

New Trade Unions of New Uzbekistan on The Path to Social Partnership

Kamolov Ilhomjon Ibrohimovich

Chief specialist for organizational affairs of the Republican Council of the Trade Union of Metallurgical and Mechanical Engineering Industries of Uzbekistan, Independent researcher at the National University of Uzbekistan

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*Correspondence: Kamolov Ilhomjon Ibrohimovich

Email: icamolove@yandex.com

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Abstract: In today's world, where the processes of globalization and modernization are rapidly unfolding in social, economic, and spiritual spheres, this article briefly highlights the activities of the new trade unions of New Uzbekistan in ensuring social guarantees and social protection for workers through social partnership. This includes cooperation with employers, the development and implementation of measures aimed at the social protection of people engaged in non-standard forms of employment (such as those working in the informal sector, temporary and seasonal workers, etc.) and their family members, and the provision of targeted assistance to pensioners, people with disabilities, minors, elderly individuals living alone, and women in need of high-level social protection by including them in the "Ayollar daftari" (Women's Register). It also reflects the role of trade unions in implementing democratic changes in all spheres of society and state life. The article concludes by discussing the prospects for trade unions in contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Trade Union, Social Protection, Social Partnership, Collective Agreement, State, "Ayollar Daftari" (Women's Notebook), Women

Introduction

The Republic of Uzbekistan is currently undergoing a period of significant transformation, marked by extensive reforms across various sectors, including labor relations and social protection. In this context, the role of trade unions is becoming increasingly vital.

This paper explores the emergence of "New Trade Unions" in Uzbekistan and their evolving role in fostering social partnership. By examining the legal and institutional framework, as well as the practical initiatives undertaken by these unions, this study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities they face in contributing to a more equitable and prosperous society.

Understanding the dynamics of trade unions in modern Uzbekistan is crucial for policymakers, labor activists, and international observers seeking to promote effective social dialogue and sustainable development.

Methodology

The tasks and duties of Uzbekistan's trade unions in the field of social protection are defined in the programmatic documents of the sectoral trade unions and the Federation. According to these documents, the activities of trade unions in the field of social guarantees and protection for workers are aimed at:

- supporting the implementation of measures envisaged in legislation to protect and support vulnerable segments of the population;
- cooperating with state bodies and employers in carrying out systemic measures to support the elderly living alone, pensioners, people with disabilities, children with special needs, low-income and large families;
- developing and implementing measures aimed at the social protection of individuals engaged in non-standard employment (informal sector workers, temporary and seasonal employees, etc.) and their families;
- ensuring the social protection of other categories of citizens in need, such as pensioners, people with disabilities, minors, and the elderly living alone;
- developing and widely applying the concepts of "Corporate Social Responsibility" and "Socially Responsible Enterprise."

In the process of fulfilling these tasks, measures are taken to provide material support to low-income families, large families, pensioners, war and labor veterans through collective agreements and contracts.

It is known that under a market economy, the protective role of trade unions is mainly realized in areas such as employment, labor safety, income growth, legal and social protection. Today, this mission can only be achieved through the use of social partnership mechanisms. In general, the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan participates in social protection in two main directions: through collective agreements at enterprises and organizations to protect workers and their families, and through participation in state programs aimed at social protection of the population.

In the first direction, ongoing monitoring is carried out on the provision of social assistance through collective agreements to low-income families, pension-aged workers, people with disabilities, working women, and youth. In particular, during the 9 months of 2023, 117 billion 439 million soums worth of social assistance was provided to 173,040 citizens and 48,722 families from funds of employers and trade unions through collective agreements and contracts.

The significance of the second direction-social cooperation-became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under quarantine restrictions, trade unions in Uzbekistan provided support to nearly 50,000 low-income families.

Today, it is widely recognized that the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan is actively working with the Ministry for the Support of Families and Neighborhoods and several other partner organizations on the implementation of the "Ayollar daftari"

("Women's Notebook") program. Through this system, an entirely new approach to addressing women's issues was introduced.

Mobilizing its resources, the trade unions played a vital role in identifying and solving women's problems, acting as a genuine people's organization. Based on extensive studies and consultations, by the end of 2023, over 900,000 socially vulnerable women were included in the "Ayollar daftari" ("Women's Notebook") and received targeted support. This was not an easy task, but it contributed significantly to alleviating a serious social issue in society.

Result and Discussion

Currently, the Federation places strong emphasis on the development of primary trade union organizations, which are key elements in every enterprise and institution. These organizations play a decisive role in creating a healthy work environment, fostering team spirit, and providing social support to employees. Special attention is being given to private sector enterprises, given the growing share of small businesses and private entrepreneurship in the national economy.

Thanks to improved benefits of union membership and systemic reforms, today 95.8% of legal entities employing union members are covered by collective agreements. These agreements clearly address the development of the labor market, employment issues, and ensure extended paid leave and regulated working hours.

Over the past two years, collective agreements have become one of the main tools for improving workers' living standards. In many sectors, these agreements serve as effective mechanisms for increasing both direct and indirect employee incomes. In addition, monthly "Spirituality Hours" are organized in labor collectives by primary organizations to explain the priorities of state policy, reforms, legislation, and government programs-implemented through collective agreements.

In the first quarter of 2024 alone, nearly 26,000 primary trade union organizations across all regions held "Ma'naviyat soatlari" ("Spirituality Hours"), involving approximately 3 million workers. A public opinion survey conducted by the "Ijtimoiy Fikr" Center showed that nearly 80% of respondents were aware of collective agreements in their workplace, indicating growing awareness and influence of trade unions in the agreement process.

Among recent initiatives by the Federation:

- Over 111,000 collective agreements were formalized, increasing social support spending per worker fivefold;
- A 200-bed modern children's camp "Sokh" was opened in a remote district, and several modern camps were built across the country. During the season, 1,000 children from "Sokh" enjoyed a holiday at the camp. Modern children's health camps were established in the Muynak district of Karakalpakstan: "Aq kema", in the Jizzakh region: "Zomin", in the Tashkent region: "Anor", in the Kashkadarya region: "Ziyo chashmalari".

- Delegates participated in a U.S.-based international conference hosted by the American Camp Association, resulting in a memorandum of cooperation;

In the Parkent district of Tashkent region, the “Zarkent” sanatorium, specializing in the treatment of respiratory and nervous system diseases, with a capacity of 200 beds, was built and put into operation. 60 new jobs were created in the sanatorium. Also, new sanatoriums such as “Yangiyer”, “Kohinur”, “Khojaipok”, “Chinobod Plaza”, “Ibn Sino”, “Sevarsoy”, “Sangardak” and “Khonka”, additional buildings were built and put into operation in the sanatoriums “Termez Marvaridi”, “Aqtosh”, “Chimyon”, “Zomin”, “Turon”, “Umid Gulshani”, “Chortoq” and “Omonkhona”. This allowed not only to significantly improve the quality of health care, but also to create 1,227 new stable jobs;

- Over 143,000 employees and their families received health and wellness services;
- 237,000 employees and family members took cultural and historical tours across Uzbekistan;
- Youth contests and essay competitions were organized nationwide;
- Workplace safety was inspected at 932 organizations, correcting over 5,000 violations and restoring the rights of more than 5,400 workers;
- Nearly 5 million women’s issues were resolved through the “Women’s Notebook” initiative, with over 128,000 calls to the 24/7 trust hotline, 99.1% of which were legally addressed;
- 924 cooperative employment projects were launched based on local entrepreneurial models, employing over 100,000 people, including more than 72,000 women;
- Annual sports competitions like “Healthy Family” and “Sport is the Key to Health” were institutionalized;

The Trade Unions’ Academy of Labor and Social Relations was established, offering training in labor protection, HR management, social work, psychology, and labor law. That all, drawing from both national characteristics and international experience, significant reforms have been introduced. Trade unions have become a vital civic institution in Uzbekistan’s socio-political system-structured from top to bottom-and now play a key role in eliminating negative factors, solving workplace issues, and developing the social sector through voluntary partnership and equality with government bodies.

Discussion.

Uzbekistan's ambitious reform agenda, often encapsulated under the banner of "New Uzbekistan," has placed a renewed focus on social and economic development. Central to this vision is the concept of social partnership: a collaborative framework involving the government, employers, and trade unions to address labor-related issues and promote a more equitable society. This analytical text delves into the complexities of this transformation, scrutinizing the evolving role of trade unions and the challenges they face in becoming effective partners in this tripartite framework.

Historically, trade unions in Uzbekistan, like those in many post-Soviet states, were closely aligned with the state, often functioning more as extensions of the government rather

than independent advocates for workers' rights. This legacy has created a trust deficit and has hampered the ability of trade unions to effectively represent their members' interests.

The "New Uzbekistan" era has witnessed significant legislative reforms aimed at empowering trade unions. Amendments to the Labor Code, efforts to combat forced labor (particularly in the cotton sector), and the ratification of key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions are all positive steps. However, the true impact of these reforms hinges on their effective implementation and enforcement. Laws on paper are insufficient without a genuine commitment to upholding them and providing effective recourse for workers whose rights are violated.

One of the key challenges for trade unions is building internal capacity and expertise. Decades of state control have left many trade union leaders lacking the skills and knowledge necessary to negotiate effectively with employers, navigate complex labor laws, and mobilize their members. Capacity-building initiatives, supported by international organizations, are crucial, but they must be tailored to the specific needs of Uzbekistani trade unions and must focus on empowering local leaders and organizers.

Another critical area is reaching out to and representing workers in the informal sector, which constitutes a significant portion of Uzbekistan's labor force. These workers often lack the protections and benefits afforded to those in formal employment and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Traditional trade union models may not be suitable for organizing and representing informal sector workers, necessitating innovative approaches and a willingness to adapt to the unique challenges they face.

The development of genuine social partnership mechanisms is essential for fostering constructive dialogue and addressing labor-related issues. Tripartite commissions and collective bargaining agreements can be valuable tools, but they must be structured in a way that ensures that trade unions have a meaningful voice and that their concerns are taken seriously. The government must create an environment where trade unions are treated as equal partners, not merely as symbolic participants.

Ultimately, the success of trade unions in "New Uzbekistan" will depend on their ability to build trust with their members, demonstrate their value in improving working conditions, and effectively advocate for policies that promote inclusive growth and social justice. This requires a shift in mindset, both within trade unions and among employers and government officials, towards a recognition that strong and independent trade unions are essential for a stable and prosperous society.

The road to genuine social partnership is undoubtedly long and complex, but by addressing these challenges and embracing a vision of collaboration and mutual respect, Uzbekistan can create a labor environment that benefits all its citizens and contributes to the country's continued progress and development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's "New Uzbekistan" reform agenda presents a pivotal opportunity for trade unions to redefine their role as champions of workers' rights and active participants in social dialogue. While challenges remain in overcoming historical legacies and building capacity, the commitment to labor reforms and the increasing emphasis on social partnership provide a promising foundation for the future. As trade unions continue to strengthen their independence, enhance their expertise, and engage constructively with the government and employers, they can play a vital role in shaping a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous Uzbekistan for all its citizens.

The emergence of "New Uzbekistan" demands a revitalized and empowered trade union movement capable of driving meaningful change in the lives of working people. To fully realize the promise of social partnership, it is imperative that the government, employers, and international organizations provide unwavering support to Uzbekistani trade unions. By investing in their capacity, respecting their independence, and fostering a culture of open dialogue, Uzbekistan can create a labor environment that promotes fairness, prosperity, and social justice for all. The time for decisive action is now, to ensure that trade unions are equipped to play their rightful role in shaping a better future for Uzbekistan.

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