

UDD Book Discussion by Dr. Samuel Andreas Admasie



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Celebrating the 34th National Day of Ethiopia in the month of May*

Team UDD
(University Diplomatic Dialogue)

invites you to an insightful

Book Discussion

on

**“The Ethiopian Labour
Movement: Trade Unions,
Collective Action, and
Contestation, 1960–2020”**

by

Dr. Samuel Andreas Admasie
Regional specialist for Africa at the International
Institute of Social History, The Netherlands,
and an
Affiliate researcher at the Labour Movement's
Archives and Library.



MAY 30, 2025
**AT 01:30–02:30 PM IST/
(10:00–11:00) AM CET**



Google Meet



Prof. (Dr.) A. S. Yaruigam, Head
Department of African Studies, University of Delhi

*Ethiopia is the only African country that successfully fended off colonial rule. It celebrates every May 28 as its National Day. This year marks the 34th anniversary of the day, which started in 1991. The day is a commemoration of the fall of the regime of its dictatorial Derg group. The Derg, or Dergue, is the short name of the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 till 1991. The day was previously referred to as the Downfall of the Derg day. Derg came to power in 1974 after ousting Haile Selassie, the last Ethiopian Emperor. The Emperor had ruled between 1930 till 1974 when he was ousted; the kingdom was officially dismissed in May 1975, and the emperor died three months later.

Dr. Samuel started with explaining that the book aims to fill a major gap in the literature on the Ethiopian labour movement, the largest civil society movement in Ethiopia. It also seeks to contribute to social science by examining labour movements as organizational constellations and sets of practices, drawing inspiration from Beverly Silver's work. He noted that existing literature tends to treat the Ethiopian labour movement as schematically docile and state-controlled. However, their research reveals repeated cycles of mobilization and militancy alongside periods of repression, with a feedback loop between mobilization and achievements. Samuel outlined the historical cycles of the Ethiopian labour movement, starting with the emergence of labour unrest in the 1960s leading to the legalization of trade unions. This was followed by repression, a period of growth with increasing militancy, and a significant strike wave in the early 1970s preceding the Ethiopian revolution. He also discussed the labour movement's role in the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, highlighting the general strike and the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions becoming a center of mobilization. The book challenges the notion that the labour movement's radicalization was solely a product of the revolution or leftist infiltration, emphasizing the longer history of radicalization and the continuity of seasoned trade unionists.

Samuel further described the repression of the labour movement after the revolution, the era of state-controlled "yellow unionism," and the subsequent attempts to create an independent trade union movement in the Federal Republic era. Two waves of autonomous trade unionism were noted, with the latter in the mid-2010s showing more success, evidenced by a strike wave and victories such as the repulsion of an unfavourable labour bill and the allowance of unionization in industrial parks. He also examined the impact of international trade union organizations, particularly the African-American Labor Center (AALC) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), on the Ethiopian labour movement. While providing financial and organizational support, these organizations also sought to control the movement's autonomy, leading to tensions and their eventual expulsion.

Samuel shifted focus to the militant practices of the labour movement, specifically strikes and unrest, and their impact on labour conditions and wages. His forthcoming book identifies cyclical patterns of unrest and connects them to the movement of real wages, noting a significant wage hike in the first cycle followed by a collapse after repression. He concluded that the book rejects static depictions of the Ethiopian labour movement, presenting it instead as cyclical with periods of mobilization and militancy leading to tangible results in terms of conditions, power, and wages. Autonomy of trade union confederations also increased with mobilization and membership.

Dr. Samuel also briefly discussed the archival cooperation program of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Africa, highlighting its importance for preserving and digitizing labour archives. This program aims to provide an underrepresented perspective on history from the viewpoint of labour and to challenge theories primarily based on evidence from the global north. He highlighted the impact of the IISH's work by showing the transformation of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions archive from a disorganized state to a well-kept and digitally accessible resource. Similar efforts are underway with other labour archives in Africa, promising to ease research for future scholars.

In response to a question from Drishya (MA scholar), Samuel discussed the evolution of labour activist tactics, noting a decrease in violence compared to the 1960s and 1970s. They highlighted the adaptation of tactics in the globalized textile sector, including leveraging international pressure, and the persistent re-emergence of clandestine networks when formal structures are repressed.

In response to Dr. Manish (Faculty) observations, Samuel noted the uncertainty surrounding the future of the unorganised sector in Ethiopia due to recent challenges. He also mentioned the growing recognition of the Ethiopian trade union movement, evidenced by the election of its president to the ILO board. The issue of informal labour and the ambition of trade unions to organize excluded sectors like domestic workers were also discussed.

Answering Aman's (MA scholar) question, Samuel explained that the neoliberal economic reforms of the early 1990s had an initial negative impact on the labour movement, including wage decline and repression due to opposition to structural adjustment programs. However, new investments in the 2010s seemed to have reinvigorated the movement, providing focal points for mobilization in foreign enterprises.

Responding to Abhinav's (Moderator) query, Samuel suggested that the Ethiopian diaspora's most significant role in the labour movement is in the organization of domestic workers, particularly those in the Gulf and the Levant, who have formed networks supporting organization efforts in Ethiopia.