

Trade Unions in Southern Africa

Herbert Jauch
Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI)

Paper presented to:

'Futures for Southern Africa'

a symposium organised jointly by

Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR/ICD)
Southern African Catholic Bishop's Conference (SACBC)
Nordic Africa Institute (NAI)
Institute for Commonwealth Studies (ICS)

Namibia
September 2003

The Southern African region has one of the highest inequalities in the world. Even those countries with relatively high per capita incomes like South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, are characterised by widespread poverty. Statistics about per capita incomes hide the poverty of the majority behind the wealth of a small elite. It is therefore hardly surprising that starvation wages, poverty, inequality and high levels of unemployment are among the key issues that unions in the SADC region have to confront.

The origins of many labour movements in the region can be traced back to their countries' liberation struggle for national independence. In several cases, organised workers were one of the most visible and effective social forces advocating for independence and social change. The roles played by the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) and the Congress of South African trade Unions (COSATU) are instructive in this regard. The close links between liberation and labour movements in parts of Southern Africa are still visible today - particularly in those countries that attained their independence in recent years, like Namibia and South Africa. In other cases, however, labour movements that once were close allies of liberation movements found themselves in the forefront of advocating for democracy and thus openly challenged the ruling parties of the day. Due to their large social base, trade unions in Zambia and Zimbabwe played a key role in forming political opposition parties that overthrew former liberation movements in power (as happened in Zambia) or presented a serious political challenge (as in Zimbabwe). However, the trade unions in the SADC region are not homogenous and vary greatly in terms of organisational capacity, membership base and vision. In some countries like Botswana, Malawi and Mozambique, for example, union federations were actually established on the initiative of governments and hardly play the role of independent working class organisations.

This paper does **not** present a comprehensive analysis of labour in the SADC region. It merely sketches some of the recent trends in the region and outlines some of the challenges the labour movement has to confront.

New roles after independence

After independence, many unions had to re-define their roles. Most have recognised the need to become politically and organisationally independent. African trade unions are often the most organised section of civil society and the most outspoken critics of failed government policies.

Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Zambia, for example, are now characterised by serious conflicts between government and labour. Southern Africa's trade unions often have to articulate the aspirations not only of industrialised workers but also of the poor in general. As an organised force with a significant social base, trade unions play an important role beyond the workplace. However, the process of defining a clear social, economic and political role has been difficult in the light of former liberation movements coming to power, adopting neo-liberal economic policies and failing to meet the expectations of a 'better life for all'. The case of the Namibian labour movement may exemplify some of the challenges faced by unions in the SADC region.

Tripartism

A major challenge that confronted Namibian trade unions after independence was to adapt to a new role within the framework of a tripartite dialogue as set out by Government. Once

in office, the SWAPO Government embarked upon a path of reforming Namibia's colonial labour relations system. The overall aim was to move towards a new system of 'social partnership', governed by the Labour Act of 1992. Tripartite consultations and collective bargaining were seen as critical for the implementation of this new labour dispensation. The government envisaged an improvement in the living and working conditions of Namibian workers to be brought about by a combination of successful economic policies and successful trade union engagement with the private sector. The government defined its own role merely as that of a 'referee', trying to create a level (and enabling) playing field for collective bargaining between business and labour.

However, the consultative process leading to the formulation of the Labour Act was driven by government as the dominant partner who decided on the scope of the consultations. Unlike in a corporatist, institutionalised arrangement – such as in the classical cases of post-war, social-democratic Sweden and Germany - where capital, labour and state are jointly formulating socio-economic policies, social partnership in Namibia does not usually take the form of a joint decision-making process. In the process of drafting the Labour Act of 1992, government consulted with labour and capital but reserved the right to take the final decision without trying to achieve consensus with the social partners.

The Labour Act constituted a significant improvement compared with the previous colonial labour legislation. It extended its coverage to all workers, including domestic workers, farm workers and the public services. The new law encouraged collective bargaining, entrenched basic workers' and trade union rights, set out the procedures for legal strikes and provided protections against unfair labour practices. However, the Act fell short of some of the expectations of trade unions who felt that employers had unduly influenced the law through "behind the scenes" lobbying. The Act did not make provision for minimum wages (as SWAPO had promised in its 1989 election manifesto) and it did not guarantee paid maternity leave. Payment during maternity leave was only introduced with the Social Security Act of 1996. Other key demands of the NUNW that were not accommodated in the Labour Act were the 40 hour working week and 21 working days annual leave for all workers.

Overall the new act constituted a significant improvement for labour, but it also served to reduce worker militancy by shifting the emphasis away from workplace struggles to negotiations between union leaders and management.

Bargaining issues in Namibia were (and still are) narrowly defined and usually deal with conditions of employment only. The trade unions' main function was thus narrowed to being the representative of workers in a tripartite arrangement. While this enabled trade unions to win improved working conditions in well-organised sectors like mining, fishing and the public service, collective bargaining remained meaningless for farm and domestic workers. The ongoing adversarial nature of labour relations, coupled with racial polarisation at many workplaces and huge wage gaps, are further obstacles to the notion of social partnership.

Against the background of huge imbalances in terms of economic power between capital and labour, the state's chosen role as 'neutral referee' and creator of an enabling environment for collective bargaining, effectively benefited business interests. Business representatives went as far as describing worker militancy as an obstacle to job creation and economic development. Such sentiments were even echoed by some government officials

and politicians, which was just one indication that the close political ties between labour and SWAPO did not prevent the entrenchment of a pro-capitalist state after independence. This process was also assisted by the lack of political clarity on the side of trade unions regarding the development of a different social order after independence. Notions of worker democracy, worker control and social transformation had just emerged in the late 1980s but had not been developed into a coherent concept within the labour movement at the time of independence.

Despite the broad acceptance of social partnership by the Government, labour and business, there are limitations to what this concept can achieve under the current conditions. Collective bargaining and tripartite consultations alone will not be able to address the question of socio-economic inequalities. Trade unions are thus faced with the task of promoting worker participation in economic and social decision-making as well as developing broader policy proposals to bring about socio-economic transformation. Increased “goodwill” and a change of attitudes on the side of business towards labour will be a necessary but on its own not sufficient precondition for Namibian workers to become partners in a tripartite arrangement. Effective measures of redistribution to reduce income gaps and to spread resources more evenly will be preconditions for long-term social partnership arrangements. At present, the prospects for such partnerships are bleak as redistributive policies were abandoned in favour of 'market-related' wage and economic policies.

Conservative economic policies

The biggest challenge facing labour after independence was to define an effective strategy of influencing broader socio-economic policies in favour of its working class base. This task proved to be extremely difficult in the face of an onslaught by the neo-liberal ideology that was usually portrayed as the only practical policy option for Namibia and other countries in the region. Klerck accurately described governments' response to globalisation as: “...an open-ended encouragement of foreign investment; the marital stance towards the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; the confinement of social transformation to an extension of representative institutions; a tendency to reduce black empowerment to increasing the black entrepreneurial classes; and a failure to conceive of an economic policy that departs in substance from that of the colonial powers” (1997: 364).

IMF and World Bank advisors have become regular visitors to Namibia and 'assisted' with the country's public expenditure review and with 'training' of high ranking staff members of economic government institutions. Local economists by and large seem to be trapped in the neo-liberal dogma and continue promoting the very policies (e.g. structural adjustment programmes) that has caused severe social hardships in other SADC countries. The Namibian government increasingly slides towards neo-liberal policies as manifested, for example, by the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and privatisation programmes. Opposition to such policies by the labour movement is often countered by accusations that trade unions are still living in the (ideological) past and that trade unions are obstacles to economic growth and job creation. In the absence of comprehensive alternative development strategy by labour, trade unions were forced on the defensive on several occasions and found themselves sidelined from economic policy formulation. This points to

the current weakness of labour to systematically challenge conservative policies and to develop coherent policy alternatives.

Similar challenges confront the labour movement at SADC level where national trade union federations come together under the umbrella of the Southern Africa Trade Union Co-ordination Council (SATUCC). The fundamental challenge for labour was to define a development strategy in opposition to the neo-liberal policies that were increasingly introduced in Southern Africa since the mid-1980s. These mostly took the shape Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) introduced by the IMF and World Bank as a pre-condition for further loans. The severe social hardships and economic devastation that resulted from SAPs were discussed at several SATUCC meetings as the regional labour movement tried to define its own alternative agenda. The unions were concerned that narrow economic concerns of SADC states have overridden the political aspirations for regional integration, as individual countries were increasingly pursuing competing policies at national level which contradicted efforts towards regional integration. A regional policy and planning workshop in July 1995 concluded that:

- ◆ 'Free movement of labour within the current context of economic inequality and polarisation will lead to a drain of skilled people and influx of unskilled immigrants into richer countries in the region. There is a need for regulation of movement until greater economic equity is attained, and the real causes for the movements are addressed. This should allow for certain levels of flows of labour, with a preference for Southern African labour, multilateral arrangements on such movements and quotas based on the economic need for migrant earnings. Unions should also ensure that minimum labour standards apply to all workers, including migrants. It was noted that COSATU has called for a Commission on Labour Migration and it was proposed that this be established at a regional level.
- ◆ Completely free trade without trade/tariff barriers is not an appropriate measure for the region at present. It would be preferable to have a preferential trade area with temporary and flexible tariffs conditional upon improvement of productivity. However at a deeper level there is a need for an integrated policy of industrial and human resources development.
- ◆ Free movement of companies is not appropriate at this stage given the varying levels of development within the region. There should be regulations on movement of companies so that they do not move to avoid liabilities or to depress labour standards. There is a need to establish a single investment centre in the region to avoid competition between countries and the minimum standards of the Social Charter should be applied to protect workers and to reduce competition based on the non-implementation of labour standards.'(SATUCC 1995)

Since the 1990s, SATUCC's main aim was to influence policies at regional level in favour of workers. SATUCC's proposed social charter demanded a guarantee of workers rights and upward harmonisation of working conditions throughout the SADC region; social, economic and political roles for trade unions and obligations on businesses to disclose information nationally and regionally to the labour movement. SATUCC's social charter aimed to remove disparities in the region to eliminate the basis for divisive and exploitative business operations. However, this task has been difficult as many governments in the region show little sympathy for labour's concerns. Driven by the perception that foreign

investment is the panacea to economy development, several governments in Southern Africa regard strong unions as an obstacle to their (neo-liberal) development strategies. Structural adjustment programmes are sweeping the region since the 1980s and even some of the 'voluntary' adjustment policies of countries like Namibia and South Africa leave little room for labour-friendly practices.

Some union federations (e.g. COSATU, ZCTU-Zimbabwe and COLETU – Lesotho) have taken an active role in the formulation of their own proposals regarding economic policy a national level. Some federations also use advanced media strategies to make their viewpoints heard. Unions in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa are building their own research departments to strengthen their capacity to influence policies in favour of the disadvantaged majority.

Labour's social base

Those opposed to trade unions' influence have questioned the social base of the labour movement in the region. Employment data for Southern Africa indicate that less than a fourth of the region's labour force is in formal employment. Compared to the total population, only 1 out of 10 people in Southern Africa is employed in the formal sector. The rest is either unemployed or engaged in informal sector activities, subsistence farming or in unpaid family labour. As a result, the responsibility of the few in formal sector jobs are immense. They have to support extended families on wages that are often below the poverty line. Domestic and agricultural workers are extremely exploited and very difficult to organise. On the other hand, industrial workers in some countries (e.g. South Africa) have achieved reasonable wages in some sectors through militant action at the shopfloor. However, these achievements are now being threatened by industrial 'restructuring' and 'global competitiveness' which strives towards lower labour costs. A particular threat to labour standards has been the introduction of Export Processing Zones in the region.

The labour movement in the region has also been affected by mass retrenchments following mine closures, privatisation and structural adjustment programmes. Nevertheless, there are huge differences between trade unions in the various SADC countries and unionisation rates in Southern Africa range from about 14% - 60% of formal sector workers. The average union density in the formal sector stands at about 42% - higher than the unionisation rates in the UK, Italy, Germany, France, Japan and the USA.

Considering that several unions are still quite young (e.g. Malawi) while others are just emerging from civil wars and links to one party states (e.g. Mozambique and Angola), these figures indicate a substantial organisational power of unions in the region. In some countries, public sector workers are the dominant organised force while mineworkers and agricultural workers dominate in others.

In some countries, industrial workers are portrayed as a privileged "labour aristocracy". This notion was used by Arrighi and Saul in 1973 who argued that urbanised, unionised wage earners secured a privileged position in society at the expense of subsistence farmers, the unemployed and the casually employed. Although it can be argued that formal sector workers are in a better financial position than informal sector workers and subsistence farmers, they do not constitute a labour aristocracy. Referring to the Namibian case, Mbuende (1986:177-179) has pointed out the close links between the Namibian peasantry

and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system. Even today, workers' wages contribute significantly to the survival of family members in the rural areas and Namibia's industrial workers bear a substantial burden caused by widespread unemployment of about 35%. Despite the emergence of a permanent urban working class over the past decade, the vast majority of workers in formal sector employment share their income by way of remittances with members of their extended families in urban and rural areas. In Namibia, for example, about 45% of national household incomes are derived from wages. Describing formal sector workers as a 'labour aristocracy' therefore seems to be a misconception, which ignores the social reality in Southern Africa.

Union influence

Nonetheless, trade unions do not represent the majority of the population and are weak in terms of organising casual workers and those in the informal sector. However, the power and influence of trade unions in Southern Africa cannot be measured by membership figures alone. In many countries of the region trade unions are the most articulate and best organised organs of 'civil society'. This was demonstrated impressively during mass action in Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa where trade unions challenged government policies and received support from NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs).

However, union influence is sometimes hampered by a lack of trade union unity at national level and by the lack of strategic alliances between labour and other organisations representing marginalised constituencies. Quite often unions within countries operate as rivals to each other thus weakening workers bargaining power when they confront employers or governments. The reasons for such rivalry are often political but sometimes they are also based on individual ambitions and power struggles.

Conclusion

The labour movement in Southern Africa stands at a crossroad today. Unions need to clearly define their role beyond the workplace. While it is essential that trade unions are efficient negotiators and able to assist their members in all workplace-related problems, they also have to articulate workers' interests on broader socio-economic issues. As representatives of a specific social class, they need to articulate not only the interests of formal sector workers but also those of other (unorganised) groups such as the unemployed, casual workers, and workers in the small business sector.

Representing such broader interests effectively requires a vision of a different society based on equality and social justice and a strategy how this can be achieved. Labour will certainly not be alone in this endeavour and a key to success will certainly be the unions' ability to form strategic alliances with other organisations representing marginalised groups. Trade unions will have to revive their tradition of being a social movement if they want to regain the support and respect they enjoyed while being a key component of liberation movements. The choices made by the labour movement now will determine what role unions will be able to play in the years to come. They can become either the driving force behind a process of mobilisation for more fundamental socio-economic changes or become further marginalised with a dwindling membership base and unable to significantly influence future developments in the SADC region. It will be essential for the labour movement to give a different direction to the process of regional integration. Otherwise, this process will continue to be shaped by

the interests of business, assisted by the competing national governments of Southern Africa.

Acknowledgements

The analysis presented in this paper drew from many meetings and discussions of trade unions in the SADC region. I wish to thank particularly the following persons: Francis Antonio, Chakufa Chihana, Blessing Chiripanhura, Ranga Haikali, Godfrey Kanyenze, Dorothy Kawala, Bethuel Maserumule, Sandy Monyake, Austin Muneku, Richard Nxumalo, Abisha Nyanguwo, Fackson Shamenda, Alice Gondwe Siame and Morgan Tsvangirai.

In addition, this paper drew from the following publications:

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The author is the director of the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in Namibia and has worked on labour issues in Namibia and the SADC region for the past 15 years.