

Development History and Role of The Vietnam Trade Union Organization



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ABSTRACT: Over more than 90 years of formation and development, the Vietnam Trade Union has grown in all aspects and made worthy contributions to the great victories of the revolution, contributing to building the Vietnamese working class into an increasingly powerful force. The trade union organization has been consolidated and developed, with the number of union members and grassroots trade unions growing rapidly, and the cadre team developing both in quantity and quality. The union has expanded its activities to the non-state economic sector; increasingly effective coordination with various levels of government, organizations, and employers has been achieved, better fulfilling its tasks of representing, caring for, and protecting the legitimate and lawful rights and interests of workers, promptly addressing pressing issues, and contributing to the establishment of harmonious, stable, and progressive labor relations in enterprises. This study summarizes the birth circumstances of the Vietnamese working class and the Red Union - the precursor of today's Vietnam General Confederation of Labor; the role of the Vietnam Trade Union in the revolutionary process; and the urgent task for society to enhance the role of the trade union organization.

KEYWORDS: Development history, Red Union, Vietnam General Confederation of Labor

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 19th century, after conquering Vietnam, the French colonists implemented a colonial exploitation policy, building many factories and enterprises focusing on industries such as railways, mines, and factories. During this period, the Vietnamese working class formed and developed in increasing numbers. Under the oppression and exploitation of the French colonists, the working class united to form organizations. These trade unions and guilds fought to protect their rights nationwide. The establishment and vigorous development of red unions across the country significantly impacted the labor movement during this period, transforming spontaneous struggles into conscious ones. This laid an important foundation for the great victories of the Vietnamese revolution. Continuing and promoting the fine tradition of the early Red Trade Union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor has grown stronger, playing an important role in promoting the development of the working class in both quantity and quality.

CONTENT

Overview of the Emergence of the Vietnamese Working Class and the Red Trade Union - The Predecessor of the Current Vietnam General Confederation of Labor

The Vietnamese working class first emerged during the French colonial exploitation phase, specifically during the first colonial exploitation (from 1897 to 1914) and the second colonial exploitation (1919-1929). Since then, the Vietnamese working class has continuously increased in both quantity and quality as more factories, enterprises, and mines were built to serve the colonial exploitation policy and resource plundering of the French colonists. In cities, many factories with over 1,000 workers became increasingly common, such as the Nam Dinh Textile Factory and the Hai Phong Cement Factory. By the end of 1929, the total number of workers in the industrial establishments of French capitalists had exceeded 220,000 people. Although the Vietnamese working class was still weak and small compared to the global working class and other social classes in Vietnam, they deeply inherited the patriotic tradition of the nation. From their inception, they had conducted various struggles against the French capitalist domination and exploitation policies. From 1925, as Marxism-Leninism was propagated into Vietnam, the workers' strikes increased, becoming more political and organized. From their birth, the Vietnamese working class, along with the Vietnamese laboring people, endured brutal exploitation by colonialism and a corrupt feudal regime. Therefore, many workers' movements against colonialism and feudalism erupted everywhere. Although strong in the early stages, these struggles were still spontaneous, scattered, and lacked a tight organization, suitable revolutionary methods, and the role of a revolutionary vanguard

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organization. Most of the early movements focused on demanding economic rights, such as higher wages, shorter working hours, and an end to beatings, mainly through methods like slowdowns and protests. They lacked a tight organization and did not have clearly defined tasks and objectives. However, since the establishment of the Communist International founded by Lenin in March 1919, and especially the International Red Trade Union—the first organization of the global working class—a large number of workers were drawn into the struggle against the capitalist class, creating a widespread movement among the working class worldwide. This significantly impacted the struggle movement of the Vietnamese working class. Many workers' strikes witnessed profound changes in class and international characteristics. Examples include the strike of the seamen on the Saclo ship in Hai Phong (late 1919) and the strike of the seamen on eight ships of the French maritime company (March 1920).

The struggle movements of the working class continuously increased not only in quantity but, more importantly, in quality. The working class did not stop at economic struggles but increasingly demonstrated political characteristics, shifting from spontaneous struggles to organized ones. The emergence of mutual aid societies, associations, and guilds within factories, enterprises, and areas clearly reflected the shift in the working class's awareness in their struggle against oppression and exploitation. Among these, the most distinctive organization, which clearly manifested the revolutionary nature of the proletarian movement, was the Ba Son Union organized and led by comrade Tôn Đức Thắng. With correct methods of operation and objectives, the Ba Son Union attracted a large number of workers to participate. After its establishment, the Ba Son Union organized many anti-oppression struggles, notably the strike of over 1,000 Ba Son workers in August 1925, which thwarted the French colonialists' plot to use warships to intervene and suppress the Chinese people's revolutionary movement. By 1926, the Ba Son Union had disbanded for various reasons, but its establishment had a significant impact on the workers' struggle movement in Saigon-Chợ Lớn and left many valuable lessons for the workers' movement and the Red Union organization in Vietnam later on. The strong development of the workers' movement and the patriotic movement from 1925 to 1929 was a decisive condition for the emergence of Communist organizations and Red Unions in Vietnam, especially the establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam in early 1930. This was the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, leading the revolution along the proletarian revolutionary path. Ho Chi Minh, in evaluating the role of different classes and strata, affirmed: *"The revolutionary nature of the working class is: determined, thorough, collective, organized, and disciplined. Moreover, as the most advanced class in productive forces, bearing the responsibility to overthrow the capitalist and imperialist regimes to build a new society, the working class can deeply imbue the most revolutionary ideology, which is Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, their fighting spirit influences and educates other strata"* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011, vol.8, p. 256).

In Northern Vietnam, the formation of the Red Union is closely linked to the activities of leader Nguyễn Ái Quốc. After Marxism-Leninism was propagated into Vietnam, especially with the establishment of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association and the implementation of the extensive proletarian movement, the working class underwent profound changes, which in turn demanded an organization for the working class. Arising from the practical needs of the revolution, the Provisional Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party decided to convene a congress to establish the Northern Red General Union on July 28, 1929. The congress approved the Program and Statutes and established the Labor Newspaper as well as the Red Union Magazine as their official organs. Immediately after its establishment, the Northern Red General Union aimed to include all Red Union bases in Southern and Central Vietnam, while quickly expanding its influence nationwide. It is evident that the Northern Red General Union, shortly after its inception, took on the role and responsibility of the Vietnamese trade union organization nationwide. Therefore, the day of the establishment of the Northern Red General Union (July 28, 1929) is also considered the founding day of the present-day Vietnam General Confederation of Labor.

The Role of the Vietnam Trade Union Organization in the Revolutionary Process

The establishment of the Northern Red General Union and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor in general holds great significance in the history of the formation and development of the Vietnamese working class. It was the inevitable result of the workers' struggle movement and the success of the widespread "proletarianization" movement across the country. Despite colonial repression, the Vietnamese working class maintained its revolutionary spirit, and the Red Union continued to actively propagate, mobilize, and organize workers to continuously fight against oppression and exploitation. They led workers to unite with the laboring people, engaging in vibrant and continuous revolutionary struggles to achieve national independence. The beginning of this heroic struggle period was marked by the revolutionary surge of 1930-1931, with the first actions taken by workers at the Truong Thi locomotive factory, the sawmill, and the Ben Thuy match factory (in Vinh city - Nghe An) on May 1, 1930. This led to the establishment of the Soviets in Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces. Alongside the struggle movement of the working class in mines, factories, and enterprises, many peasant struggles also took place in various locations, involving demands such as the redistribution of communal land, reclaiming amounts lost to corrupt village officials, and more prominently from International Labor Day on May 1. The success of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets marked a turning point in the revolutionary surge of 1930-1931, where the Communist Party and the working class asserted their leadership role and position. Moreover, the close cooperation in revolutionary struggle between the working class and the peasantry underscored the critical role of the worker-peasant alliance in mobilizing revolutionary forces to fight against imperialism and feudalism in Vietnam. This was the first time the working class

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effectively implemented a broad class alliance to achieve common goals with other classes and strata. However, by the end of 1931, the struggle movement was brutally suppressed, with most Party and Red Union officials captured by the enemy, severing the connection between the Party and the masses, and between the Red Union and the workers' movement. Additionally, the severe and prolonged economic crisis left 80,000 people unemployed, and workers' wages were continuously cut, with capitalists fully exploiting workers. The oppressive, terrorist, and exploitative policies of the French colonialists left the working class bearing the heaviest consequences. Yet, with their revolutionary zeal and the persistent efforts of the pioneering revolutionary Party, Vietnamese workers continued their struggle and gradually recovered by 1932.

From 1936 to 1939, the Vietnamese Workers' Movement Underwent Major Changes. The rise of fascism worldwide required nations fighting for independence to shift their focus to anti-fascist struggles, aiming for peace, democracy, and socialism. In response, the Central Executive Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party decided to raise the banner of the struggle for livelihood, democracy, food, and peace under the guidance of the Communist International. To best achieve these goals, the Red Union organization was renamed the Mutual Aid Association, transitioning to a semi-public phase of operation, implementing measures to demand union freedom and the realization of livelihood and democratic rights. The Mutual Aid Association aimed to include all workers, provided they accepted the union's operating regulations. Many flexible organizational forms for workers were established to adapt to the new circumstances, such as Mutual Aid Associations, Mutual Help Societies, and Trade Associations. From 1936 to 1939, the Mutual Aid Association directly led the struggle movement of the Vietnamese working class, expanding the public nature of the union organization. During this period, Marxism-Leninism was openly propagated among workers and laborers, providing direct political education to millions of people, creating a revolutionary surge within the Vietnamese revolution.

While the Vietnamese revolutionary movement was gradually recovering and growing stronger, World War II broke out on September 1, 1939. The French colonial authorities began fascistizing the ruling apparatus, abolishing almost all the achievements of the democratic livelihood movement. On September 28, 1939, the French colonialists issued a decree to dissolve the Mutual Aid Associations and arrested over 2,000 members. On November 10, 1939, the Governor-General of Indochina issued a decree increasing working hours to 60 hours per week for male workers and 54 hours per week for female workers and children. Despite the difficult situation due to the suppression of freedoms, workers' strikes still broke out. At the end of 1940, the Japanese army entered Indochina, and the revolutionary situation took a new turn. The 8th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (May 1941) decided to establish the "Vietnam Independence League" (abbreviated as Viet Minh); the "Anti-Imperialist Workers' Association" was renamed the "National Salvation Workers' Association." Under the leadership of the Party, with suitable organizational forms and clear struggle goals, the National Salvation Workers' movement developed strongly in Northern and Central Vietnam, especially in Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Hon Gai. By 1945, the National Salvation Workers' Association had led the struggle to break into Japanese rice warehouses in Bac Ninh and Hanoi and distribute the rice to the poor. In August 1945, under the leadership of the Party, the working class, along with the people across the country, overthrew the Japanese fascists and the feudal government, won national independence, and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the first workers' and peasants' state in Southeast Asia.

After the successful August Revolution, the revolutionary cause of the Vietnamese people entered a new phase. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established, and the working class of Vietnam, through its vanguard party, the Communist Party, became the masters of the country and embarked on the new task of safeguarding the newly won independence and building socialism. In response to the new demands and tasks of the revolution, on June 20, 1946, the National Salvation Workers' Congress decided to change the name "National Salvation Workers' Union" to "Trade Union" and establish the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, with Comrade Tran Danh Tuyen as its General Secretary. Under the leadership of the Party, the Trade Union of Vietnam gathered and united workers nationwide along with the entire people to struggle to build and protect the people's government, defend national independence, and protect the rights and interests of workers. In the process of fighting against French colonialism and American intervention, the Trade Union was closely linked to the tasks of production and stabilizing the lives of workers. By 1950, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor had 241,720 members, with 194,000 members in the liberated areas.

The resistance war against French colonialism achieved complete victory with the triumph at Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva Accords in July 1954. The North was completely liberated and swiftly began the task of economic reconstruction, creating the necessary conditions for the transition to socialism in the North.

From 1954 to 1975, the Vietnamese working class actively built socialism in the North to become a solid rear base for the people of the South to fight against and defeat the United States. At the same time, they fought alongside the people of the South with steadfastness and resilience to resist the American imperialist invasion. Whether carrying out tasks in production or on the battlefield, the working class excellently fulfilled its duties. Despite the different tasks in the two regions, thanks to the effective role of organization, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor promoted the labor movement in the South vigorously and extensively, with diverse and impactful forms, contributing significantly to the overall struggle of the Southern people. Through the revolutionary struggle, the workforce in the South became increasingly trained and mature. On the production front in the

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North, the pace of work in factories, plants, and enterprises became more dynamic and robust. The new advancements in the labor movement in the first five-year plan contributed significantly to significant transformations in the industry of the North.

To provide a legal basis for trade union activities, on November 5th, 1957, the President issued Decree No. 108-SL/L10, promulgating the Trade Union Law. This event marked a significant turning point in the restructuring of organizations and the enhancement of the position of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor. In addition, to further improve the organization and effectiveness of the trade union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor intensified its foreign activities to exchange experiences across various fields with trade union organizations worldwide, especially those of socialist countries. Through international activities, friendly relations, understanding, and mutual assistance between the Vietnamese working class and the global working class were strengthened, creating conditions for our people to carry out the socialist revolution in the North and struggle for national unity.

From February 23rd to 27th, 1961, the 2nd Congress of the Vietnam Confederation of Labor was held in Hanoi. The congress decided to change the name of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor to the Vietnam Confederation of Labor. Comrade Hoang Quoc Viet, a member of the Party Central Committee, was re-elected as the Chairman of the Vietnam Confederation of Labor, and Comrade Tran Danh Tuyen was re-elected as the General Secretary. During this period, the Vietnam Confederation of Labor actively and promptly set forth goals, contents, and measures to promote production, address urgent issues in people's lives, and be ready to fight against the destructive war of the American imperialists in the North. In the South, despite facing heavy oppression and numerous sacrifices, the workers and people of the South overcame the intense terrorism of the enemy; maintained and developed the struggle, contributing to the defeat of every enemy plan to achieve the great victory of the spring offensive in 1975. This victory completely ended the struggle for national liberation of our people and ushered in a new era - the era of building socialism nationwide.

After the reunification of the country, the trade unions of the North and South merged to form the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor. Since then, the trade union organization has continuously grown stronger, and the working class has increasingly asserted its position and role throughout the revolutionary process from its inception to the present day. In 1986, during the comprehensive renovation of the country, the working class and trade union organizations also made significant contributions to the success of the renovation, thus creating a new face for the country and the Vietnamese people. A major event marking the remarkable development of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor was the 6th Congress of the Vietnam Confederation of Labor in October 1988, with the slogan "Employment, Living Standards, Democracy, and Social Justice." The Congress innovated in organization and activities to encourage workers nationwide to strive for the successful implementation of the Party's renovation policy. The Congress also decided to change the name of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor to the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor. In the current period, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor continues to strengthen organizational development, enhance the quality of its staff, improve its operating methods, and diversify forms of mobilization and enhance social activities to rally and encourage workers from all economic sectors. Renewal of the content and methods of operation of trade unions at all levels, especially grassroots trade unions, towards "focusing on the grassroots for the legitimate rights and interests of members and workers for the sustainable development of the country" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011, p. 240-241) is also emphasized.

Leveraging the role of trade union organizations is a pressing task for the entire society

In the current revolutionary period, we continue to uphold the viewpoint that the working class is the leading class of the revolution through its vanguard, the Communist Party of Vietnam; it represents the advanced, modern mode of production; it is at the forefront of the socialist construction; and it is the backbone force in the alliance of the working class with the peasantry and the intellectual class under the leadership of the Party. The strength of the working class is a prerequisite for the success of the renewal, industrialization, and modernization of the country. Therefore, building a strong working class in our country during the period of promoting industrialization and modernization is an important and urgent task for the Party, the State, the entire political system, every worker, and the whole society, in which trade union organizations play a significant role and responsibility. Therefore, to maximize effectiveness, it is necessary to focus on the following basic issues:

Firstly, to build and perfect the system of mechanisms, policies, and laws to create an attractive investment environment to attract both domestic and foreign investment, facilitating the restructuring of industries and labor towards industrialization to increase the number of the working class.

Secondly, valuing and developing the training and retraining system for workers. With the development of the knowledge economy today, it is necessary to thoroughly grasp the theoretical and practical standpoint that education and training are top national policies, implement the socialization of education, build a learning society, and consider education as the nation's endeavor. Intellectualization of the working class is an objective trend in building a modern Vietnamese working class. Workers must first enhance their educational level and professional skills, study scientific and technological knowledge, advance their political awareness, class consciousness, and industrial demeanor.

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Thirdly, building clean, robust, and effective trade union organizations to ensure legitimate interests for workers. Continuously innovating, improving the quality of organization, methods, and effectiveness of trade union activities to be suitable for new situations and requirements, adapting to the current reality of our country's ongoing renovation and multi-sectoral economic development, industrialization, modernization, and proactive and positive international integration. The trade union is the organization of workers, by workers, and for workers, based on the legitimate needs of the collective of workers, civil servants, and laborers as its operating foundation; with the representation, care, and protection of the rights and interests of workers, civil servants, and laborers as its activity objective, emphasizing collective dialogue, negotiation, and building harmonious, stable, and progressive labor relations. Focusing on building a professional, competent, intellectual, dedicated, and responsible trade union cadre team, steadfast in the face of all difficulties and challenges.

Fourthly, the development of the working class determines the development of the country, thus Party committees, Party organizations, authorities, the Fatherland Front, and political-social organizations at all levels need to deeply grasp, enhance awareness, and responsibility for caring, nurturing, educating, and promoting the role and potential of the Vietnamese working class. Building a strong working class is the responsibility of the entire political system, society as a whole, and the self-assertion effort of each worker, the active contribution of employers; in which the leadership of the Party and the management of the State play a decisive role, and the trade unions have a direct and important role in caring for the building of the working class. The state is concerned with amending and supplementing policies and laws on wages, social insurance, health insurance, unemployment insurance, etc., to ensure the rights and improve the lives of workers and laborers. Building a strong working class must be closely linked to building a clean, politically robust Party, organizationally and ethically, building trade union organizations, and Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union within the strong working class.

Fifthly, promptly, and accurately grasping the legitimate thoughts and aspirations of workers to devise effective solutions for resolving disputes and differences between the working class and employers, while continuously building a healthy environment to nurture the spiritual development of the working class. This is also a crucial prerequisite for enhancing labor productivity and production efficiency.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the working class has played a pivotal role in leading the revolution through its vanguard, the Communist Party of Vietnam. This leadership has been crucial in shaping the political and social landscape of the country, guiding it through numerous challenges and towards significant victories. In the contemporary context, the Vietnamese working class is tasked with upholding its revolutionary nature, embodying a pioneering spirit, and maintaining its core role in societal advancement. This involves not only contributing to economic growth and development but also actively participating in the political and social spheres to ensure the continued progress of the nation. The working class must also promote and preserve the rich nationalistic traditions of patriotism, unity, and creativity that have defined Vietnam throughout its history. These traditions have been instrumental in fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose, enabling the country to overcome adversities and achieve remarkable feats. By embracing these values, the working class can continue to inspire and lead the broader population in efforts to sustain and build upon the revolutionary achievements that have been hard-won over the decades. Furthermore, the collaboration between the working class, the Communist Party, the army, and the people is essential in driving forward the nation's goals. This unified effort is necessary to uphold and promote the revolutionary accomplishments, ensuring they are not only preserved but also built upon. The shared commitment to the vision of a prosperous and mighty Vietnam is a testament to the enduring spirit of solidarity and resilience that characterizes the Vietnamese people. Together, they can work towards the dual objectives of national development and protection, creating a future that honors their past sacrifices and paves the way for continued success and stability for generations to come.

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