

Labour in Crisis: The NUNW and the Basic Income Grant

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The decision by the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) to part ways with the Basic Income Grant (BIG) Coalition is regrettable because it affects the plight of so many Namibians, including the constituency of the NUNW. The decision came as a surprise to many as the NUNW is the country's largest trade union federation, has a long history of struggle, proclaims to act in the interests of the poor and was a founder member of the Basic Income Grant Coalition. Thus at face value, the decision to leave the Coalition looks like a sudden turn-around but a closer look at some of the factors that have shaped the labour movement over the years points to a deeper crisis that puts the BIG decision into perspective.

Social movement unionism in the 1980s

During the 1980s, the NUNW played a key role in mobilising Namibian workers, linking workplace struggles with the broader struggle for liberation, democracy and social justice. Concepts like "workers' control" and "social movement unionism" reflected the democratic tenets of the time. The labour movement created structures to empower their members and formed alliances with other organisations that fought for socio-economic justice and independence. Unity of purpose was a guiding strategy as reflected in the national stay-away of June 1988, which was called in solidarity with the students' uprising against military bases near schools. Churches, community organisations, students and workers formed a powerful united front against South Africa's colonial rule and the NUNW played a central role.

New role after independence

After Independence, the unions narrowed their role to that of a "social partner" within a tripartite labour relations framework. The new SWAPO 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. Most trade unions accepted their new role with little resistance – after all, political independence had been achieved and the liberation movement had taken over the reigns of government with several prominent former union leaders serving in parliament and cabinet.

Although there were significant improvements in labour legislation and policies after independence, these changes also served to reduce workers' direct participation by

shifting the emphasis of union activities towards negotiations between union leaders and management. Bargaining issues in Namibia are narrowly defined and usually deal with conditions of employment only. However, improvements of living and working conditions through collective bargaining did not benefit all workers. Instead, the main beneficiaries were workers in well-organised industrial sectors like the mining industry and the public service. By contrast, a large number of vulnerable workers, including informal sector workers, casual workers, domestic workers, and the unemployed, hardly benefitted from collective bargaining and thus still experience high levels of poverty. Even in sectors where minimum wages were formally introduced, like those for farm workers and security guards, workers remained exposed to highly exploitative practices.

A new bureaucracy

On the other hand, the post-independence period brought about a layer of trade union bureaucrats whose material standards of living are significantly above those of the average trade union member and who have entered company boards as directors as part of an ill-defined trade union investment strategy. This became apparent during the controversy surrounding the GIPF and the incredible large sitting allowances paid to its trustees, including trade union representatives. They earned as a sitting allowance for one meeting more than some of their members earned in a month!

The trade union activists of the 1980s who organised workers under extremely harsh conditions, including threats to their lives, were gradually replaced by union leaders who regarded trade unionism as a career option or as a springboard to "greener pastures" in government or the private sector. It is symptomatic in this regard, that some union leaders today are managers, either in the civil service or at parastatals. Notions of worker democracy, worker control and social transformation that had emerged in the late 1980s were not developed into a coherent concept within the labour movement and were gradually replaced by more hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of organisation in the post-independence era. Thus the labour movement as a whole shifted away from being membership-driven and became increasingly leadership-driven.

Labour's declining influence

Against the background of huge imbalances in terms of economic power between capital and labour, Namibian trade unions found it increasingly difficult to influence public policies in favour of their constituency. Business representatives went as far as describing worker militancy as an obstacle to job creation and economic development. Such sentiments were echoed by some government officials and politicians, and found even resonance amongst some union leaders who were reluctant to support militant workers' actions against exploitative practices. The Ramatex strike of 2006 was a case in point when union leaders were torn between

loyalty to government (who wanted to avert the strike) and their own members who were determined to act in defence of their own interests.

Unions occasionally criticised the neo-liberal ideology that so strongly shapes Namibia's economic policies as reflected in supply-side economics to attract investments, export processing zones, and liberal trade arrangements. Economic growth and competitiveness have become the key goals while the general welfare of the population was expected to be achieved through a mere "trickle-down" process. Following this path of economic development has led Namibia to unprecedented high levels of unemployment, which reached 51% in 2008.

Alternatives?

In light of this crisis, trade unions should be at the forefront of campaigning for alternative policy options that will address the burning issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Unlike most other civil society organisations, trade unions still have a fairly large membership base, a national presence and significant organisational potential. Trade union federations like the NUNW are supposed to articulate workers' interests on broader socio-economic issues and spearhead initiatives that could lead to redistribution, employment creation and social justice. Proposals like those contained the publication on "Alternatives to Neo-Liberalism in Southern Africa" (ANSA) were developed by trade unions and researchers in Southern Africa and point to possibilities for structural changes. Although the NUNW mentioned the need for structural changes when it announced its withdrawal from the BIG Coalition, the federation has not yet tabled its own proposals and has not campaigned for structural changes in a coherent and consistent manner.

At least, the NUNW's participation in the Basic Income Grant Coalition provided an example of labour's participation in a broad front of organisations united by the desire to tackle poverty. The BIG results in Omitara were encouraging and the idea of a national BIG seems widely supported by workers across the country. This is hardly surprising as many workers still earn below N\$ 1000 per month and have to cater for large extended family networks. A national BIG would certainly lessen their financial burden and enable others to engage in economic activities as occurred in Omitara. Also, the BIG is a tool for (modest) redistribution as it benefits the poor while the wealthy would cross-subsidise the BIG through the tax system.

However, the NUNW's Central Executive Committee (which includes some politicians and former trade union leaders as "associate members") decided otherwise. This raises questions about whose interests were actually served. A labour movement committed to organisational democracy and worker control should operate on the basis of mandates and afford its members the opportunity to debate issues through union structures before decisions are taken.

Perhaps the upcoming NUNW congress can provide a platform for workers to discuss Namibia's persistent high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, as

well as what can be done to effect the necessary changes. Trade unions need to find the courage for an open debate on what role the labour movement is willing and able to play in Namibia today. Reviewing the NUNW's role in the BIG Coalition is an important aspect of this process. Those opposed to the BIG should explain to their members why workers should reject a grant meant to benefit them and the poor in general.

Such a debate is long overdue and has to be the elementary starting point if unions want to reverse the continuous decline of influence and relevance they experienced over the years.

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