

Predictors of Union Commitment among the Public Sector Employees

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Abstract: *Based on the dramatic changes taking place such as globalization, technological advancement and change in work structure have in reality exert some pressure on the movement of trade union around the globe. Previously, in the Malaysian context, the government has introduced some major plans. These include The Government Transformation Program (GTP) and Economic Transformation Program (ETP) as the key components of National Transformation Program (NTP). The transformation programs have brought in new changes to employment sector that has lead to drastic changes in public and private sector administration. Despite all the efforts introduced, the landscape of trade union movement remains unchanged in certain aspects. Hence, this study explored factors that may predict members' commitment toward their unions. A survey questionnaire was employed and data was collected from a random sample of 395 members. Based on regression analysis, the results generally showed strong relationship between the factors and union commitment dimensions which resulted in partial acceptance of the hypotheses formulated. Factors like general union beliefs, union satisfaction, and union leadership significantly influenced the value union commitment dimension, while only union instrumentality influenced instrumental union commitment dimension. From the research findings, some implications are discussed. Limitation and suggestions for future research were also highlighted.*

Keywords: union commitment, public, private, sector

1. Introduction

In the Malaysian public sector, there are more than a million employees. At present, there are three distinct groups of employees in the public sector: civil service employees, employees in local authorities such as town councils, and employees in statutory authorities. The separation between the three administrative regions was retained from the colonial past and the Registrar strictly separated employees not only according to federal and state government criteria, but also based on the special 'occupational characteristics' in different ministries (Arusothy & Craig, 1993).

In Malaysia, the principles governing industrial relations in the private sector (such as trade unionism, union recognition, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution) do not apply in the public sector. Consequently, public sector employees unions (unlike those in the private sector) cannot bargain collectively or conclude collective agreements and have only limited access to arbitration and industrial action. In this respect, the right to strike in the public sector is largely illusory, given the inapplicability of parts II to VI of the Industrial Relations Act 1967. In effect, there has been in the public sector labor relations sphere, a shift to a more unitary and paternalistic system of industrial relations where the system is more toward government-dominated (Arusothy & Craig, 1993). At the same time, to ensure success in the transformation programs which include The Government Transformation Program (GTP) and Economic Transformation Program (ETP), the government takes serious effort to listen to grievances or complaints given by the public sector unions particularly forwarded by the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service (CUEPACS) which represent and speaks on behalf of the public sector unions (Durrishah, Parasuraman, & Aminuddin, 2012).

1.1 Problem identification

The Government has also set up few types of machinery for promotion of harmonious working relationship and settlement of disputes. These include the National Joint Councils (NJC) known as Majlis Bersama Kebangsaan (MBK) and the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) known as Majlis Bersama Jabatan (MBJ). Both of the NJCs and JCC are regarded as indirect form of participation (Parasuraman, 2004). The Government has restructured three NJCs covering various groups such as i) NJC for employees in the Managerial and Professional Group; ii) NJC for Science and Technology Employees in the Support Group; iii) NJC for General Employees in the Support Group. However, the NJCs has no power to make decisions regarding terms and conditions of employment. In this context, their function is limited to general discussion of principles relating to remunerations, allowances and facilities in the public sector (Shian, 2008).

In the same vein, JCC has been established with the aim to create a well-balanced management-employees relationship and to provide platform for employees to voice up their concern on certain issues in order to create a harmonious working environment (Parasuraman, 2004). These councils will allow the government to receive any information or feedback from the public union members. The discussions will lead to giving views and unilaterally decide by the government on matters submitted to it. The functions of the NJCs are complemented and supported by the establishment of JCC. Consequently, unlike the private sector unions, the decisions on wages and other terms of employment for government employees are made unilaterally by the government through the Salaries Commissions, Public Service Department and Public Service Tribunal (Parasuraman, 2004; Aminuddin, 2011). Based on the research done by several local and foreign scholars displayed

that trade unions and employees have very limited influence in Malaysian workplaces (Parasuraman & Jones, 2006; Rose, Kumar & Ramasamy, 2011). With the constraints faced by the public sector unions as described earlier, to what extent are the members' commitments towards their union? Can the members sustain their commitment toward their union? The study of unions as organizations requires an understanding of the functions run by these unique organizations and the nature of the member's commitment to their union.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Past researches have been interested in investigating an employee's psychological attachment because it is considered to be an important indicator of trade union strength (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992). Practically, understanding union commitment is pertinent to organized labor due to its strength that may well determine the eventual success of the union in the achievement of its overall goals (Fullagar & Baling, 1989). Due to the lack of literature in relation to union commitment in Malaysia, this research attempts to explore the predictors of union commitment among the public sector employees.

1.3 Research objective

Specifically, this research intends to identify the influence of general union beliefs; union socialization; perceived union instrumentality; union satisfaction; union leadership and job satisfaction toward members' union commitment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Union commitment

According to the theory of union commitment by Sverke and Kuruvilla (1995), union commitment as dependent variable can be explained in terms of two dimensions: an instrumental dimension and value dimension. The instrumental dimension of union commitment reflects a utilitarian relationship between members and union, where the individual member is attached to the union mainly because of the union's instrumental value to the member. The degree of this dimension is thus dependent upon conscious assessment of costs and benefits associated with membership. The value dimension on the other hand refers to the degree of value congruence between the member and his or her union. In other words, a member is value committed if the goals of the union are consistent with his or her values. Member support for the union is derived from the individual's identification with the ideology and values of the union. According to the theory, this conceptualization makes it possible to better reflect union commitment in different cultural context i.e. where unions differ significantly in terms of their orientation, e.g. welfare unions, business unionism or political unionism. Hence, by understanding these dimensions further, this may help in understanding various factors that may influence and determine members' commitment to their union.

2.2 Independent variables

2.2.1 General union beliefs

This variable refers to how an individual perceives unions in general. For example, are unions generally seen as a benefit to society or are they the cause of unemployment and inflation? Due to literature support that stresses the importance of general union attitude in relation to the decision to commit to a union, to actively participate in it, and to vote for or against it (Bamberger, Kluger, & Suchard, 1999; Langford, 1994), this variable is chosen as the independent variable. Hence, the following hypothesis is postulated as:

H1: General union belief significantly influences union commitment

2.2.2 Union socialization

In the literature, organizational socialization is regarded as those changes caused by the organization that take place in newcomers and as the process by which a person learned the values, norms and required behaviors which permit him or her to participate as a member of the organization (Wanous & Collela, 1989). The variable is viewed as important determinant on the development of positive organizational attitudes and commitment. Fullagar, Gallagher, Gordon, and Clark (1995) had suggested that further understanding of the relationship need to be conducted in different settings and populations. In addition, they also suggested that future studies need to be designed so that the cause-effect nature of the relationship between socialization and union commitment can be more specifically delineated. Consequently, union socialization is hypothesized as follows:

H1: union socialization significantly influences union commitment

2.2.3 Union leadership

Although leadership is difficult to define, what is commonly referred to as "leadership" seems to make a difference to worker and organizational outcomes in most workplace setting (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Leadership implies an intentional process that influences structure and facilitates activities and relationships in a group or association. A vast array of knowledge has been accumulated on leadership and leadership effectiveness in particular with a large number of studies over the past years. However, the effect of leadership on some behavioral aspects of employees that are not in the immediate interest of managers in organizations is relatively unattended by the leadership researchers. In this context, the effect of leadership on union commitment of employees is an issue that rarely been attended by researchers (Dhamika, Faiz, & Sam, 2013). In the union setting, leadership behavior reflects the ability of union leaders to promote the membership among its members with some favorable behavior that can positively increase the members' attitudes and participation (Hammer, Bayazit, & Wazeter, 2009). This variable is highly relevant to labor unions as it entails inducing organizational members to strongly identify with the values and mission of the organization (Snape, Redman, Chan, 2000). Thus, the hypothesis is formulated as below:

H3: union leadership significantly influences union commitment

2.2.4 Union satisfaction

Fiorito, Daniel, Gallagher, Fukami (1988) suggested that union satisfaction is a function of the discrepancy between member expectations and perceptions of union performance on a number of job and union-related facets such as bread and butter issues, internal relations between the rank-and file members, and improvements in the working environment. They suggested that expectations of union performance tend to be relatively homogenous across members, and union satisfaction differences stem predominantly from variation in perceived outcomes. Due to the lack of empirical findings, the relationship between union satisfaction and members' commitment warrant further investigation (Kuruvilla & Fiorito, 1994; Snape et al., 2000). Hence, decision involving union membership may merit further attention related to the roles provided by the union. Hence, the hypothesis is formed as:

H4: union satisfaction significantly influences union commitment

2.2.5 Perceived union instrumentality

This variable is one of the key predictors of union loyalty and participation (Bamberger, Kluger, Suchard, 1999, Keser, Yilmaz & Kose, 2014, Tetrick, 2007). It refers to perceive the union as being effective in fulfilling the roles as the workers' representative (Chacko, 1985). According to Kochan (1979), union instrumentality is conceptualized as the belief that unions are able to improve wages, benefits, working conditions, and fairness, through their collective bargaining activities. The tangible and economic benefits of union membership such as better working conditions, fair treatment, job security, and equitable benefits for membership dues are representatives of union instrumentality. This variable is chosen as it reflects one of the important roles by the union in fulfilling member's expectation. Hence, the hypothesis is formulated as below:

H5: Perceived union instrumentality significantly influences union commitment

2.2.6 Job satisfaction

In general, job satisfaction is an effective response to work. According to Bullock (1984), job satisfaction is a positive or negative emotional state associated with one's work, while Locke (1976) regards job satisfaction as pleasurable and positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experience. It is a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as offering. Findings have shown that workers join unions because of perceived deprivations and various dissatisfactions with the condition of their employment (Premark & Hunter, 1988; Rose, Kumar & Ramasamy, 2010). These findings corroborate the industrial relations perspective that attachment to unions is a consequence of both dissatisfaction and perceived deprivation. On the other hand, research finding by Davis (2013) explores whether union commitment dampens public sector job satisfaction. Their findings indicate that union commitment could directly increases members' job satisfaction. Hence, this study intends to examine further the relationship between job satisfaction and union commitment among the public sector union members. The hypothesis formulated is as below:

H6: Job satisfaction significantly influences union commitment

3. Methodology

The quantitative research design was based on the survey data. The sample used in the research covered the union members from one public sector union which is a national union situated in the northern part of West Malaysia. This union represents workers within the clerical group (support group) who are also the registered union members of the union. In addition, this union affiliates with the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service (CUEPACS). The congress is a national trade union center in Malaysia which represents and speaks on behalf of the public sector unions (Durrishah, Parasuraman, & Aminuddin, 2012). Wages and other terms of service are discussed at national level between CUEPACS and the government. The unit of analysis is the individual union member. Since the total population size of the union is above 20000 members (The Department of Trade Union, Malaysia), the sample size chosen in this study was 400 union members. The sample size followed the table given by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) (as in Sekaran, 2003) that generalized scientific guidelines for the sample size decisions. This number is considered adequate to represent the total population of the union. In this context, a sample of members from the union was drawn randomly from the membership registration list obtained from the union. A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed and from this total, 395 were returned, representing a response rate of 49%. Fortunately, the questionnaires were acceptable for further analysis. Of the respondents, 49% were men while the rest were women. In terms of the length of service, about 22.9% had been working for the period of 9 to 12 years. As to the age of respondents, they were between the ages of 21 and 50, while for the marital status, 46.8% of the total respondents were married.

3.1 Measurement

Data was collected on a voluntary basis through a survey questionnaire developed from established instrument based from past studies. However, some modifications to the adopted measures have been made to render more appropriate to the context of this study. All the measures were assessed on a 5-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5); strongly dissatisfied (1) to strongly satisfied (5). The detail of the measurement of variables is as follow:

3.1.1 Union commitment

This construct focuses on two dimensions of union commitment. For value/normative union commitment, this construct was measured by adapting O'Reilly and Chapman's (1986) measure of value/normative based organizational commitment. The eight items used include statements that are related to survival of the union, a sense of loyalty, voluntary effort in any activity organized by union, and etc. For instrumental union commitment, this construct is based on calculative, utilitarian and self-interest considerations. This dimension of commitment occurs

because of specific rewards that are gained from union membership and not from shared beliefs or values. This construct was measured by adapting Heshizer and Lund (1997) instrumental union commitment of five items (e.g. for me, thing like wages and benefits are the most important reasons why the union is worthwhile). Another two items were adapted from the Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, and Spiller (1980) scale of union commitment (e.g. I have gained a lot since joining the union).

3.1.2 General union beliefs

The scale of 12 items measuring general union beliefs was adapted from the scale developed by Brett (1980). The items are designed to ascertain the respondents' beliefs about the effects of unions in the workplace and on society in general (e.g. generally speaking, unions help improve wages and working conditions for workers; unions give members their money's worth for the dues they pay; unions are important organizations and should be strengthened and etc).

3.1.3 Union socialization

The scale of 10 items measuring union socialization was derived from the Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, and Spiller, (1980) which request respondents to indicate whether or not they have encountered any experience with their union in any form (e.g. you receive a personal invitation to a union discussion; the goals are made clear to you; the union gives you much support and etc).

3.1.4 Union satisfaction

The union satisfaction used by Glick, Mirvis, and Harder (1977) was adopted. The scale consists of 7 items which measure union members' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their union. Basically, the questions are linked to the issues of wages, job security, fringe benefits, handling of complaints and grievance and etc.

3.1.5 Perceived union instrumentality

This study adopts the scale used by DeCotiis and Lelourn (1981). The seven items are used to assess workers' perception of the extent to which the presence of a union would result in fulfilling its roles to the members. The items involved statements about the roles of union in terms of pay, benefits, working conditions, fair treatment and supervision (e.g. my union gives workers a say in how they do their job; my union gets workers better wages and etc).

3.1.6 Union leadership

This study adopts the transformational leadership scale by Conger and Kanungo (1992). The scale consists of 9 items which are modified to cater for the rank-and file members' perceptions of union representative leadership. The items mainly measure member's perceptions regarding the leadership of their union representatives (e.g. the member's faith and confidence in the leader, leader's knowledge about the current surrounding environment and etc).

4. Results

Based from the factor analysis, reliability analysis was conducted on the factors extracted using the recommendation from Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). For

the purpose of this study, a minimum reliability (Cronbach's alpha) value of .60 was set. The values could be seen from the table below.

Table 1: Reliability results

Unit	Variables	β value
1.	Union commitment: Instrumental	0.69
2.	Union commitment: Value	0.76
3.	General union beliefs	0.78
4.	Union satisfaction	0.81
5.	Union socialization	0.70
6.	Union leadership	0.86
7.	Perceived union instrumentality	0.71
8.	Job satisfaction	0.75

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Std Dev
Union Commitment: Instrumental	3.56	.93
Union Commitment: Value	4.12	.57
General union belief	4.10 4.10	.54
Union satisfaction	3.44	.79
Union socialization	3.45	.75
Union leadership	3.90	.59
Perceived union inst	3.49	.90
Job satisfaction	3.30	.80

Table 3: Regression on value union commitment

Variables	Beta	Sig
General union belief	.212	.002
Union satisfaction	.200	.003
Union socialization	.070	.228
Union leadership	.193	.008
Perceived union inst	.213	.002
Job satisfaction	.012	.835
F value	15.856	
R ²	.584	
Adjusted R ²	.551	

Table 4: Regression on instrumental union commitment

Variables	Beta	Sig
General union belief	.023	.814
Union satisfaction	.076	.345
Union socialization	.186	.022
Union leadership	.086	.390
Perceived union Inst	.052	.578
Job satisfaction	.046	.563
F value	3.303	
R ²	.206	
Adjusted R ²	.144	

5. Discussion of the findings

In order to describe the responses for the major variables under study, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation on the dependent and the independent variables were obtained. From the results, it can be seen that the means of all variables fell between 3.30 and 4.12. This indicates that there were no extreme values for the mean. The mean of union commitment variables such as value union commitment and instrumental union commitment were high for the public sector union (value of above 3.0). In this respect, the public sector union members showed higher level of union commitment in terms of value dimension compared to the instrumental dimension. From the

regression analysis, several factors managed to portray significant relationships with both dimensions of union commitment. Firstly, few variables were found to significantly correlate with the value dimension of union commitment. These include variables such as union leadership, general union beliefs, union satisfaction and perceived union instrumentality. This study revealed that only union socialization showed significant relationship with instrumental dimension of union commitment.

Based on the results above, basically, the members still maintained high commitment and support to their union. Although, faced with challenges and pressures such as transformation activities, government regulations and procedures especially with respect to union activities, members showed a favorable attitude toward the existence of the union as their representative. The probable reason being that based on similar values and ideology, the members put great confidence and trust in their union in order to fight for their needs and demands. Hence, it is mostly through the effort of their union and CUEPACS (the umbrella for public sector union where the union affiliates) that facilitates the bargaining process with the government. The members perceived that through these collective efforts, their aspirations and needs could be heard and considered.

For variable such as union leadership, the results showed consistency with previous findings (e.g. Sverke and Sjöberg, 1994) that the perceived responsiveness of local union leaders was a positive predictor of union commitment. In this study, the leaders may have maintained good relations and communication with members through various activities, meeting and etc. These efforts may have contributed to higher loyalty, pride, and trust among the members. With respect to general union beliefs, despite the fact that the Malaysian union movement exists in a seemingly strict legislative environment and restricts in having bargaining machinery in the public sector, this does not influence their opinion and belief about their own union. They portrayed high confidence that their union can fight for their rights and needs. In this respect, the beliefs may have derived from previous participation or prior experience in union activities.

Members also exhibited significant relationship between union satisfaction and value union commitment. The results support the findings from previous studies (Snape et al, 2000). According to Snape et al. (2000), this result may suggest that member commitment to union values (value union commitment) in part reflects beliefs about the perceived effectiveness of the union in achieving valued outcomes. In this present study, it appears that benefits of the union may have provided support for member acceptance of their union values and ideas. Demonstration of economic benefits serves to help members rationalize their belief in the unions and increases their participation in activities for unions as well.

In another aspect, the public sector union members also exhibited significant relationship between union socialization with instrumental union commitment. The result is consistent with the finding provided by Pisnar (1997), whereby this may imply that the members may have

a deeper concern with the tangible economic benefits that could provide more security for the members. This could also be a major priority since their employment conditions are seriously influenced by the changing environmental factors which include the transformation programs launched by the government. In this respect, initiatives have been taken by union representatives to provide information to members regarding their activities and update matters pertaining to their employment. Besides interaction with the union representatives, members also gain information from union newsletters, bulletins and etc.

6. Implications

The present study supports and consistent with the notion of union commitment described by Sverke and Kuruvilla (1995) in terms of value dimension and instrumental previous research on understanding union commitment especially in the public sector. As one may realize, in Malaysia, there are some differences between the public and private sector unions with respect to the industrial relations system. Although the public sector unions are bonded with certain rules and regulations, members showed strong relationships between some of the independent variables such as union leadership, union satisfaction, general union belief, union socialization and perceived union instrumentality. From the practical perspective, union leaders need to enhance more efforts towards improving educating and communicating members through various networking, counseling and assisting members in any way possible. Hence, by creating good rapport and relationship, it will enhance further understanding, trust and spirit of unity among members.

7. Future Prospects of this Study

As for the future prospects of this study, the author hope to expand the issues of union commitment from the present cross sectional study to a longitudinal study covering a wider array of variables ranging from the individual, union and organizational factors. This is critically important due the high probability of respondents changing their feeling and perceptions concerning commitment over time. Beside this, the longitudinal study may also include some potential moderators such employment sector, nature of industry, demographic and other potential factors that may provide indirect influence on members' union commitment. By developing and utilizing a longitudinal study may develop a fuller understanding of the complexity of various relationships of factors and union commitment.

8. Suggestion for Future Research

This field of study is very appealing since it is relatively new in Malaysia. Thus, for future research, other variables should also be considered such as labor law, political atmosphere, technological change at work, leadership of employing organization, and etc. Future research could also be expanded into different types of industries/sectors such as education, health, textiles, automobiles, electronics, food, and others.

9. Conclusion

This study has to some extent helped to provide more awareness and understanding in relation to factors that may influence different dimensions of union commitment (value union commitment and instrumental union commitment). This means that members may join trade unions for various reasons, such as ideology or economy. Hence, for unions, it is imperative to recognize and aware of this situation and their traditional roles. Faced with transformational changes and challenges, unions may need to take a more proactive and creative efforts towards satisfying and fulfilling the ever changing needs and expectations of members. These integrative efforts are critical for the survival of the unions as worker's representative now and in the near future. As Gordon et al., (1980: p 480) noted: *"Since the ability of union locals to attain their goals is generally based on the members' loyalty, belief in the objective of organized labor, and willingness to perform service, commitment is part of the very fabric of unions"*.

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is in human resource management particularly dealing with the issues of industrial relations.

Author Profile



Husna Johari received her PhD in Management from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia in 2006. She also obtained her Master in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Cardiff, United Kingdom. Currently, she is a senior lecturer attached in the Department of Human Resource, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Besides teaching the undergraduate and postgraduate studies, she is also engaged in research activities. Her major interest