

From Social Partner to Strategic Actor: A Sociological Analysis of Workers' Representation in an Algerian Maritime Public Enterprise

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Abstract

This paper examines how workers' representatives in an Algerian public maritime transport company deviate from their role as social partners to pursue informal power. A one-year qualitative study reveals they exploit legal functional immunity for personal gain by controlling information, manipulating hiring and promotions, mismanaging social funds, and instigating conflicts. This behavior undermines organizational cohesion and inflicts operational and financial damage. Weak governance enables these abuses. The study recommends strengthening formal controls and revising policies.

Keywords: *Workers' representative, social partner, uncertainty zone, power, strategic actor.*

من الشريك الاجتماعي إلى الفاعل الاستراتيجي: تحليل سوسيولوجي لتمثيل العمال في مؤسسة عمومية جزائرية للنقل البحري

ملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة كيف ينحرف ممثلو العمال في شركة نقل بحري عمومية جزائرية عن دورهم كشركاء اجتماعيين ليصبحوا فاعلين استراتيجيين يسعون للسلطة غير الرسمية. كشفت دراسة نوعية استمرت عامًا أن الممثلين يستغلون حصانتهم القانونية الوظيفية لتحقيق مكاسب شخصية بالسيطرة على المعلومات، والتلاعب بالتوظيف والترقية، وسوء إدارة الصناديق الاجتماعية، وإثارة النزاعات الداخلية. يؤدي هذا السلوك إلى تقويض التماسك التنظيمي وإلحاق أضرار تشغيلية ومالية جسيمة. ويُعد ضعف الحوكمة والرقابة المتراخية أبرز العوامل المؤدية لهذا الإساءة. توصي الدراسة بتعزيز الضوابط الرسمية ومراجعة السياسات لحد من هذه الممارسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ممثل عمال، شريك اجتماعي، منطقة ارتياب، سلطة، فاعل استراتيجي.

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Introduction:

Virtually no organization is immune to the phenomenon of the strategic actor, an individual who seeks to gain power and to exploit areas of ambiguity to their advantage. Through continuous manoeuvring and calculated decisions, the strategic actor adapts to evolving facts and circumstances, leveraging uncertainty to strengthen their position. According to Michel Crozier's analysis, power is inherently reciprocal, existing in the relationship between the one who wields power and the one subject to it. Ultimately, both parties in this dynamic possess some degree of power, even if it is minimal, highlighting the complex interplays of influence within organizational structures.

The trade union structure, workers' delegates, and the committee of equal members are elected by the workforce to represent their interests before the employer. These bodies aim to secure the necessary conditions—both material and moral—for workers to perform their duties effectively, while ensuring compliance with the company's overall order. The social partner plays a critical and sensitive role in maintaining a harmonious social climate and organizational stability, which are essential for achieving the company's objectives. By aligning the company's goals with those of the workers, the social partner helps preventing marginal issues that could disrupt operations and hinder the attainment of shared goals, thereby safeguarding the interests of both the workforce and the organization.

Through the researcher's presence in the company in the field of study, he noticed the phenomenon of the strategic actor who assumed the role of the social partner, and he was not satisfied with this simple observation but delved deeper into the subject by re-reading the work of the scientist Michel Crozier in this regard, and the results he reached through the research he conducted in the tobacco factory (SIETA). He also conducted preliminary interviews with some of the company's workers and conducted documentary research, thus verifying the existence and prevalence of the phenomenon, which made many workers, even those with a university level and significant qualifications, live on the margins of the company's movement, confined to their positions, unable to change the situation and provide a tangible addition to the company.

Guided by these observations, the researcher formulated the following key questions to explore the dynamics of labour representation and the strategic actor phenomenon within the organization:

- What underlying motivations drive labour representatives to participate in the elections for labour delegates?
- Through what mechanisms does a social partner transition into a strategic actor?
- Which stakeholders benefit from the presence and actions of the strategic actor within the company?
- What are the broader implications of this phenomenon for the social climate and organizational cohesion?

1- Theoretical Framework:**1-1- The System of Labour Participation in Algeria according to the Legislation in Force:**

Since gaining independence, the highest authorities in the country have placed significant emphasis on labour and its role in national development. Following the crisis of the summer of 1962, which saw the departure of colonialists and the abandonment of the lands and factories they owned, a vacuum was left in their wake. In response, some workers and farmers began managing these lands and factories independently. To address this situation and formalize self-management, the Algerian legislator enacted Decree 63-95 on March 22, 1963. This decree established the framework for self-management within enterprises, defining key organizational structures such as the general assembly, the workers' council, the managing committee, and the director (Decree 63-95, 1963: 298-300). This legislative move aimed to stabilize the economy and empower workers in the post-colonial era.

The self-governance system: The self-governance system was further formalized with the introduction of the Charter and the Law on the Socialist Management of Enterprises, enacted



through Order No. 71-74 on November 16, 1971. This legislation recognized workers as active participants in the management process and enshrined the principle of public ownership of the means of production, asserting that these resources belonged to the workers and the working class as whole (Shabba, 2007-2008: 98). This marked a significant step in aligning the country's economic framework with socialist principles, emphasizing collective ownership and worker involvement in decision-making.

Following the events of October 5, 1990, and during a period of political and economic openness, the Algerian government enacted Law 90-11 on Labour Relations on April 21, 1990 (Law 90-11, 1990). This legislation institutionalized the principle of workers' participation in enterprise management through an elected body known as the Participation Committee. Title V of the law specifically addressed workers' participation, outlining the structure of participation bodies, the procedures for their formation through open and individual elections, their operational mechanisms, and the facilities provided to support their functions. Article 91 of Law 90-11 explicitly states: Labour participation in the employed body shall be carried out as follows:

Through the establishment of a Participation Committee, composed of employee delegates at the headquarters level of the employing body (Law 90-11, 1990: 570), workers were granted a formal role in organizational decision-making. The employee delegates are elected throughout a ballot organized by an electoral committee with equal representation. This committee is responsible for collecting nominations from representative trade union organizations, with the exclusion of managerial staff. This process ensures that the Participation Committee reflects the interests of the workforce while maintaining a clear separation between managerial and employee roles, thereby promoting transparency and fairness in worker representation.

Workers listed on the electoral roll are elected through individual, free, and direct voting. The election process begins with a first round of voting; if voter turnout does not reach at least half of the eligible voters, a second round is held, during which all workers meeting the eligibility criteria may stand as candidates. Following the ballot, the electoral committee compiles the final minutes of the results, announces them publicly, and submits a copy to the relevant regional labor inspectorate. Subsequently, the Bureau of the Participation Committee is established, comprising a President and Vice-President, elected by all delegates for a three-year term. Once constituted, the Participation Committee promptly drafts its internal rules of procedure, ensuring a structured and transparent framework for its operations (Law 90-11, 1990: 570).

Article 95 of Law 90-11 on Labour Relations stipulates that in cases where the employing body has more than one hundred and fifty (150) workers and is governed by a board of directors or a supervisory board, the Participation Committee is responsible for appointing worker representatives to these boards. These representatives may be selected from among the committee's members or from non-members, including managerial staff, in accordance with the prevailing legislation (Law 90-11, 1990: 571). This provision ensures that workers have a voice in high-level decision-making processes, promoting greater inclusivity and representation within organizational governance structures.

The board of directors is appointed by the general assembly of shareholders and holds the responsibility of overseeing the company's affairs, monitoring its activities, and planning its strategic projects. Additionally, the board is tasked with appointing the company's executive bodies. In general, the board of directors exercises the following powers:

The board of directors holds the following key powers and responsibilities (Law 90-11, 1990: 571)

- Appointing the Authorised Director, determining their remuneration, compensation, competencies, and powers, overseeing their performance, and, if necessary, dismissing them.
- Implementing and monitoring the execution of decisions made by the General Assembly.
- Preparing the final accounts for the previous financial year.



- Discussing and approving an annual activity plan for the company for the upcoming year.
- Monitoring the implementation of the annual plan and submitting periodic reports to the auditor, as well as an annual report to the General Assembly on the plan's outcomes.
- Conducting studies and compiling statistics to enhance the company's development and operational efficiency.
- Making decisions regarding borrowing, mortgages, and guarantees.
- Selecting independent financial auditors who are not employed by the company (Audit and Control Committee).
- Determining the nature and the amount of fees paid to board members and the authorised manager (Remuneration Committee).

These responsibilities ensure the board's oversight of the company's strategic direction, financial health, and operational performance, while maintaining accountability to shareholders and stakeholders.

However, the inclusion of worker representatives, who have transitioned from social partners to strategic actors, has introduced challenges that undermine the effectiveness of this sensitive body. The files reviewed at this level are often highly confidential and technically complex, requiring a university-level understanding to grasp their strategic implications. Yet, the presence of worker representatives with limited technical expertise and strategic insight has hindered the board's ability to fully evaluate and approve proposals presented by the General Manager. This has not only slowed down the proceedings of periodic board meetings, but has also led to the leakage of sensitive information to the broader workforce, particularly in cases involving strategic decisions such as ship acquisitions. Such leaks have repeatedly caused harm to the company, highlighting the tension between inclusive governance and the need for confidentiality and efficiency in high-level decision-making.

1-2- Powers of the Participation Committee according to Law 90-11:

The Participation Committee, as outlined in Article 94 of Law 90-11 on Labour Relations, holds the following responsibilities:

- Enhancing material and service production, sales, and labour productivity.
- Overseeing the development of employee numbers and labour structure.
- Addressing issues related to absenteeism, workplace accidents, and occupational diseases.
- Ensuring the proper application of internal regulations.

These responsibilities ensure that the Participation Committee plays a vital role in shaping organizational policies and practices, while safeguarding the interests of workers and promoting transparency in decision-making processes.

- Access to the financial statements of the utilised entity: Collections, utilisation accounts, profit and loss accounts.
- Regularly inform the workers about the matters it addresses, with the exception of issues pertaining to manufacturing methods, third-party relations, and matters involving confidentiality or secrecy.

However, the legislator did not grant the Participation Committee unrestricted authority to inform workers, instead emphasizing the principle of safeguarding confidential information that could harm the organization's interests, particularly when related to the nature of its operations.

1-3- The Strategic Analysis Model according to the Theory of Michel Crozier:

According to Michel Crozier strategic analysis is not an easy process, but a very complex process in terms of its complexity and interdependence between a large number of inputs and outputs, as the actor, with his cultures and experiences about work situations, always produces actions or conditions through which he can move things.

1-3-1- Actor: The actor adopts a certain strategy with the aim of maximising profit and self-benefits. The strategy is not necessarily clear and conscious within the individual and is explained after the actor goes through the practice.



1-3-2- Betting: ‘Those issues or events for which the actor builds a strategy towards others, characterised by change and transformation, because the actor is always in a state of gain or loss, and here the extent of the success of rationality in choosing the time, goal and appropriate strategy’ (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977: 45).

1-3-3- The Zone of Uncertainty: Every individual in an organisation has room for freedom and manoeuvrability through resources, actions and behaviours that are not necessarily controlled by the organisation or other groups outside the group to which they belong. To control the Zone of Uncertainty, four possible sources of authority are required (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981: 5).

- Special Competencies
- Special relationships with the external environment
- Accessing and retaining information voluntarily
- Control of organisational rules

It should be noted that the Zone of Uncertainty may appear spontaneously without the intervention of the strategic actor, in which case he exploits it without making any additional effort.

1-3-4- Power: The main goal sought by the strategic actor is his access to power in any way, he makes all manoeuvres and makes all available tools and adapts to all data and circumstances to make them in his favour in order to expand the Zone of Uncertainty, until he obtains the largest share of power that enables him to achieve all that he aspires to.

To control the Zone of Uncertainty, four possible sources of authority are required (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981: 73).

- Special competences.
- Special relationships with the external environment.
- Access to and voluntary retention of certain information.
- Control over organisational rules.

1-4- The Principle of Learning Theory and Strategic Actor:

According to the social learning theory, the new generation learns from the old generation or those who are on their way out of the organisation through retirement, how to control the zone of suspicion or the zone of doubt, and how to manipulate situations and create zones of suspicion in the company. According to psychologist Albert Bandura, almost all phenomena of experiential learning occur by observing the behaviour of others and the effects it produces. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory is based on two basic principles: Observation and Imitation (Bandura, 1977: 142). In this regard, Bandura believes that humans learn a lot from the environment in which they live, such as behaviours, attitudes, experiences, knowledge and patterns of behaviour of the members of the organisation, through observing the behaviour of others and emulating those behaviours (Kendra, 2024).

This is called Self-Evaluation, as the expected effects are the result of symbolic perceptions of behaviour. Every behaviour is self-evaluated, and if it differs from the evaluation set by the group (family, friends...), this disparity or conflict results in conflict, and the person is faced with two solutions: Change his behaviour, giving up manoeuvring and exploiting the problems of others to seize power, or justify or oppose the reference group to which he belongs, which disagrees with him in belief and opinion, so the user begins to associate with groups that adopt the same standards and values, and in this way mutual reinforcement occurs for the behaviour in general, which helps these groups to adapt thanks to this support (Gammaz, 2009: 67-68).

Thus, the worker within this company acquires behaviours from the social partner and these behaviours become entrenched in him, and he seeks to reach power within this company through the zone of suspicion and doubt and not through the channels drawn by the company's policy, and what increased the entrenchment of this social phenomenon is the failure of the management to reset things and reduce the dominance of the strategic actor by reducing the zone of suspicion, according to Victor Vroom's Expectations Theory, which believes that



individuals choose their behaviour based on what they believe will lead to the most useful and beneficial result (Kiara Miller, 2022). When an individual learns how to control the Zone of Uncertainty, but observes the management intervening every time to put an end to the strategic actor and to reduce his dominance in the organisation, and may punish him if he applies the disciplinary system, in this case, the individual who intends to carry out or to follow a behaviour to gain power thinks again and again before doing such a behaviour because he expects the management to confront him strictly.

2- Methodological Aspect of the Study:

2-1-The Time Frame of the Study:

The field study was conducted over a period of one year, spanning from December 2023 to December 2024.

2-2- Population of the Study:

The research population for this study encompasses all employees of the company, including both seafarers and onshore workers based at the company's headquarters, totaling 278 employees. The study sample specifically focused on the elected worker delegates who form the Participation Committee, comprising 15 members (all elected delegates). Additionally, the researcher conducted interviews with 7 ship captains, 7 chief engineers, and 12 onshore managers and workers who had direct or indirect interactions with the Participation Committee. The current union structure was excluded from direct analysis due to its distinct approach to engaging with management, which diverges from traditional methods and does not rely on manoeuvring to gain power.

2-3- Information Gathering Tools:

One of the primary data collection tools used by the researcher in this study was participant observation. The researcher took advantage of his presence as a senior manager within the company to gain access to critical information and insights, enabling a deeper understanding of the organisational phenomenon under investigation.

The researcher also used an unstructured interview, so that the respondent does not feel that he is under study, which included all workers' representatives and some of the managers and workers who benefited from material or other privileges. He also interviewed seven ship captains and seven chief engineers. During the study period, the researcher tried to question the same respondent several times, and tried to compare the statements over time, to delete all conflicting statements, and to retain only those statements and facts that were emphasised by the same respondents.

The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of accessible documents, which played a crucial role in verifying facts and corroborating or refuting statements made by respondents during informal and unstructured interviews.

2-4- Methodology Design of the Study:

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology, using Michel Crozier's Strategic Analysis Framework, which is particularly well-suited for this type of study. Given that the company is viewed as an organisation—or an organisational phenomenon—there is always room for negotiation, manoeuvring, and strategic behaviour among its members. Crozier's Strategic Analysis enables the researcher to gain an accurate and a realistic understanding of the dynamics at play within the organisational context (Crozier, 1977: 38). This approach provides valuable insights into the interactions, into the power structures, and into the decision-making processes that shape the phenomenon under investigation.

2-5- Introducing the Company in Question:

For economic, commercial and security reasons, and in accordance with Law 18-07 of June 2018 on the protection of the processing of personal data of a natural person, the researcher refrained from mentioning the name of the company. Especially since the company is going through a very difficult phase, and it has international competitors who are trying with all their might not to regain the market share it lost earlier.



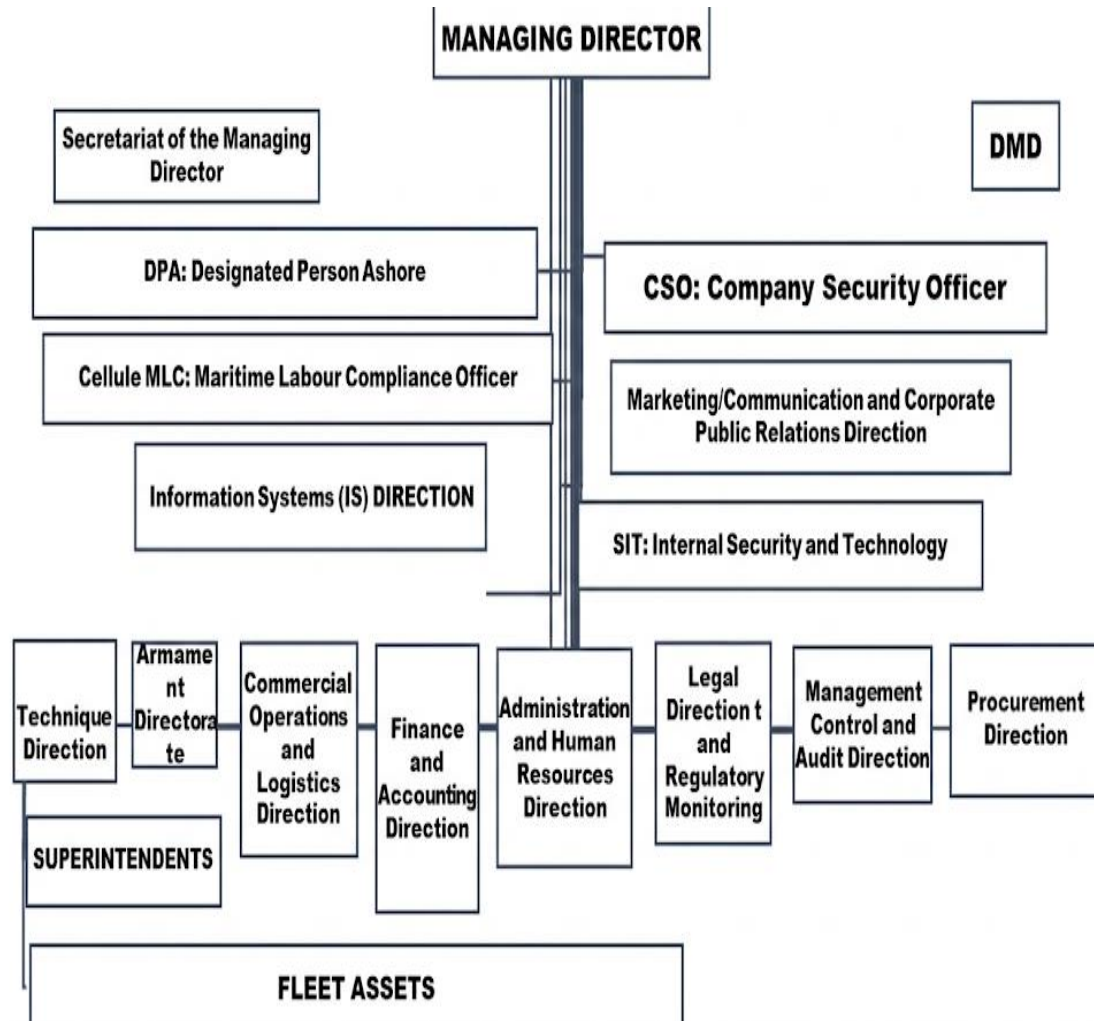
The company is a public economic company with shares, operating in the field of maritime transport of goods and commodities, owns nine vessels, and has 278 workers.

Table (1): shows the status of employees in the organisation according to the nature of labour relations

	Statut	Nbr	Total
Residents	Permanent contract	69	88
	Fixed-term contract	19	
Sailors	Permanent contract	103	190
	Fixed-term contract	87	
Total		278	

Source: Table data source: Administration and Human Resources Direction.

The organisational structure of the company:



Form (1) shows the organizational chart image the company's organisational structure

Source: Figure data source: Administration and Human Resources Direction.



There are very important directorates, that are considered the centre of gravity of the company, namely the Technical Directorate, the Processing Directorate and the Commercial Exploitation Directorate, while the rest of the directorates are support directorates, namely the Resources and Human Resources Directorate, the Finance and Accounting Directorate, the Legal and Legislative Vigilance Directorate, the Information Systems Directorate, and the Marketing Directorate.

The Company owns nine vessels, as shown in Table 02

Table (2): The Company's Shipyard

Ships	Year of Construction	Year of Acqu	Ship Type	DWT tons	(TEU)Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit
03 Ships (Sister Ships)	2011	2014	General Cargo	9100	661
02 Ships (Sister Ships)	2020	2021	Container Carrier	22883	842
02 Ships (Sister Ships)	2016	2016	General Cargo	12168	1842
02 Ships (Sister Ships)	2012	2015	General Cargo	12767	665

Source: Table data source: Technique Direction.

Thus, it is clear from the table above that most of the ships acquired are used and not new.

3- Analysis and Discussion of Field Results:

3-1- Candidacy for Workers' Delegate Elections in Pursuit of Immunity:

The field study revealed that the candidacy for workers' delegate elections was not primarily for the benefit of the workers but rather to seek the immunity granted to delegates by the legislator. Article 113 of Law 90-11 (Law 90-11, 1990: 571) stipulates that no delegate can be subjected to dismissal, transfer, or any disciplinary action of any kind due to activities carried out in the course of their representative duties. If an employer imposes a disciplinary penalty on a workers' delegate for activities related to their representation of workers, it is considered an obstruction of their duties, and the employer may be penalized for such actions. This provision has been exploited by delegates, leading to loss of control over their actions.

Running for elections related to the participation committee has become an attractive prospect for anyone with ambitions to attain immunity and illegitimate power. This is evident through experience and observing how management has dealt with previous delegates. According to Albert Bandura's theory, they learned that reaching power does not come through hard work and dedication to advance in a legal and objective manner. Instead, they learned that certain behaviours can be reinforced through rewards or weakened through punishment. Thus, the theory emphasizes the importance of reference groups in shaping social behaviour.

In this context, workers' delegates have learned that their path to power and immunity is not through merit or adherence to rules, but through exploiting legal loopholes and leveraging their immunity to act without accountability. This has created a situation where delegates prioritize personal gain over the collective interests of the workers they are supposed to represent.

3-2- Employing Sailors to Serve Strategic Actors Remotely:

The social partner indirectly employed a large number of sailors, primarily manual laborers, who play a key role in ship operations. Although no official documents were signed by the social partner, sailors reported to him daily, providing valuable technical and operational information that often surpassed what reached the general management. By controlling this information, the social partner leveraged it to pressure management, gaining influence and control over the company's power structures.



The social partner often employed children of ship captains, who lacked higher education, bringing them under his influence. According to the international maritime law, sailors can only serve on a ship for six months before being replaced. When sailors violate company rules and are penalized by the captain, the social partner intervenes to reinstate them on another ship. This undermines the captain's authority and weakens management's ability to enforce regulations, encouraging other sailors to adopt similar behaviour, as explained by Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964).

This behaviour had serious repercussions for the company, including:

- Several ship captains resigned, losing the authority granted by Algerian and international maritime laws.
- Sailors increasingly violated maritime law and company regulations.
- The strategic actor gained control over sailors they protected from disciplinary actions.
- The condition of the ships deteriorated, risking detentions at Algerian or international ports, leading to significant financial losses.
- The recruitment officer lost authority over hiring sailors.

3-3- Selective Vertical Promotions:

The promotion of a number of resident workers to high-ranking positions at the company's headquarters was carried out without considering the established promotion criteria. A group of workers obtained senior positions, such as Commercial Operations Manager, Human Resources Manager, and Container Management Manager. This process of promoting had a negative impact on the proper functioning of the company:

- **The promoted managers demonstrated limited competence in their roles**, leading to a decline in the company's revenue.
- **All workers promoted by the strategic actor** came under their control, following their orders, which caused significant problems for the company.
- **The Commercial Operations Manager**, a pivotal and vital position in a maritime company, not only lacked the competence required to manage a company of such scale operating internationally, but also made grave errors without being referred to the disciplinary board.
- **Loss of major clients**, both private and public, who shifted to competing international companies. Regaining these clients has proven to be extremely difficult.
- **Container Management Manager**: Previously a departmental secretary, she was promoted to the position of manager despite lacking any competence to manage this type of activity. After some time in the role, she made serious errors that led to the loss of more than 420 containers, in addition to implicating the company in disputes with international clients and causing the company to become entangled in international conflicts due to poor management.
- **Human Resources Manager**: She was promoted to this position without possessing the competence or qualifications required to hold the role of Human Resources Manager. This position remains critical and sensitive, demanding competence and field experience, which she lacks. She made grave errors, but was not referred to the disciplinary board because the strategic actor protected her.

3-4- Management of Advances and Loans for Workers' Benefit:

A significant budget is allocated annually for social services, estimated at 2% of the total wage bill, reflecting the Algerian legislator's commitment (Law 90-11, 1990: 571) to providing a comfortable social environment for workers.

The expenses covered by social services for workers include:

- Granting loans that are repaid in instalments through workers' salaries.
- Organising trips and summer camps.
- Entering into agreements with recreational centres for the benefit of workers.
- Allocating funds for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and circumcisions, among others, where workers or their beneficiaries receive a predetermined financial amount agreed upon in advance.



However, for the same reasons mentioned earlier, the social partner seeks to allocate a significant portion of the funds designated for workers to a small group of them, who enjoy all the privileges. This allows the strategic actor to use them when needed. Among the clear practices observed by the researcher is the repeated granting of financial loans to the same individuals over several years. As soon as they finish repaying one social loan, they are granted another, and so on. Upon reviewing the files of those concerned, it becomes evident that they are the same individuals who have benefited from promotions and other privileges. This behaviour by the social partner has clear objectives, namely **expanding the gray area of ambiguity**.

According to the report by the company's auditor, the management of social loans within the company does not comply with the standards typically applied in this context. Additionally, the financial auditor discovered that a significant number of advances have not been repaid by the beneficiaries.

Table (3): shows the number of social advances and the number of individuals who benefited from these advances for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Year	Number of Advances Granted (Transactions)			Number of Unique Workers Who Actually Received Loans		
	Nbr	Residents	Sailors	Nbr	Residents	Sailors
2021	200	120	80	80	30	50
2022	150	100	50	120	20	100
2023	80	60	20	80	60	20

Source: Table data source: Administration and Human Resources Direction

The column "Number of Advances Granted (Transactions)" represents the total number of loan transactions recorded in the company's system, which includes multiple transactions for the same individuals over the course of the year. The column "Number of Unique Workers Who Actually Received Loans" indicates the actual number of distinct workers who benefited from these transactions. For example, in 2021, while the system recorded 200 loan transactions, only 80 unique workers actually received these loans, with many individuals receiving loans multiple times during the year.

In 2021, although records show 200 social loan transactions, only 80 unique workers actually received the loans, many of them repeatedly—mainly sailors and a few residents. These individuals are closely linked to the strategic actor, serving various roles such as informants, rumor spreaders, logistical aides, or individuals who engaged in activities that undermined management's authority. Some even take legal action against the company under maritime law, reinforcing the actor's influence. The same situation occurred in 2022, where out of 150 loan transactions, 120 unique workers benefited, including 100 sailors and 20 residents. In 2023, due to the company's financial crisis, loan approvals dropped to 80 transactions, all corresponding to unique beneficiaries. Unlike before, few repeat beneficiaries remained mainly because of unpaid salaries, mounting pressure on management, and the strategic actor reduced favoritism toward select individuals.

3-5- Encouraging Informal Organisation:

The strategic actor also implemented practical plans to encourage and to impose informal organisation as an alternative to the formal structure. As a result, the company's operations became subject to informal organisation, creating chaos in management at all levels.

Informal organisations arise from personal ties and shared interests outside formal structures. They follow unwritten norms and often strengthen when formal systems fail workers. These



groups help members supporting one another, exchanging ideas, and protecting their interests (Asfour, 1988: 42).

Indeed, the informal organisation is a healthy social phenomenon in any organisation, as it arises spontaneously among its members. Although it has several advantages, including (Nasrudin, August 18, 2024):

- **Rapid communication**
- **Faster error detection and resolution**
- **Adaptability**
- **Increased creativity**

However, there are many drawbacks to informal organisation that can destabilize an organisation. These drawbacks stem from several reasons, the most important of which are (Nasrudin, August 18, 2024):

- **Difficulty in sustaining and maintaining**
- **Conflicts between individuals and groups**
- **Unorganized work**
- **Weak oversight**
- **Negative information**
- **Greater focus on individual interests**

The strategic actor intentionally promoted the informal organisation over the formal one by systematically undermining management through criticism and social media pressure. Over time, management weakened, retreating from official procedures and decisions, often in response to worker unrest stirred by the social partner. This allowed the strategic actor to embed the informal system across the company, making formal practices rare and widely resisted.

3-6- Inciting Workers against Management, Then Negotiating with the General Directorate to Resolve the Conflict Amicably:

In June 2024, unpaid salaries led to worker unrest, with the social partner urging a protest, and then, presenting themselves as a mediator. Although the General Manager tried to calm the workers, his efforts failed, and the social partner stepped in to resolve the crisis. **The study suggests that the social partner may have contributed to the unrest** to reinforce their image as essential to the company's stability and conflict resolution.

3-7- Formation of Rival Groups within the Company:

The actions of the social partner fostered a social climate characterized by organisational conflict, marked by the formation of small, rival factions. Each group viewed the others with suspicion, and the conflict stemmed not from professional disagreements but from competing personal interests. This environment of mistrust and division had a detrimental effect on the organisation's operational efficiency, undermining collaboration and hindering the smooth functioning of work processes.

Through our field study, it became clear to the researcher that there were at least three rival groups within the company. Organisational conflict is defined as a series of resentments that push one worker into opposition with others, leading to harm in functional activities and, consequently, a decline in production efficiency (Al-Sayrafi, 2007: 5).

Organisational conflict in the company stems from unclear roles, resource competition, and mismatched goals, but was largely intensified by the social partner manipulating internal tensions. This led to deep worker divisions, communication breakdowns, and harmful behaviours like sabotage and rumor-spreading. The toxic environment severely disrupted operations, increased absenteeism and turnover and damaged overall organisational stability (Kassimi, 2014: 22).

We also observed that each group seeks external support to strengthen its position and gain external backing. However, these external actors often have their own agendas and objectives, which they pursue by aligning with one side over the other.



3-8- Removal of the General Manager Due to Disagreement with the Head of the Participation Committee Office:

The General Manager sought to dismiss the head of the Participation Committee due to his disruptive actions and influence. In retaliation, the latter halted ship operations and spread false rumors about mass layoffs and wage cuts. This sparked a rebellion among sailors and onshore workers, escalating the organisational conflict. The sailors' walkout and the suspension of ship operations created a serious crisis with potential international fallout. To protect the company's and the state's reputation, the ministry dismissed the General Manager. This eased tensions temporarily, but did not resolve the deeper issues. The incident highlights the strategic actor's immense influence and ability to provoke organisational crises. Despite the General Manager's efforts to restore order and address key issues, his attempt to remove this disruptive figure backfired. The strategic actor used organisational loopholes and misinformation to trigger a crisis, leading to the General Manager's dismissal and further strengthening his own position.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study is set out to investigate the transformation of workers' representatives from their formal role as social partners into strategic actors who wield significant informal power within an Algerian public maritime transport company. Grounded in Michel Crozier's theory of Strategic Analysis, the research confirmed the pervasive presence of this phenomenon and its profoundly detrimental impact on organisational health.

The findings from the applied field study reveal a clear and deliberate strategy employed by these actors. Far from seeking office to represent worker interests, their primary motivation was to obtain the legal immunity granted to delegates, which they then leveraged to create and control expansive **Zones of Uncertainty**. Key mechanisms for acquiring power included: the manipulation of sensitive technical and operational information flow from sailors, bypassing formal channels; the orchestration of selective, non-merit-based vertical promotions that placed for which they lacked requisite experience, but loyal individuals in critical management positions; the discriminatory allocation of social advances and loans to create a network of obligated followers; and the deliberate incitement of conflict to then position themselves as indispensable mediators.

The consequences of these actions, as directly observed and documented, have been severe. The company has suffered significant operational and financial damage, including the loss of major clients, costly international disputes, a deterioration of its fleet, the resignation of qualified captains, and a general breakdown of formal authority and organisational cohesion. The study concludes that this detrimental shift from partner to actor is not an isolated incident, but a direct result of two primary factors: permissive legislation that offers immunity without sufficient accountability, and weak management that fails to enforce internal rules, thereby allowing informal structures and Zones of Uncertainty to flourish.

To curb the undue influence of strategic actors and restore the role of the social partner, the following measures are recommended:

- **Legislative Reform:** Advocates for amendments to Labour Relation Laws (e.g., Law 90-11) to introduce clearer accountability mechanisms for workers' delegates. This includes defining clear instances where immunity is waived for actions that demonstrably harm the company's interests.
- **Strengthening Formal Structures:** Management must consistently enforce all internal regulations, procurement procedures, and promotion criteria based on transparency and meritocracy. This reduces the Zones of Uncertainty that strategic actors exploit.
- **Enhanced Governance:** Implements stricter oversight for the management of social funds. The process for granting loans and advances should be fully transparent, based on clear, equitable criteria, and subject to regular internal and external audit reviews.



- **Leadership Training:** Provides mandatory training for senior and middle management on conflict resolution, strategic negotiation, and detecting and managing informal power structures to prevent the erosion of formal authority.
- **Whistleblower Protection:** Establishes a secure and anonymous channel for employees to report misconduct, abuse of power, or corrupt practices without fear of retaliation, thereby; breaking the culture of impunity.
- **Clarification of Role:** The role and responsibilities of the Participation Committee should be clearly re-communicated to all employees, emphasising its purpose as a collaborative social partner rather than an adversarial or parallel power structure.

Limitations of the Study:

This study, while providing a deep and nuanced exploration of informal power, is circumscribed by several important limitations that qualify the extent of its claims. Primarily, as an intensive qualitative case study focused on a single Algerian public maritime enterprise, its contextual findings are not statistically generalizable to all sectors or national contexts, though the application of Crozier's theoretical framework offers a transferable analytical model for similar organisational settings.

The researcher's inherent positionality as a senior manager within the organisation, though instrumental for unparalleled access and ethnographic insight, unavoidably presents a potential source of interpretive bias, which was actively mitigated through rigorous methodological triangulation of data sources and continuous reflective journaling to bracket personal preconceptions. Furthermore, the temporal scope of one year captures a definitive snapshot of these fluid power dynamics, but cannot account for their longitudinal evolution beyond the study period. Finally, while the research incorporated a multitude of perspectives, the full spectrum of views may be partially obscured due to the potential reluctance of some employees to speak candidly, or the strategic self-presentation of the primary actors themselves. By openly acknowledging these parameters, this study aims not for universal truth, but for a valid and an empirically rich contribution within its defined boundaries, simultaneously charting a clear path for future research to build upon its findings through comparative and longitudinal studies.

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