the production and the dynamics of capital accumulation. They also point out that, "the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life." The Marxist view is predominantly concerned with the historical expansion of influential relationship between wealth and workforce, to which employment relations is important and the worker participation has a role (ILO-A, 2011:1-6).

In the United States of America, where elimination of labour unions has a long tradition, a focus of the current research is understood to be the beginning of new models of workers' representation and involvement, which symbolises collaboration and support within the workplace (Kochan & Osterman, 1994:163). Although such initiatives are likely seen to be in place, advanced efforts which makes unionisation to be unsuccessful and less effective are found to be at high level of practice. This is primarily meant to limit workers' preference regarding their representation on labour issues. Employers contributed immensely in opposing any existence of unionisation. This has significantly made a huge gap in representation that might be filled by any successful set up plans of emergence of alternative organisational forms or union renewal (Barry & May, 2004:205).

In South Africa, unions are recognised in the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), which guarantees the right to join trade unions, and for unions to collectively bargain and strike. Unions contain about 25.5% of membership in the workforce countrywide and therefore, unions remain relevant and influential (STATS SA, 2005:37; ADCORP, 2013). Adler and Webster (2000:77) argue that the strength of labour unions during the era of resistance was judged more by the militancy of the labour unions' membership. However, changes and transitions in politics took place over time, particularly from the late 1980s (Ndala, 2002:4). Within the context of the emergence of a democratic society, attention shifted from challenging the system of apartheid to the objectives of focusing on workers' demands and representation in cases against their employers.

The shift of the political paradigm led to a change in the manner in which labour unions operate.

This has been attributed to an increase in membership, of more literate (mostly skilled) members (Heineken, 1989:24), compared to the large number of the mostly unskilled members labour unions represented in the past. Unions' operation includes involvement in negotiations and introduction as well as implementation of the Labour Relations Act, (Act 66 of 1995) (hereafter referred to as the LRA) in post 1994. The union represents workers and is concerned with advancing the rights of workers in the workplace as stipulated in chapter two of the Constitution. Amongst these representations, unions also defend their members in situations such as grievance and disciplinary matters (Ndala, 2002:4).

The presence of a labour union in a workplace is crucial. Labour unions negotiate work related issues and stand for workers' rights to maintain tolerable working conditions in the workplace. Membership of a labour union forms its constituency. Their participation underpins the labour union's strength and this impact on the union's capacity to bargain with the management (Gani, 1996:61). The driving force behind the changes to the current membership and even the leadership of labour unions depends on what motivates people to join the unions. The interests of the members of the labour union may differ (Deery & De Cieri, 1991:59). Skilled members may view certain issues differently than unskilled members and this may cause divisions in the union.

Lever and James (1987) argue that where more skilled employees join labour unions which have traditionally served unskilled employees, tensions could emerge. Evidence from research (Gani, 1996; Visser, 1988) indicates that workers with a higher level of education have a tendency of being individualistic. Such employees are likely to see their personal progress as the only beneficial factor towards their advancement and promotions at work, and that has nothing to do with collective bargaining (Handley, 1989:336). Union office-bearers may be intimidated by the skilled members and consequently focus on their needs. Therefore, unskilled members in particular, may feel neglected where they perceive their needs receiving less attention. Leadership therefore, needs to work strategically in order to maintain a balance.

The current employment relations practices have been influenced by colonial and post-apartheid experiences in the workplace, resulting in changing work organisation and the managerial strategies in South Africa. Wood and Glaister (2008:239) refer to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) an umbrella organisation of independent trade unions. COSATU as a federation played a key role internally in the struggle for democracy. As part of the ruling alliance, with the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP), COSATU shares a commitment to the objectives of the National Democratic Revolution, and the need to unite the largest possible cross-section of

South Africans behind its objectives (COSATU today, 2009:1-3). The record of unions' reputation, competency and its good standing in South Africa as renowned may have deteriorated since the early 2000s. Notwithstanding the fact that the concept of unions' understanding, its rates and infiltration are viewed to be relatively high, the economic environment since then have negatively influenced credibility of the unions (Wood and Glaister, 2008:439).

An industrial conflict which could result to workers withdrawing from their occupations in the workplace is an indication of dissatisfaction and disagreement of workers against the employers. Such disagreement or conflict refers to disputes which need to be redressed within an organisation (Williams and Adam-Smith, 2005). According to Butler (2004:61) three institutions have been created to reduce conflict in employment relations and eliminate unfair discrimination. These institutions are the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), the Labour Court and the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). They were established within the broader policy framework to redress the past discrimination which led to the social inequality as a result of the apartheid regime in the workplace in South Africa. NEDLAC played a major role through involvement of all stakeholders or rather most parts of the society in formulating policies to benefit the majority (Wood and Glaister, 2008:441-442; African History Newsletter, 2011:1).

Conflict cannot be avoided within an organisation, thus it needs to be controlled so that it does not escalate and this is one of the vital principles endorsed by pluralist perspective (Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008; Bendix, 1996). It is therefore imperative to note that in UK's institutions where the unitary perspective is applied (Shattock, 2003:178), the management often makes the decision rather than to participate in a joint decision making through collective bargaining (Public Service International, 1989:35). In South Africa post 1994, the LRA sets out aspects of employment relations as practiced in the country. The external role and functions of the labour ministry involves NEDLAC, which plays an important role in influencing and shaping the labour laws of the country. Therefore, employment relations exercised in South Africa emerged from negotiation at NEDLAC and continues to evolve as conditions change in the external environment (Nel and Holtzhausen, 2008:10). This notion implies that there are more involved role-players and bodies which constitute towards building relations for a common interest of developing the economy, creating employment and ensuring sustainability through work relations envisaged by a pluralist perspective (Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008; Bendix, 1996).

Initiatives pertaining employment relations contain significant repercussions of emergence of

contemporary representational developments as well as for the established unions. With reference to the studies conducted in UK, employers have achieved valuable objectives through employment relations all over a number of countries (Brown, 1999:153). If worker participation and involvement is recognised, it harmonises the work relations effectively.

### **5.1 Employees' participation and involvement**

Wood and Glaister (2008:442-443) consider factors that promote employee participation and involvement in the workplace. Employers experiment with participation and involvement in order to weaken or find alternative mechanisms of employee representation, instilling what Wood and Glaister (2008:443) describe as the "hard Human Resource Management" strategy. They argue that this is high value added model in line with distinctive dynamic strategy implied by a unitary perspective. This strategy could be implemented by employers for the deterioration of the established system and the workers cooperative representation in order to regain power and continue dominating.

Based on Kelly's (1998:52) point of view, employee participation demonstrates the magnitude to which union members realise and value the importance of the union. The union is perceived as strengthening the principles of unity and serves as a base for the articulation of new values in changing working conditions. This includes the presence of effective structures for collective representation, like workplace representation by a union official or shopsteward being a key role during grievance and disciplinary representation. Regular attendance to the union's meetings and consistency of the representatives on the union's issues is very important. Thus, the representative structures of the union remain accountable and robust as expected by the members who elected them (Wood & Glaister, 2008:443).

According to Wood and Glaister (2008:436-451), in an attempt to create settlement and maintain a strong union presence, employers could use substitutional ways of workers' participation. The main purpose in this regard, being to keep relation and gain attention of the union. Involvement of workers has more to do with building solidarity and a sense of belonging to a group they can trust, where active participation could be accepted and be rendered. In workplaces with a robust and confrontational union members' participation, innovative developments in much constructive forms are most likely found.

Based on Knudsen's (1995) observation, employee participation gives workers a real input into how the organisation is governed. In the process of participation there is no right to use industrial conflict to influence the other party. Employees are exposed to consultation and they are at the receiving point of information which helps in the co-decision making

processes. Despite the fact that employers and unions could be in opposite stance regarding what each party stands for, they enjoy interdependence and have common interests. Thus participation gives workers a say to express their concerns within the institutions and their involvement makes it feasible for them to raise their views on board through consultation. Flanders (1975), argues that employee participation is mainly direct or via representatives of the labour union and this applies in a pluralist environment.

The workplace employees' participation and involvement fulfils a level of agreement in a collective bargaining approach. Unions prefer consultation regarding employment processes, policies and co-decision making with the employers. Such relationship could be the grounding for cooperation or between the employers and employees' representatives (Knudsen, 1995).

### **5.2 Conflict resolution**

The existence of grievance and disciplinary procedures as well as the practice of thereof indicates realism that differences occur in workplace between employers and employees and such incident is unavoidable. According to Nurse and Devonish (2007:90), the use of grievance and disciplinary procedure in the workplace sets up a mindset that expectation of conflict is likely to happen but orderly means of settling disputes are in place. In arguing this notion further, Freeman and Medoff (1984:108) state that in accordance with the employees' standpoint, the practice of grievance and disciplinary procedures provides an opportunity for the use of the expression from the parties concerned. In this regard, through legitimate channels of communication, conditions under which workers and their union representatives can assert and protect job rights under against management.

The conduct of grievance and disciplinary procedures in an organisation helps in dealing with improper, unbecoming and offensive behaviour by resolving a conflict or disagreement over facts. Although in some instances, workers instigate these processes based on observations that the handling of management is unjust to their member. Thus, through implementation of legitimate institutional processes which are equivalent to handle differences between the worker and the employer, grievance and disciplinary procedures are legitimately applicable. Their implementations seek to redress issues of differences pertaining offenses occurring in the workplace but through appropriate ways executed (Nurse and Devonish, 2007:91).

If there is information and consultation agreement in place between the employer and the workers, the duty of management to notify and consult workers or union representatives on changes made in the workplace still remains. By so doing, the management of an organisation will have to inform

and consult the union regarding any proposed redundancies with the employees' organisation or the union to resolve matters of dispute (BIS Acas, 2010).

## 6 Conclusion

Theories and techniques required to promote employment relations effectively are based on the pluralist perspective (Bressers & Ringeling, 1995; Gani, 1996; Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008; Bendix, 2010). Nel and Holtzhausen (2008:7) view that the pluralist perspective recognises the mutual work relations between the unions and the employers' organisations. Unions and employers' organisations are a blend of the pluralist perspective. The involvement of labour union to engage with management in representing their members and to stand for their rights is primarily meant to resolve the possible differences between employers and employees (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2005).

Based on the above aspects, one may concur with Nel *et al.* (1998), that conflict exists in the workplace and in various organisations. However, pluralist perspective within an organisation encourages mutual benefit derived from a relationship developed between the employer and the employees' organisation in order to negotiate and accept conflict as natural. Pluralist perspective in essence, promotes employment relations within the organisation as regulated by legislation in democratic principles.

According to Nel *et al.* (1998:146), the issue that may lead to conflict between management and unionised workers could vary. Some degree of conflict is inherent in every union-management relationship. This ranges from differences in goals and value systems, to methods used to reach the goals. The bargaining process, irrespective of the overall relationship between an organisation and the labour union, will inevitably generate conflict, because the parties have different desires and expectations with regard to the final solution. It is generally conceded that the workers most likely to be susceptible to union-organised appeals are those who are dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction may relate to income, unfair treatment, etc. There are a number of problems which characteristically arise and contribute to union-management conflict, namely misconception and differences in personalities, background and motives of the management and union negotiators (Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008:179).

Due to the diverse labour, social and political issues which unions find themselves engaging in, their characters and roles as workers' representatives align them much broader into the political fraternity and social challenge. They also take into account their organisational strength which is primarily their membership which is politically or socially inclined too. Thus, unions in some countries are closely aligned with political parties as this is the case with COSATU and the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) aligned to United Workers' Union of South

Africa (UWUSA) (African History Newsletter; 2011:1-3). Significance of the unions or workers' organisations is noticeable and could be better described based on their memberships' representation and what they strive for. As an organisation with membership oversee, they have a stronghold and organised structures with well-defined responsibilities of their leadership and protocols. Union leadership in the workforce takes the lead in campaigning for the union alongside confronting management. This work relation forms major part of employment relations and is grounded on pluralist perspective.

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