

A bumpy road ahead: Namibia's labour movement in 2011

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Namibian, March 2011

As Namibia celebrates 21 years of independence, the country's trade unions are facing a bumpy road ahead, having to confront huge levels of unemployment and inequality as well as internal divisions and a lack of ideological clarity. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the legal environment in which unions operate today is far more conducive than in the pre-independence era when labour relations were characterised by open hostilities and conflicts. The Labour Act of 1992 reflected the new government's efforts to balance the interests of the workers with those of the employers. 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. For the first time, the Labour Act covered all workers, encouraged collective bargaining, entrenched basic workers' and trade union rights, set out the procedures for legal strikes and provided protections against unfair labour practices.

In 2007, a new Labour Act was passed to improve on the old one, especially regarding the resolution of disputes. However, the new Act is still based on the notion that employers and workers should solve their conflicting interests through orderly collective bargaining. This has happened to some extent in well-organised industrial sectors like the mining, transport and fishing industries as well as the public service, but the vast majority of Namibia's working class – including informal sector workers, casual workers, domestic workers, unemployed workers etc. – did not benefit from collective bargaining and thus still experience high levels of poverty. Even in sectors where minimum wages were formally introduced, like in the agricultural sector as well as the construction and private security industries, workers remained exposed to highly exploitative practices.

The record levels of unemployment are perhaps the most significant structural problem for trade unions as tens of thousands of unemployed (mostly young) workers represent a "reserve army of labour" that is forced by circumstances to accept almost any job at any condition and thus places a downward pressure on wages and working conditions in the country.

Besides these organisational challenges, Namibia's trade unions also experienced a loss of internal capacity when several of its most prominent leaders left for "greener pastures" in government or the private sector after independence. Workers militancy and trade unions' prominence as popular "struggle organisations" declined as symbolised by the poor turnout at May Day rallies. In general, trade unions found it increasingly difficult to influence national social and economic policies and to present themselves as consistent defenders of working class interests. This was compounded

by the relationship of trade unions with political parties and by an ill-defined trade union investment strategy.

The question of linkages between trade unions and political parties led to deep divisions within the Namibian labour movement. The largest trade union federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) is affiliated to the SWAPO party and this was the main reason for the formation of a rival trade union federation, the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA). Although both union federation aim to represent workers' interests, they have been unable to take joint positions and spend much time and energy fighting each other. Divisions are also visible within the federations and even within industrial unions. Thus attention is deflected away from the central issues affecting Namibian workers today (such as unemployment, inequality and exploitative labour practices) towards internal conflicts, which at times are rooted in personal interests of union leaders.

The labour movement's ideological uncertainty found its clearest expression when trade union leaders entered company boards of directors as part of a very poorly defined union investment strategy. Individual leaders not only benefitted materially from handsome sitting allowances and other perks, but in the process the line between the interests of workers and those of companies became blurred. The recent GIPF scandal is perhaps exemplifying this confusion in the most striking way: some trade union leaders serving as trustees who were supposed to safeguard the interests of their members did not only enrich themselves through outrageous sitting allowances but were also amongst those who benefitted from dubious loan write-offs!

These examples demonstrate the urgent need for Namibian trade unions to re-define their role as class-based organisations with a clear transformative agenda. As a starting point, they need to ensure workers control in all their structures, entrench the principle of mandates and feed-back in all their operations and articulate the wishes and collective interests of Namibia's working class at all times. Unless trade unions manage to rise to these challenges, they are likely to face further declining influence in the public sphere and dwindling support from the very workers they are supposed to represent.