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**Examining the Effectiveness of a Trade Union:
Role of union strength and union leadership**

**Mahazril 'Aini Yaacob^{1*}, Nurul Hidayana Mohd Noor¹,
Nor Syamaliah Ngah¹, Mohammad Zulhafiy Zol Bahari²**

** Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

² ASEAN Youth Organisation, Malaysia

mahazril@uitm.edu.my; hidayana@uitm.edu.my; syamaliah@uitm.edu.my; zulhafiy.zol@aseanyouth.net
Tel: 012-4342069

Abstract

This article aims to examine the influencing factors towards the effectiveness of the trade union from the perspectives of public sector union members. The present study used a quantitative research method involving a survey among 114 union members of *Kesatuan Kakitangan Umum, Universiti Teknologi MARA (KKUUiTM)*. The findings revealed two important findings. First, the union members disclosed that their union was effective. Second, union strength and union leadership significantly influence trade union effectiveness. This research will help the union understand its strengths and continuously improve its leadership to maintain its trade union effectiveness and contribute to greater union performance.

Keywords: trade union; effectiveness; union strength; union leadership

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1.0 Introduction

Trade unions refer to an independent organisation consisting of workers to achieve common objectives such as better job benefits and have separate legislation with employers (Hodder & Edwards, 2015). The primary role is to maintain and improve employment conditions, environments and conditions and exercise its rights to achieve employee goals and needs (Majid et al., 2021). Due to the significant role of a trade union, the participation of members in a trade union is essential. If the involvement of members is high, then the union will have high bargaining power in negotiating with management. If the participation of members is low, then the management will be easier to control employees (Toubøl & Jensen, 2014). When the employee who joins a trade union is quite large at the workplace, the union is strong enough because the voice of the trade union is the voice of most of the employees in a company. Unlike other countries, the Malaysian trade union movement faced several challenges, notably neoliberal policies and changing employment structures (Ganesan, 2016).

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Asia has witnessed a declining union density rate compared to countries like Europe, West Asia, and Africa (International Labour Organisation, 2019). In Malaysia, the trade union membership only experienced a slight growth over seven years. Based on the official statistics from the Department of Union Affairs (2019), there are 948,772 union members in Malaysia as of 2019. The number of trade unions rose to 762 in July 2019, signifying a small growth percentage of 9.37 (Department of Trade Union Affairs, 2019).

There has been little research on what makes unions effective in the view of their members (Pirozzi & Bonomi 2021). It is remarkable because, when union membership drops, union density declines, and never-membership rises (Bryson and Gomez, 2002). Unions have a vested interest in developing practical strategies to promote union member recruitment and retention. One approach is to improve employee perceptions of union effectiveness.

However, the question that arises is, with more than 700 trade unions in the country, why are only a small percentage of Malaysian workers joining unions? Was it because employees felt that the union's existence was less effective and committed to protecting their rights? These questions lead to the purpose of this study. Much past research focusing on trade union participation and effectiveness in Malaysia was outdated since most were carried out long ago. The most recent study was conducted by Hamidah and Roshidi (2020) and Mohamad Yusuf et al. (2021), which looked at determinants of trade union participation among Malaysian employees but neglected the evaluation of their effectiveness.

Another research mainly focused on government policies regarding trade unions (Ahmad et al., 2019), employers' and employees' attitudes and perception of union effectiveness (Tarumaraja et al., 2015), trade union growth (Said et al., 2002) and trade union leadership (Loganathan et al., 2022). However, minor studies investigated employees' perceptions of their union effectiveness, especially among employees in the private sector. Hence, this article aims to examine whether the union's effectiveness is much influenced by factors such as union strength and union leadership.

It is vital to know the union's effectiveness from the perspectives of its members, as a country with productive employees can dramatically strengthen a country's competitiveness. It parallels the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG Goal no 8) in promoting decent work and economic growth (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

2.0 Literature Review

Trade union effectiveness has been a topic of interest and study for many years. Scholars and researchers have conducted numerous studies to understand the impact and effectiveness of trade unions in various contexts. The following discussion reviews the trade union's effectiveness and two important variables influencing its effectiveness from the existing studies. Loganathan et al. (2022) in their study claimed that the state of industrial relations and the characteristics of trade unions have a considerable impact on trade union effectiveness. This was described in the findings of Yusop et al. (2020) that union leadership, union effectiveness and union commitment significantly influence trade union membership decisions among civil servants in Malaysia.

According to Bryson and Gome (2002), the trade union's effectiveness is measured by how well it can represent its members by fulfilling their needs and interests. Another study among bank employees postulates that unions' effectiveness in bargaining, organizing, politics and member solidarity are the reasons for members to stay and commit to their unions (Majid et al., 2021). Loganathan et al. (2022) focused on the state of industrial relations and the characteristics of trade unions to measure trade union effectiveness. Bryson (2005), on the other hand, said that trade union effectiveness included both organisational, which is holding members accountable and bargaining effectiveness which is delivering improved work and working conditions. Meanwhile, Ahmad et al. (2019) argue that the union's effectiveness was not only influenced by the leadership of the union but also induced by the labour policy and the leadership of the prime minister.

2.1 Union strength

Union strength can be finalized as one factor influencing the union's effectiveness. According to Bryson (2003), union strength is defined as the unions that have a lot of power in the workplace because they can offer major contributions and the union can disrupt the supply of workers to protect their member's interests. Research conducted by Eden et al. (2017) indicated that union strength is related to the communication that needs to be practised among them regularly. Hence, it is important to create strategies to preserve cooperation more effectively. The findings of their study exposed that the hierarchical regression performed in his study significantly influences the trade union effectiveness. This research found that union strength was the most important contribution to the trade union's effectiveness.

A study by Rüya Gökhan Koçer (2018) emphasized that it is not easy to measure or keep track of the strength of trade unions regarding how much power an affiliated group can use through trade unions to shape social and economic life. As Bryson (2003) noted unions share information more effectively when workers believe they have enough power and employer support. He discovered that strong unions are needed to protect employees' wages and working conditions. A study by Debono (2019) revealed that respondents have an overall positive opinion of trade unions, which carry out important functions in Maltese society. They believed that the union's strength significantly impacts the offering of individual services to their members.

2.2 Union leadership

Apart from union strength, their effectiveness is often argued to be influenced by the union leadership. Researchers have conducted a study and believe that responsive leadership encourages more open democratic processes, which in turn encourages commitment and participation. Findings from a study done among public service in Zambia suggest that organisational strategies, leadership accountability, innovations and administrative and democratic structuring are significant factors that positively influence union effectiveness (Koyi et al., 2021).

In the Malaysian perspective, union leadership is seen as an involvement, a dedication to the cause of empowering workers to make a better living and protecting their rights (Yusop & Hassan, 2020; Ramasamy, 2015). Another study has also shown how important it is for union and management actors to show the right skills and ways to lead (Harrisson et al., 2011; Kochan et al., 2008). They have realised that both union and management leaders need to have certain skills in communication, problem-solving, and conflict-resolution skills when dealing with members and other local actors as part of good leadership. Ganz (2010) claimed that trade union leadership that is open and accountable is also important to keep employees in the organization working together and engaged. These leadership behaviours have seemed to work best in unions where members choose to be involved and where day-to-day interactions at work greatly impact how members see the organisation as also discussed in Loganathan & Ganesan (2022). They discovered, however, that union characteristics appear to have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the union, aside from leadership.

Numerous studies have looked at union behaviours and how they affect members through the lens of leadership. Despite this perspective, it seems that the actions of union leaders count, particularly when it comes to encouraging their members or subordinates to take part in union activities. For example, how members perceive their union leaders seems to have a big effect on the relationship between how effective they think their union is and how responsible they are to it (Debono, 2019; Snape et al., 2000; Tetrick et al., 2007). In another study, similar arguments are made about how union members see the union's effectiveness and working towards goals that are crucial to them (Simpson and Kaminski, 2007).

Few past studies using the transformational leadership theory have found a positive and significant relationship between leadership and members' union commitment and participation (Hennebert et al., 2021). However, more empirical research is needed not only to prove that local union representatives' transformational behaviours are enough but also to figure out how they can make unionised workers more involved (Cregan et al., 2009; Gall & Fiorito, 2012). In the trade union context, researchers found that leaders who show inspirational motivation behaviours help employees gain a strong sense of community and support the union's mission and values (Avolio et al., 1999). Also, leaders who demonstrate good leadership pay special attention to the needs of the group's members and try to get everyone involved and invest their energy in the union (Podsakoff et al., 1990). Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework that highlights the factors influencing trade union effectiveness.

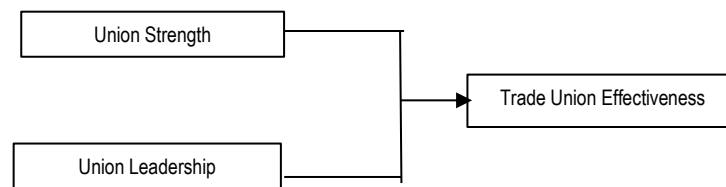


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

3.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional design using the quantitative method was used in this study. The population of this study was *Kesatuan Kakitangan Umum Universiti Teknologi MARA (KKUUiTm)* union members in the Negeri Sembilan which consist of UiTM Seremban, UiTM Kuala Pilah and UiTM Rembau. Following the Krejcie and Morgan Table of 1970, the sample of 114 respondents was defined for data collection (N=162). A set of questionnaires has been developed and distributed to the active union members using random sampling. The researcher contacted the Secretary of the union to help with the distribution of the survey to the targeted respondents. All variables are adapted from an original 27-item scale by Eden et. al. (2017). All dimensions for each variable used the Likert Scale to examine how strongly respondents agree or disagree with statements on a seven-point scale. Examples of some items are "Union is the most useful source of information and guidelines," "Union has control over employee conduct and discipline," "Union has good relationships with other unions," "The management and union usually work together," and "I have no difficulties in contacting the union officials." Before the primary data analysis, data were checked for reliability and normality assumptions. Cronbach's alpha is used to test the internal consistency of measures. A reliability value less than 0.60 is poor, 0.60 to 0.70 is moderate, 0.70 to 0.80 is good, 0.80 to 0.90 is exceptionally good, and 0.90 is excellent (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). To test the normality of the data, Kline (2005) stated that the skewness value should fall within the range of -3 to +3, and the kurtosis value should fall within the range of -10 to +10 to indicate the standard distributions. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Regression were used to establish the relationship between predictor and criterion variables.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile

Of the respondents, 52.5% were female, and the remaining 47.5% were male. Many of the respondents are from the age group of 36 and 39 years (40.8%). Many of them were members of KKUUiTm (86.7%) followed by committee members (9.2%) and President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer (0.8%). Employees who have been KKUUiTm members for less than 2 years had the highest percentage of respondents (33%), followed by those who have been members for less than 6 years (21.7%), 4 years (20%), and more than 8 years (25%). When asked about the reason for joining a trade union, personal protection was ranked as the highest reason

(54.2%). This follows with solidarity (43.3%), betterment of relationship with employer (39.2%), peer pressure (18.3%), and economic conditions (16.7%).

4.2 Normality & Reliability Results

Table 1. Normality and Reliability Results

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Union Strength	-0.152	0.172	0.728
Union Leadership	-1.335	4.035	0.893
Trade Union Effectiveness	-0.845	1.665	0.930

Based on Table 1, skewness values fall within the range of -3 to +3, and the kurtosis values fall within the range of -10 to +10. Thus, the research model is stated to have met the assumption of normality and can be continued with other classical assumption tests. Cronbach's Alpha value for union strength (0.728), union leadership (0.893), union participation and commitment (0.871), union-management relations (0.831), and trade union effectiveness (0.930) are above 0.60, which indicates good reliability.

4.3 Mean result for trade union effectiveness

Table 2 below shows that the mean (M) for the six items in the dependent variable is high indicating 4.93, 4.87, 4.86, 5.13, 5.18 and 5.52 respectively. Therefore, this finding through descriptive analysis from the table above indicated that most of the items influenced the level of trade union effectiveness.

Table 2. Mean Results for the effectiveness of a union

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1)	The union has periodic communication and information sharing with members on its updates.	4.93	1.30
2)	Union conducts periodic polls or surveys to obtain members' opinions.	4.87	1.26
3)	The union does periodic assessments of union performance.	4.86	1.18
4)	Union efficiently handles the constraints imposed by government policies and legislation that hinder union efforts to recruit members.	5.13	1.17
5)	Union effectively refers trade disputes to the Director General of Industrial Relations.	5.18	1.15
6)	I have no difficulties to contact the union officials.	5.52	1.28

*Mean: 1-2 (Low satisfaction), 3 (Moderate), 4-5 (High satisfaction)

4.4 Correlation Results

Table 3. Correlation Results

Variable		Result	Hypotheses
Union Strength	Pearson Correlation	0.544**	H1 accepted
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	
	N	120	
Union Leadership	Pearson Correlation	0.653**	H2 accepted
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	
	N	120	

Table 3 shows a positive relationship between union strength ($r=0.544^{**}$, $p=0.000$), union leadership ($r=0.653^{**}$, $p=0.000$), union participation and commitment ($r=0.722^{**}$, $p=0.000$), and union management relations ($r=0.682^{**}$, $p=0.000$), and trade union effectiveness. Therefore, H1 and H2 were accepted.

4.5 Multiple Regression Results

Table 4. Regression Results

Variable	Beta (β)	Sig. (p)
Union Strength	-0.033	0.713
Union Leadership	0.221	0.022

R ²	0.581
Adjusted R ²	0.566
Sig	0.000

Based on Table 4, regression analysis showed that union strength and union leadership significantly predicted trade union effectiveness with an adjusted R² value of 56.6%. The ANOVA generated in this test also shows a significant probability value ($p=0.000$) and signifies that all the factors significantly affect trade union effectiveness.

5.0 Discussion

The study's objective is to determine whether the union is effective and examine whether union leadership and strength posit significantly towards union effectiveness. Surprisingly, the union members of *KKUU/ITM* disclosed that their union was effective. They agreed that their union can carry out their duties towards its members as also mentioned by Eden et. al. (2017) in their study among Malaysian unions. Moreover, the union members claimed that the union has periodic communication and information sharing with members on its updates since they have a basic media platform to share the latest news such as Facebook and updates about recent activities carried out. The findings are in line with a study conducted by Annuar et al. (2021) found the respondents felt that the union has been able to deliver quite effectively but contradicted with study by Debono (2019) findings revealed that they are less confident about the unions' role in offering individual services to their members. Trade unions act as local pressure groups work, and they need to be seen as capable of influencing any decision made by the employer which involves the interests and welfare of employees (Buyruk, 2021). Trade unions also provide services and training to improve members' living and social standards over time in line with economic progress and development in the country.

The findings also show that the two employed factors significantly influence trade union effectiveness. The main findings also discovered that union leadership and strength are the most significant predictors, as disclosed in previous studies (Koyi et al., 2021; Debono, 2019; Loganathan et al., 2022). Union leadership plays a crucial role in influencing the effectiveness of a labour union. Effective leadership can lead to a well-organised and powerful union that can effectively represent its members' interests and achieve their goals. The finding is consistent with the study by Loganathan et al. (2022) and Ganesan (2016) that union leadership and union commitment did influence the membership of the trade unions (Yusop & Hassan, 2020). Hence, to further strengthen the relationship, the leaders can organise regular meetings with their members to exchange ideas, knowledge, and experience and address their members' concerns.

As practical implications, the union must initiate activities that can improve the organisation of the union since the findings of the study have proven the connection between the leader and union effectiveness. These include sharing information with members, informing the development of the union to the members, facilitating members to meet the union, being accountable to its members, and being knowledgeable about the employment policies and programs. This effort not only increases union effectiveness but also improves positive attitudes of the employer towards trade unions. Next, the government or the relevant agency can play a role in terms of advisory services and education from time to time to the trade union officers to ensure the unity of trade union can be achieved and ensure harmonious industrial relations (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2020).

6.0 Conclusion

This study has painted that the union needs to be effective to encourage more members to join them. It can be done if their union is effective, which can be seen from a combination of factors, including leadership and union strength, which has been proved from the findings of this study. Although this study provides a contribution and important implications for trade union effectiveness studies, the study has some limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the causality linkage between variables. Thus, future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal studies, which could deter variable changes. Second, this study only focused on a limited sample which could limit the generalisation of the finding. Future studies are encouraged to widen the study to other trade unions (public and private sector). Third, this study has employed a survey design approach which could limit the findings. The qualitative approach would prompt more answers and views on the study context. Future studies could employ other methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Lastly, it is recommended that future studies expand on the current research model by including more variables such as mediating or moderating variables, demographic influence, the duration of time the union has existed, and union-related industries like plantations, construction, and services.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The findings of this study, which involved the participants from the union members, filled the gaps of the study in the existing studies, particularly in the field of industrial relations, which are found to be outdated and contributed to the richness of the industrial relations

literature.

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