



Article

The Development and Strategic Transformation of Trade Union Activity in the Republic of Karakalpakstan During 2016–2025

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Abstract: This article examines the development and strategic transformation of trade union activity in the Republic of Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025 in the context of socioeconomic reforms in Uzbekistan. The study focuses on the protection of labor rights, social partnership, occupational safety, labor monitoring, social protection, prevention of forced and child labor, international cooperation, and digitalization. The findings show that trade unions have gradually expanded their functions beyond the traditional representation of employees' interests toward preventive protection and broader participation in labor and social relations. The study also demonstrates the growing importance of tripartite cooperation among trade unions, employers, and government institutions, as well as the implementation of international labor standards. It concludes that strengthening preventive mechanisms, extending protection to informal-sector workers, improving legal awareness, and introducing digital forms of communication are important priorities for the further development of trade unions in Karakalpakstan.

Keywords: trade unions, social protection, decent work, international labor standards, digitalization.

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1. Introduction

Trade unions constitute an important component of the system of labor relations and social protection, representing employees' interests and contributing to the regulation of relations between workers, employers, and the state [1]. Their role becomes particularly significant during periods of socioeconomic transformation, when changes in employment, labor legislation, production processes, and social protection create new challenges for workers. In Uzbekistan, the reforms implemented in recent years have considerably influenced both the content and organizational forms of trade union activity [2]. As a result, trade unions are increasingly expected not only to defend employees' rights but also to participate actively in social dialogue, prevent labor disputes, improve working conditions, strengthen social protection, and contribute to social stability.

The period from 2016 to 2025 represents an important stage in this transformation. Economic liberalization, development of entrepreneurship, improvement of the investment environment, modernization of social policy, and changes in the labor market created new conditions for interaction among employees, employers, and trade union organizations [3]. Under these circumstances, establishing constructive dialogue between workers and employers and preventing or resolving labor disputes acquired particular importance. Trade unions were also increasingly associated with supporting employment and helping employees develop professional skills required by the changing labor market.

These developments were closely connected with the broader objectives of promoting decent employment, improving social protection, and increasing social inclusion [4]. Labor relations could therefore no longer be considered separately from questions of social justice, occupational health and safety, equality, employment opportunities, and workers' legal awareness. Particular attention was directed toward improving working conditions, protecting employee health, supporting the employment of persons with disabilities, promoting gender equality, and strengthening compliance with labor legislation [5].

In the Republic of Karakalpakstan, these changes were reflected in the practical activities of trade union organizations. Protection of employees' lawful interests remained a fundamental responsibility, but it was increasingly supplemented by labor monitoring, legal assistance, occupational safety activities, social dialogue, educational measures, and cooperation with national and international institutions. Trade union participation in monitoring compliance with labor standards, particularly during the cotton-harvesting season, became one of the practical mechanisms for preventing violations of labor rights [6]. In 2018–2019, monitoring activities in Karakalpakstan covered farms, educational institutions, healthcare institutions, and other organizations, while direct questionnaires were conducted with workers and responsible officials.

Against this background, the study of trade union activity in Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025 is important for understanding how the functions of trade unions have changed under conditions of socioeconomic reform. The aim of this study is to examine the main directions, practical results, and institutional transformation of trade union activity in the Republic of Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025, with particular attention to the protection of labor rights, social partnership, labor monitoring, occupational safety, prevention of forced and child labor, social protection, international cooperation, and digitalization. The study also seeks to identify the major priorities that may determine the further development and effectiveness of trade union organizations in the region.

2. Materials and Methods

The study examines the development and strategic transformation of trade union activity in the Republic of Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025. The research is based on historical, comparative, statistical, and institutional approaches. The chronological method was applied to trace changes in the functions and priorities of trade unions during the period of intensive socioeconomic reforms in Uzbekistan. The comparative approach was used to identify changes in the traditional and emerging functions of trade unions, particularly in the areas of labor rights, social protection, social partnership, occupational safety, and international labor standards.

Statistical data were used to evaluate the practical results of trade union activity, including the number of employees whose labor rights were protected, financial compensation recovered in favor of workers, reinstatement of unlawfully dismissed employees, compensation related to occupational accidents, and the scope of labor monitoring activities.

The institutional approach was employed to examine the changing position of trade unions within the system of relations among employees, employers, government institutions, and international labor organizations. Particular attention was given to the development of tripartite social dialogue, implementation of International Labour Organization standards, prevention of forced and child labor, improvement of occupational safety, and expansion of social protection.

The study covers the main areas of trade union activity that became especially significant during 2016–2025: protection of labor rights, restoration of violated rights,

social partnership, labor monitoring, occupational safety, prevention of forced labor, legal education, social protection, professional development, international cooperation, and digitalization.

3. Results

The results demonstrate that during 2016–2025 the activities of trade unions in Karakalpakstan gradually expanded from the traditional protection of employees' interests toward a broader system of labor and social protection. Trade unions increasingly combined legal assistance with monitoring, prevention of labor violations, social dialogue, occupational safety measures, educational activities, and cooperation with national and international institutions [7].

Protection and restoration of labor rights remained one of the most important practical areas [8]. The available data indicate that in recent years the lawful rights of approximately 500,000 employees were protected. A total of 267 billion Uzbek soums was recovered in favor of employees. In addition, 1,000 workers affected by occupational accidents received approximately 35 billion soums in compensation, while 13,000 employees who had been unjustly dismissed were reinstated.

Table 1. Selected quantitative indicators of trade union activity and labor monitoring

Indicator	Result	Analytical significance
Employees whose lawful rights were protected	Approximately 500,000	Indicates the broad practical scale of labor-rights protection
Funds recovered in favor of employees	267 billion UZS	Demonstrates the material dimension of restoring violated labor rights
Employees injured in workplace accidents who received compensation	1,000	Reflects trade union involvement in occupational injury cases
Compensation paid in workplace accident cases	35 billion UZS	Shows the financial significance of occupational protection
Unjustly dismissed employees reinstated	13,000	Demonstrates practical restoration of employment rights
Farms covered by cotton-harvest monitoring	74	Indicates direct monitoring of labor practices in agriculture
Colleges covered by monitoring	5	Demonstrates inclusion of educational institutions in monitoring
Schools covered by monitoring	52	Reflects attention to the prevention of involvement of schoolchildren and employees in prohibited labor practices
Preschool institutions covered by monitoring	9	Expands the institutional coverage of monitoring
Medical institutions covered by monitoring	14	Shows monitoring beyond the agricultural sector itself
Other organizations covered by monitoring	11	Demonstrates the cross-sectoral character of the monitoring process
Questionnaires completed during monitoring	549	Provides evidence of direct communication with workers and institutional representatives

The indicators presented in Table 1 reveal two important dimensions of trade union activity. The first is restorative protection, represented by compensation, recovery of financial resources, and reinstatement of unlawfully dismissed employees. The second is preventive protection, represented by field monitoring and direct interaction with workers and institutional representatives. The coexistence of these

two dimensions indicates that the role of trade unions was gradually moving beyond intervention after a violation had already occurred.

Particularly important results were achieved in labor monitoring. During the national monitoring of the cotton harvesting season in 2018–2019, activities in Karakalpakstan covered 74 farms, five colleges, 52 schools, nine preschool institutions, 14 healthcare institutions, and 11 other organizations. In total, these categories represent 165 monitored establishments and organizations. During visits, 549 questionnaires were completed through interviews with cotton pickers, institutional managers, and employees. Problems identified in the course of monitoring were addressed through immediate measures where possible [9].

The significance of these monitoring activities extends beyond the number of institutions inspected. They demonstrate the practical application of labor standards through field observation and direct communication with employees. Monitoring also created a mechanism through which potential violations could be identified before becoming systematic. This approach strengthened the preventive component of trade union activity.

The fight against forced and child labor became another significant area. Trade unions participated in seminars, training activities, monitoring, and regional discussions concerning the implementation of International Labour Organization conventions, occupational safety, labor standards, and the prevention of forced and child labor [10]. The materials associate this participation with the broader progress achieved by Uzbekistan in ending the systemic use of child and forced labor in cotton production.

Another important result was the strengthening of social partnership. Cooperation among government institutions, employers, and trade unions increasingly developed through institutionalized mechanisms. Republican and territorial tripartite commissions on social and labor issues were established to encourage cooperation among the three principal participants in labor relations. This development increased opportunities for trade unions to participate not only in resolving disputes but also in discussing employment, working conditions, wages, social protection, and related labor issues before conflicts emerged [11].

The findings also reveal an expansion in the meaning of employee protection. Trade union priorities increasingly included gender equality, employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, occupational health, safe working environments, social protection, and professional development [12]. Consequently, the concept of labor protection gradually developed from a relatively narrow focus on contractual rights toward a broader understanding of workers' socioeconomic well-being.

A particularly important direction was the extension of trade union attention to workers employed in different economic and social sectors. The materials emphasize the importance of protecting employees working in education, healthcare, culture, agriculture, and small industrial zones. They also identify the inclusion of informal-sector workers as a strategic task. Such workers may have weaker access to formal mechanisms of labor protection and social guarantees [13]. Increasing their legal awareness and involving them in trade union structures therefore represents an important direction for further institutional development.

The results further indicate that educational activity became an increasingly important preventive instrument. Seminars and training activities were organized on fundamental labor rights, trade union activity in enterprises involving foreign investment, corporate social responsibility, wages, social protection, and youth employment. These activities contributed to strengthening the legal competence of trade union representatives, employers, and workers.

International cooperation also expanded during the period under consideration. In 2021, the Council of Trade Unions of Central Asian States was established in Tashkent. In 2023, an organization bringing together trade unions of Turkic states was founded in Samarkand. These developments demonstrate the increasing involvement of Uzbekistan's trade union movement in regional and international institutional cooperation [14].

Digitalization emerged as another strategic direction. The use of modern information and communication technologies creates opportunities to receive workers' complaints and proposals, provide online consultations, improve legal literacy, and maintain closer communication with trade union members. Digital tools may also contribute to greater transparency and accessibility of trade union activities [15].

Taken together, these findings indicate a structural expansion of trade union functions in Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025. The traditional function of defending workers' rights remained central, but it was increasingly supplemented by preventive monitoring, social dialogue, occupational safety activities, legal education, international cooperation, support for social protection, and digital communication. The quantitative results presented in Table 1 provide practical evidence that this transformation was reflected not only in institutional priorities but also in concrete interventions affecting employees and workplaces.

4. Discussion

The results suggest that the transformation of trade unions in Karakalpakstan during 2016–2025 should be understood as a shift from a predominantly protective organization toward a broader institution of labor and social governance [16]. The defense of workers' rights remained the central function, but it increasingly became connected with preventive monitoring, social dialogue, occupational safety, legal education, international cooperation, and technological modernization.

The distinction between corrective and preventive protection is particularly important. Corrective protection is required when an employee has already been unlawfully dismissed, deprived of wages, exposed to unsafe working conditions, or denied other labor rights. Preventive protection operates earlier through workplace monitoring, legal education, occupational safety measures, collective representation, consultation, and negotiations between employees and employers. The combination of these approaches makes trade union activity more sustainable because it addresses both the consequences and the causes of labor problems.

The development of tripartite social dialogue strengthened this preventive dimension [17]. Cooperation among government institutions, employers, and trade unions provided an institutional framework for discussing labor and social issues before they developed into serious conflicts. The establishment of republican and territorial tripartite commissions on social and labor issues reflects an effort to make social partnership a regular mechanism of labor governance rather than an occasional response to disputes.

Such cooperation is especially important under conditions of economic transformation. Changes in employment structures, investment activity, entrepreneurship, and labor-market requirements can generate new forms of disagreement between employers and employees. A functioning system of social dialogue allows these interests to be negotiated through institutional channels [18].

However, effective partnership requires trade unions to preserve their representative role. Cooperation with employers and government institutions should not reduce their capacity to express and defend the interests of workers. The strength

of social partnership depends precisely on the existence of institutions capable of representing different interests clearly and responsibly [19].

The expansion of the social function of trade unions is closely related to wider reforms in Uzbekistan's social protection system. The National Social Protection Strategy included institutional mechanisms for social assistance, labor-market development programs, social security coverage, and services for families, children, persons with disabilities, and elderly citizens [20]. These developments increase the importance of trade unions as intermediaries between employees and available mechanisms of social protection.

One of the most important future challenges is the representation of workers employed outside traditional stable employment structures. The materials specifically emphasize the need to involve informal-sector workers in trade union activities, increase their legal literacy, and assist them in obtaining social protection. This issue is especially significant because informal workers may have weaker access to legal assistance, occupational safeguards, social insurance, and collective representation.

The changing labor market therefore requires trade unions to reconsider the traditional workplace-based model of membership. If workers are employed temporarily, seasonally, informally, or in sectors with high labor mobility, trade unions need more flexible forms of communication and representation. This is one reason why digital technologies may become increasingly important.

Digitalization can significantly expand access to trade union services. Online consultations, electronic submission of complaints, legal information platforms, and digital communication with members may reduce the distance between workers and trade union institutions. The materials identify digital technologies as a means of receiving employee proposals, providing consultations, increasing legal awareness, improving transparency, and strengthening communication with members.

The potential importance of digitalization is greater than simple replacement of paper-based procedures. If complaints and labor disputes are recorded systematically, trade unions could identify recurring problems by sector, territory, type of violation, or category of worker. This would make it possible to move from case-by-case intervention toward evidence-based prevention. For example, repeated complaints concerning delayed wages, unsafe conditions, unlawful dismissal, or excessive working hours could indicate structural problems requiring collective negotiation rather than isolated legal assistance [21].

Professional development is another area in which trade unions can play a preventive social role. The source materials emphasize the importance of helping employees acquire skills required by the modern labor market. This function becomes increasingly significant when technological and economic changes affect employment structures. Supporting retraining and professional development can help workers adapt to new requirements and reduce their vulnerability to unemployment.

International cooperation also strengthened the institutional environment of trade union activity. The establishment of the Council of Trade Unions of Central Asian States in Tashkent in 2021 and the creation of an organization of trade unions of Turkic states in Samarkand in 2023 reflect the growing international involvement of the trade union movement. Such cooperation can facilitate exchange of experience and contribute to the implementation of internationally recognized labor standards.

Nevertheless, the practical value of international cooperation depends on how effectively these principles are incorporated into workplace practices. Participation in international institutions and seminars becomes meaningful when it contributes to safer employment, stronger representation, better dispute-resolution mechanisms, and greater compliance with labor rights.

The results therefore indicate that the future development of trade unions in Karakalpakstan should focus on several interconnected priorities. These include strengthening preventive labor protection, expanding representation among informal and vulnerable workers, improving occupational safety, developing systematic legal education, increasing the use of digital technologies, strengthening professional development programs, and maintaining effective tripartite dialogue.

5. Conclusion

During 2016–2025, trade union activity in the Republic of Karakalpakstan evolved from the traditional defense of employees' rights into a broader system of labor and social protection. The restorative results were substantial: approximately 500,000 employees had their lawful rights protected, 267 billion soums were recovered in favor of workers, about 35 billion soums were paid to 1,000 employees affected by occupational accidents, and 13,000 unjustly dismissed workers were reinstated. At the same time, cotton-harvest monitoring covering 165 farms and institutions with 549 completed questionnaires marked a clear shift toward prevention, reinforced by the institutionalization of tripartite social partnership.

The future effectiveness of trade unions in Karakalpakstan will depend on their ability to combine corrective and preventive functions. Priority should be given to involving informal-sector workers, strengthening legal literacy and occupational safety, supporting professional development, and introducing digital consultation and complaint systems that allow recurring problems to be identified and addressed early. Progress in these areas would contribute to decent work, stable labor relations, and sustainable socioeconomic development in the region.

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