

Trade unions at the crossroads?

*Reflections on the challenges and opportunities facing
Namibia's labour movement*



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Abbreviations

AMCU	Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union
ANC	African National Congress
BIG	Basic Income Grant
CCN	Council of Churches in Namibia
CEACR	Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DLF	Democratic Left Front
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIPF	Government Institutions Pension Fund
GSSA	Government Service Staff Association
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
LAC	Legal Assistance Centre
LaRRI	Labour Resource and Research Institute
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
MANWU	Metal and Allied Namibia Workers Union
NAFAU	Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union
NAFTU	Namibia Federation of Trade Unions
NANTU	Namibia National Teachers Union
NDAWU	Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers Union
NDP	National Development Plan
NEC	National Executive Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

NISO	Namibia Informal Sector Organisation
NLFS	Namibia Labour Force Survey
NPSM	Namibia People's Social Movement
NSA	Namibia Statistics Agency
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers in South Africa
OPC	Ovamboland People's Congress
OPO	Ovamboland People's Organisation
PSUN	Public Service Union of Namibia
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTWU	Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union
SAMWU	Southern African Municipal Workers Union
SANGOCO	South African NGO Coalition
SATUCC	Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council
S&T	Subsistence and Travel Allowance
TIPEEG	Targeted Intervention Programme for Employment and Economic Growth
TUCNA	Trade Union Congress of Namibia
UN	United Nations
UNAM	University of Namibia
UPM	Unemployed People's Movement
WCL	World Confederation of Labour
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

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Summary

Namibia's labour movement today operates within the context huge levels of inequality.

Guillermo Delgado shows the linkages between global developments and those inside Namibia. He argues that the focus on economic growth without addressing the question of redistribution only serves elite interests. The gap between the rich in the poor is increasingly noticed but there are currently few forums in Namibia to discuss the class divide.

At a time when Namibia increasingly resort to debt-financing (for example for the TIPEEG programme), social unrest in large parts of Africa is on the rise. Although this is not yet happening on a large scale in Namibia, the series of "wildcat" strikes and some civic demonstrations point to emerging discontent.

Neoliberal policies continue to shape Namibia and large parts of the world in different forms, resulting in environmental degradation, the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, chronically ineffective land reform processes, massive housing shortages, chronic unemployment and increased dependency on consumerism. Delgado argues that the debates on the outcomes of neoliberal globalisation need to be linked to the current and emerging class struggles in order to chart a different way forward.

In his contribution, **Herbert Jauch** argues that the achievement of independence in 1990 had a tremendous impact on the labour movement and required a redefinition of the role that trade unions wanted (and were able) to play. The function of political mobilisation, which had taken centre stage before independence, was taken over by SWAPO, whose leadership returned to Namibia in 1989 and became the government after independence in 1990. Given the close structural links between the NUNW unions and SWAPO as well as the fact that most union leaders played a prominent role in the party as well, there was a widespread expectation among workers that the SWAPO government would be a "workers' government". However, once in power SWAPO did not pursue revolutionary working class politics and instead maintained the predominantly capitalist structure of the economy, while introducing the notion of social partnership into labour relations. Trade unions were expected to define a new role within this framework and offered little resistance to an increasingly neo-liberal development agenda.

The Namibian labour movement was ill prepared in both organisational and ideological terms, for the onslaught of neo-liberalism as expressed in the SWAPO government's economic policies. They were increasingly caught in a narrow "economism" as expressed in defensive battles around "bread and butter issues" without being able to address (or alter) the socio-economic structures, which perpetuated Namibia's high levels of income inequality. Jauch argues that Namibia's labour movement is in crisis today because trade unions do not represent Namibia's working class as a whole. Also they have accepted globalisation/capitalism as the framework within which to operate and they have virtually abandoned the notion of working class politics and social movement unionism. Another challenge identified is that the leadership of several unions is increasingly middle-class (both in orientation and in personal material standing) and that inner-union democracy is diminishing.

The **panel discussion of union leaders** revealed the distinct histories of NUNW and TUCNA. The former has close links with the ruling party and historically is "a child of SWAPO". The NUNW argues that its affiliation to the ruling party today helps it influence national policies and

the federation is proud that many national political leaders emerged from its ranks. TUCNA on the other hand believes that unions should be independent as stated in the Namibian constitution and that any links with political parties would undermine workers' control in unions.

In both federations the public sector unions are dominant and unions are aware of the need to ensure workers' and to expand union membership beyond just the permanent workers in the formal sector. Unions' key achievements include the improvement of members' living and working conditions, fighting discrimination and negotiating minimum wages and representing members in disciplinary cases.

There are many challenges confronting unions today such as suspicion towards trade unions, a lack of resources and internal capacity as well as internal divisions: "how can we fight poverty if we fight each other?" is one of the central questions. Some unions are now rebuilding their organisations through strategic plans, recruitment campaigns and capacity building at different levels. Also unions are beginning to realise that in the end they all have the interest to protect workers. They also agree that they need to address broader socio-economic issues affecting workers beyond the workplace.

Mazibuko Jara analyses the political conflicts in South Africa, within COSATU and within the tripartite alliance. He argues that the position taken by the country's largest trade union NUMSA poses a significant challenge for the ruling ANC. He points to heightened class struggles in South Africa and analyses the developments since the attainment of democracy from a working class perspective.

The battle lines within COSATU are drawn between those loyal to the ideas of a gradual national democratic revolution led by the ANC and those who call for a more radical implementation of the demands of the Freedom Charter, including nationalisation of key industries. Thus far COSATU has given support to the ANC in every election but this is bound to change after NUMSA's challenge to the ANC's hegemony.

The current conflict reflects a long-standing dilemma for South Africa's trade unions. They are caught within a capitalist system while asserting their support for socialism. Working class interests were subordinated to the national project which meant that crucial social, political and economic questions remained unresolved. Today there are numerous contradictions which paved the way for conflict: material differences between union members and unions leaders, union investments within a capitalist economy, reformist collective bargaining alongside rhetoric of transformation, and political cooption of union leaders into government.

COSATU now faces a crisis due to its subordination to the ANC which meant a loss of influence over policy, a loss of political plurality within COSATU. The federation faces neoliberal restructuring at work, structural unemployment and a politically arrogant ANC. The SACP while having played an important historical role in political workers education is today a mere apologist for the ANC and thus NUMSA consulted its members and structures country-wide and then decided to fight for a more radical COSATU and a more radical transformative agenda. Mazibuko argues that this presents an opportunity to mobilise large social forces for the necessary battles against capitalism.

Pempelani Mufune points out that over the years Namibia has experienced high levels of unemployment. That has not been very surprising given that the economy has not been growing at a pace where more people could be absorbed. What was surprising was the drop in unemployment between 2008 and 2012. The NLFS of 2008 showed that unemployment had risen from 36.7% in 2004 to 51.2% in 2008. The 2012 NLFS however showed that unemployment had dropped to 27.4% in four years. The employed population increased from 331 444 to 630 094, that is by 90.1%. How could this be? Mufune places the spotlight on how Namibia defines and measures employment and unemployment. He examines the changes to definition and measurement of employment and unemployment as used in the various Namibia Labour Force Surveys with particular focus on the “treatment” of the subsistence economy and/or family-oriented economy in NLFS. He argues that the changes made in the official unemployment statistics may not reflect the reality on the ground as the reduced unemployment figures are not based on the creation of additional jobs.

Clement Daniels and **John Nakuta** evaluate the extent to which the law, institutions and processes converge to safeguard labour rights in Namibia. They critically assess issues which may give rise to spontaneous labour unrest as often experienced in the country. They argue that the law, instead of expanding the labour-related rights guaranteed in the Namibian Constitution, is sometimes used, wittingly or unwittingly, to water down some of these rights. In this regard, the restrictive application of the Labour Act, the liberal interpretation of essential services, the overly cumbersome pre-strike procedures are given as examples in substantiation of the argument.

Daniels and Nakuta also point to unions’ weaknesses and ineffectiveness in the resolution of disputes. They argue that the law, institutions, procedures, organs of state and non-state actors should all work together to give full effect to the spirit and purport of the Constitution as it relates to labour rights instead of diminishing the essential content of these rights, especially the right to collective bargaining and others rights flowing from there.

Daniels and Nakuta also point to a lack of understanding regarding collective bargaining and dispute resolution processes, knowledge of the labour laws and industrial relations and dispute resolution skills. They warn that cumbersome procedural requirements must not be erected to undermine workers’ right to strike as this is the only ultimate weapon that workers have at their disposal when dealing with intransigent employers. They call for more public resources to be invested in the administration of labour relations and the capacity building of employers and employees to avert unnecessary and unprocedural industrial action.

Introduction

Volker Winterfeldt

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Announcing the August Public Lecture Series for 2013, an event jointly staged every year by the Department of Sociology at the University of Namibia and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the organizers asked the question: *Are Namibian trade unions at the crossroads?* Since its inception in 2006, the lecture series has always made an effort to offer a forum for the critical debate of issues of social relevance. The organizers expected answers and assessments of the situation from activists and experts to contribute to a dialogue involving various stakeholders as well as the interested public in general.

The theme of the 2013 lecture series “Trade unions – navigating the class divide” focused on the difficult reality confronting Namibian labour unions two decades after independence. Neoliberal economic policies¹ have long exacerbated the social divide between middle and high income earners in permanent employment, and the less fortunate majority, those with insecure livelihoods who more often than not are out of work and near the breadline. The sharp contrast between affluent suburbs and the rapidly growing informal settlements on the margins of most urban centres in Namibia bears witness to that. The lecture series thus wanted to explore where in Namibian society do the National Union of Namibia Workers (NUNW) and the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA) stand? Whom in society do they represent?

The crucial role the NUNW and affiliates played in opposing the apartheid regime in the 1980s within the country vouches for the relevance of this organization representing workers’ and employees’ interests and rights. The resistance and support by the then young trade unions and the workers’ action committees remain one of the prominent features of the liberation struggle from colonialism. The NUNW’s push for workers’ rights contributed to the passing of the Labour Act in 1992, which for the first time in the country’s history safeguarded workers’ rights at the workplace. In 2007, the legislative ban on labour hire practices recalling the Contract Labour System marked another success.

But with times changing exigencies also change. Twenty years of tripartite social partnership, despite many improvements, did not bridge the huge income gaps. Social and economic inequalities inherited from the colonial dispensation were blended with new ones that originate from the ascendancy of new elites recruited from the ranks of the previously disadvantaged. While in affluent quarters the old racial divide is now less pronounced, unemployment and lack of resources for the majority of the population fuel class divisions.

Trade unions have not remained unaffected by the post-independence inequalities and the rush for opportunities and public resources. There are indications that the closeness of their

¹ Traditionally, neoliberalism has been understood as a development model based on free market principles in which the state's role is reduced to the creation of conducive conditions for market to operate. The assumption was that markets will bring social upliftment and benefits for all, which after many decades of implementation has been not only an unfulfilled promise, but arguably a disastrous experiment. After a repeated sequence of crises in the 20th and 21st centuries, the most recent being the 2008 financial crisis, the debate on neoliberalism has shifted.

relationship with the ruling party comes with the unintended effect of a growing gap between rank and file and leadership within unions. Union representatives on boards of parastatals and private companies earn sizeable sitting fees which often provide them with a living standard way above the common members' livelihoods. Industrial unions and the NUNW have set up investment arms to earn incomes in addition to their membership fees. By forming these investment companies unions have not only become an integral part of the country's financial sector but also employers of size, ironically representing capital and labour simultaneously. On the other hand, the unions' role in pushing employment creation policies in the interest of labourers shows clear signs of failure. Namibian workers' slide into unemployment is reflected by census statistics. The numbers of unemployed increased from 91 000 in 1991, to 185 000 in 2001, and 312 000 in 2011. Even for those who are in employment, permanence is increasingly threatened by the informalisation and casualisation of labour.

For workers, unemployment entails exclusion from union representation. What can unions do for the unemployed, to improve their social condition and contribute to the country's development? This was one of the questions the organizers of the lecture series hoped to get an answer for. Are the indications of a growing social divide between leadership and rank and file consistent with reality was another question. Does affiliation with the ruling party still foster exertion of political influence in labour matters, or does it rather tie the union leadership's hands? Are trade unions at the crossroads? Many questions awaiting critical debate for which the six lectures of the series were meant to create space.

The relevance of these questions has been emphasized by several recent occurrences. The leadership of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) fell apart into factions. The NUNW remained entangled in a conflict over unfair dismissal and outstanding payments with its former Secretary General. His successor as acting secretary general awaits trial for misappropriation of union assets and was subsequently suspended. The leadership of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) was accused by workers of signing a wage agreement at the Roads Authority without their consent.

The lecture series was well attended by trade unionists, many of them travelling as far as from Walvis Bay to participate. Several times, activists urged the organizers to continue offering such fora for discussion. The discussions pointed to a divergence of interests within the unions but also stressed the need for a common base of solidarity. However, debates also showed that there is a great need for systematic information and education on economic, social, legal and political issues amongst trade union members, as well as for training on organizational and procedural aspects of union work. The debates included representatives and members of both Namibian trade union federations, NUNW and TUCNA, and thus accommodated dialogue between contrasting and competitive stances, in particular with reference to the fundamental question of unions' relationship with political parties.

The lecture series started with a look back into the history of Namibia's labour movement. Herbert Jauch, labour researcher and educator, asked the question *Where from?* retracing the initial decades of workers' contribution to the struggle for labour rights and independence. He contrasted the powerful legacy of political resistance to the apartheid regime at the workplace with the critical situation in which Namibian workers find themselves today, after more than twenty years of independence. His assessment of the unions' current crisis of representation and internal struggles for power pointed to a worrying distance between members and leadership.

The assessment led to the follow-up question: *Where to?* Herbert argued that for unions to remain relevant they would need to broaden their social base, address working class issues beyond the workplace and find their way back to the principle of mass mobilization characterizing the unions' early years. His paper forms chapter 1 of this publication.

Four leading representatives of the two trade union federations, NUNW and TUCNA, and of two of their affiliates came together on a panel taking stock of the current situation from the leadership's perspective. Alfred Angula emphasized the importance of the NUNW's direct access to government and line ministry for getting the necessary political support for the concerns of the labour movement. In contrast, Mahongora Kavihuha and Victor Kazonyati stressed TUCNA's autonomy from political parties as an essential advantage to ensure independent industrial action and advocacy. Both NUNW and TUCNA were critical of the leading question asked by the organizers – are *Namibian trade unions at the crossroads?* Justina Jonas outlined MANWU's commitment to transparent organizational structures bound by the members' political mandate, as well as the union's efforts to educate and train female members and the youth in order to take them to leadership positions. The key aspects of this panel discussion are presented in the second chapter.

Mazibuko Jara gave a detailed and colourful picture of the factions within COSATU and of the often strained relationship between the congress and the ruling party in South Africa. His presentation touched on the question what lessons the Namibian labour movement could learn from its neighbour's experiences. To ensure the unions' independence from the ruling party's influence he proposed not disaffiliation but the formation of a mass-based political party in opposition instead. This party could offer a home to union members who oppose the unions' subjection the interests of the ruling party. In this way, the democratic opposition would organize itself within the unions, and through the affiliation with the new party develop new ways of combining economic and political struggle. Mazibuko's contribution forms chapter three.

Daniel Oherein, leading statistician at the National Statistics Agency, and Pempelani Mufune, sociologist at UNAM, presented two controversial assessments of the Namibian Labour Force Survey (NLFS) released early in 2013. Oherein explained the astonishing drop in the unemployment rate from 51.2% in 2008 to 27.4% in 2012 on the basis of a reclassification of communal farmers and unpaid family members. The 2012 NLFS classifies both groups not only as economically active within the country's subsistence economy but also as employed. Mufune contested their re-classification as inconsistent with our economic reality, pointing to the fact that employment is not just a matter of statistical definition but relates to actual economic activity and livelihoods. His contribution is contained in chapter four.

The last lecture focused on issues of conflict resolution in labour disputes. The two legal experts approached the question whether responses to labour unrest should be guided by strict legal procedures only, or whether the structurally weaker position of labour – in relation to the employer – justifies spontaneous industrial action. Guided by a human rights perspective, John Nakuta pointed to shortcomings of the current labour legislation, which favours a rather inflexible legalistic response that does not take account of the social imbalance of power between labour and capital. Clement Daniels, building on his vast practical experience as a labour lawyer, agreed with Nakuta's assessment but also pointed at the positive effects the Namibian labour laws had on strengthening employees' rights in labour disputes. Their paper forms the final chapter of this publication.

We hope that this booklet will provide worthwhile and inspiring reading for those interested in Namibian labour issues and for those who join unions to address the challenges confronting workers today.

The socio-economic context of contemporary labour struggles

Guillermo Delgado

Associate researcher with the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI)

This paper outlines the socio-economic context in which the Namibian labour movements finds itself today. While the contributions in this book are already telling of the current situation and the urgency for change, it is necessary to stress the fact that this urgency is not only notional or subjective, but that there is substantive evidence that supports arguments for alternative paths. This paper aims at firstly outlining some evidence and linking it with current developments relevant to the labour movement in Namibia, while also establishing some connections with international debates. It provides an overview of issues and themes, and therefore relies heavily on references for the reader to resort to when seeking further details. Far from ending on an apolitical (neutral) note, the paper argues that it will be (groups of) inhabitants directly affected by the issues taking place and consciously aiming to transform them that will be the ones effecting fundamental change. Conditions are ready for “the political” to become an arena for class struggle, and therefore the question arises about the labour movement's position in this process.

Dogmatic views on economic growth

On a 2012 interview with the Qatari news network Al Jazeera, President Pohamba was faced with the initial straightforward question on what would, in his view, be the number one challenge of Namibia today. He clearly replied: “economic growth” (Al Jazeera, 2013). This is indeed the case not only for Namibia as the planet is on a stagnant growth path (IMF, 2013). Some would argue that this is the case for quite some decades now², and few are able to clearly formulate where potential growth could possibly come from. Furthermore, multi-national organisations are consistent in preaching this one-liner dogma on a permanent basis: “Namibian economy [...] should aim to rein in current spending -wages and transfers and subsidies to state owned enterprises, while preserving growth-promoting capital”(Kaira, 2014a), as recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, this all is based on the assumption that economic growth is the precondition for social upliftment. It is here where a fundamental discrepancy between the position of current “decision-makers” and (currently marginal) radical positions lies: it is *not* economic growth but redistributive measures that will enable a more equitable existence for human kind. If capitalism could be boiled down to a few words, these would be: *the accumulation of surpluses*, and in a limited context like ours, accumulation necessarily happens through dispossession (Harvey, 2006). In other words: there is one single cake, and large slices taken mean smaller ones for others. The implications of this is a political divide between those advocating for slices of different size (perhaps because they’re already getting one, or *believe* they’re getting one, or *hope* to get one) and those advocating for, if not slices of exactly the same size, at least a fair size for everyone to make ends meet. To say that the dominant stance is not

² Initiatives such as Redefining Progress (2014) and Beyond GDP (European Commission, 2014) propose to not only calculate the growth indicated in the GDP index, but add to the equation the losses, such as long-term environmental damage, resource depletion, crime, dependence on foreign assets, amongst others. This index is called Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI). If calculated, these indicators would show that growth has been massively more modest than the GDP indexes suggests.

that “the cake” has to be cut in fairer slices, but that the cake needs to be “grown”, is telling of the model and attitudes of the dominant classes interested in keeping the current development model up and running.

The growing divide - where does it lead to?

There is a division taking place amongst classes, and this has widened alongside (or because of) the prevalent economic indicators. The aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and its ripples worldwide did indeed produce generalised impoverishment in the form of increased unemployment (IMF, 2010), homelessness and evictions (UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, 2012), and cuts in social programs through austerity measures undermining human rights (CESR, 2013), to name a few. However, what is striking (or, rather say, predictable) is that the crisis also produced more billionaires than ever (Foley, 2010). In fact, there has never been more “high net worth individuals” in the planet than after the crisis. Inequality is on the rise at the planetary scale, and if one understands that in a planet with limited resources accumulation happens through dispossession, this simply means that the elite has started to extract more labour power from the working class in increasingly exploitative ways, natural resources in a more violent and irreversible way (e.g. fracking, tar sands, exploration in melting glaciers), and at the same time find increasingly intricate ways to avoid “giving back” through due tax (Stewart, 2012).

In Namibia, this division appears to be also fragmenting economic activities and the labour market. Pempelani Mufune writes about a “dual economy” in his chapter where a “modern market economy” coexists along a “subsistence and/or family-oriented” one, while Herbert Jauch points out at a tiered restructuring of labour market today: from the “small elite enjoying a standard of living comparable to first-world countries” along high-waged formal sector groups on top, to the low-waged formal-sector groups, casual workers, and unemployed on the other. However, fragmentation and the current gaps are only a fraction of the issue. The other pressing fact is that there are no indications of these divisions being bridged or narrowed anytime soon. This growing gap raises the question of what could happen when a point is reached where the socio-economic differences are becoming irreconcilable?

The increasing gap is not an abstract warning, but one of the most concrete and ordinary implications: those in which fragmented groups stop knowing and regarding each other. It only took a quick scan of the SMS section of the main Namibian newspaper to find what an ordinary inhabitant thinks of the elite: *“Who can challenge this? [...] local elite or businessmen from previously disadvantaged groups in Namibia today are the ones who steal money somewhere to make up their businesses in one way or the other. It is like taking bribes, diverting funds, winning tenders unprocedurally, setting up unnecessary foreign trips for S&T[subsistence and travel allowances] and so forth. They never actually sweat for their wealth”* (The Namibian, 31 January 2014). This works also the other way around, where highly educated individuals and the elite defend that indeed “the poor” are inherently crime-prone, and that free time for “them” is inherently equal to crime³. Dedicating the public lecture series of 2013 to the theme of “Navigating the class divide” could not have been more timely, but it is also telling that open

³ The neoliberal French commentator Nicolas Bavarez said that “for the poorest sectors of society, free time equals alcoholism, violence, and crime”, (Chollet, 2013).

debates on class structures are rather rare in Namibia and many in the audience indicated the lack of such forums and discussions.

Trading with fictitious capital and expectations

The economic landscape is not encouraging, but rather reflecting a “brace position” trajectory. Namibia sold its first 10-year US\$500m⁴ Eurobond in 2011, which is essentially selling domestic debt to foreign markets which investors buy with the promise of returns based on economic growth projections in the country (Duddy, 2011). It did so purportedly to fund a deficit in budget (Kay and Seria, 2011). This bond-financed the country’s Targeted Intervention Programme for Employment and Economic Growth (TIPEEG) which is subject to its own critique (Jauch, 2012). What is worth pointing out here is the normalisation of debt and the increasing engagement in debt-financed strategies (Kaira, 2013). “It is possible that we’ve opened a Pandora box of credit”, and analyst said (Duddy, 2011). Not long after, more sovereign debt was listed in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange “to fund a budget deficit” (Windhoek Observer, 18 October 2012), but that also didn’t prevent for the government a year later to table the budget earlier than usual because it was running out of cash (Grobler, 2013). That early-tabled national budget of 2013 did what indeed appeared as alchemy: increasing spending while reducing tax. Where does the money come from then? The answer is: from debt as Namibia tries to follow a debt-financed growth strategy. Some analysts would justify that by referring to the fact that Namibia’s foreign debt, then at 20% of National GDP, is nothing compared to the levels of debt that countries like Japan or the U.S. have, then at 200 and 100% of their GDP, respectively (Duddy, 2011).

One can argue whether these cases are comparable or not but debt is also subject to class perspectives, where low-income groups are regarded as prone to “irresponsible borrowing” if left unregulated (Kaira, 2014b) while at the same time states engage in debt at the macroeconomic level many times for frivolous spending without a proportionally-similar amount of discipline (Ikela, 2013). Debt is termed “fictitious capital” (Marx, 1991) because it refers to a value that has not yet been produced. Trading with it, like current trade with oil licenses in Namibia at a time where oil findings have not materialized (Sherbourne, 2012), is trading with the promise of something that could take place (or not). With current outlooks, debt-fuelled growth and other growth-dependent sectors⁵ are, ultimately, just hopes.

Social unrest and conditions for mobilization

The fear of what could happen if global prosperity fails to materialise soon is not hidden, but succinctly put by the “global elite” at the recent Davos “World Economic Forum”: “Widening gaps between the richest and poorest citizens threaten social and political stability as well as economic development” (Johnston, 2014). This was in fact a “fear” repeatedly outlined years before and echoed by other mainstream multinational organizations, such as the ILO (Elliott,

⁴ Note that at the then rate of N\$7.89 per US\$, its value was calculated at N\$3.9bn; at today's rate of N\$11.04 per US\$, it stands already at N\$5.52bn. Rate fluctuations directly affect the amount of the debt that government has to repay, and currently the prospects of currency depreciations are high, mainly due to the Namibian dollar being pegged to the South African Rand. Therefore any instability in either country will affect the other and Namibia is particularly vulnerable (Isaacs, 2014).

⁵ An example of such sectors is construction, which is regarded to be the sector leading Namibia's growth since last year (see The Namibian, 21 November 2013 and 22 January 2014).

2011). Social unrest, particularly in the African continent, is on the rise⁶, giving an ironic twist to the superfluous “Africa rising” narrative so dominant in pro-business media (Akwagyiram, 2013; Biney, 2013). Regarding Namibia, it’s not possible to jump to direct parallels to global trends of social unrest, as there are specific nuances and differences. While indeed Namibia saw a recent wave of “wildcat” strikes (Grobler, 2012), these were arguably not for the reasons regarding “the broader role [of unions] in society” nor in relation to “unions’ understanding as class-based organizations”(see Jauch’s chapter), but for more practical and utilitarian reasons. In other words, not for issues directly concerning anyone else beyond those striking and those affected by the strikes. However, there are a few examples of civic demonstrations on more general topics that have taken place, such as a protest against the Police Inspector General’s remarks prompting a ban on mini-skirts (Kaulinge, 2013) and a demonstration against a N\$700 million renovation of Parliament (Immanuel, 2014). Cultural events such as a public platform organised for “spoken word” from the youth and general public has also been a moment that allowed for the sharing of critical reflections (Theys, 2013). Furthermore, divisions within unions have also sparked a unique new kind of protests for the Namibian context. The teachers’ march against the Namibia National Teachers’ Union (NANTU) in 2012 (Nakale, 2012) was arguably the first of its kind, as workers’ protests in Namibia have been historically against employers and in some cases against government (Dempers, 2010).

Trade unions are not here singled out as the only ones displaying such contradictions. Similar oppressed-turned-oppressor dynamics have been laid bare in the 2012 round of shack demolitions that left homeless dozens in the middle of winter⁷. There are emerging grassroots movements in Namibia and shack dwellers asked: “Why during the time of elections, the people living in the informal settlement[s] are legal to vote but after the elections we are illegal for anything?” (LaRRI, 2013). In South Africa, increasingly radical social movements are already visible. Abahlali baseMjondolo’s⁸ “No land, no house, no vote” slogan shows possible parallels to Namibia. However, a closer look is required to understand possible developments.

The normalization of anti-labour narratives

With a ruthless quest for economic growth as a backdrop, it is plain to see how labour demands are and will continue to be presented in the mainstream media as “unreasonable”(Louw, 2013), “unaffordable”(Beukes, 2014), and “unnecessary” (Ikela, 2012). While anti-labour rhetoric is everyday practice in the pro-business media, Namibia has seen public displays from public servants and commentators who put the blame of economic woes on workers. “Don’t you dare to strike”, warned Minister Naholo when he addressed construction workers and others at the launch of the “mass housing programme” on 16th October 2013. On that occasion, he also put the blame for the flight of the Malaysian textile company Ramatex on workers. Similar positions can be equally observed in South Africa (Reddy, 2013). Globally, labour has seen its lowest unionization rates (Rampell, 2009), which are related to the downward diversification of workers

⁶ The number of public protests and civil violence on the continent has more than doubled since 1996 (African Economic Outlook 2013).

⁷ To see a full documentation on the matter, see "Citizens of Windhoek", a publication on a platform for self-organisation organised by the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI, 2013).

⁸ Abahlali baseMjondolo is one of the most visible groups pressing for radical development alternatives in South Africa. Their struggle is today internationally famous and their website is very well documented for further reference: <http://abahlali.org/>

that Jauch observes in his contribution. Whereas the emergence and re-emergence of the Namibia Informal Sector Organization (NISO) and the Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers' Union (NDAWU) could be signs of new kinds of organisations, these have still a long road to prove that they can become organisations for transformative purposes. In South Africa, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM), is also a contemporary manifestation of current landscape regarding labour⁹. Speculation in international debates that "today's strongest unions [...] could easily be[come] the weakest" (Porter, 2012) coincides with the restructuring of the labour environment sketched in this book.

The future might lie somewhere between the broad spectrum of a new labour movements and a future without trade unions. The task of reminding society why unions matter, be it in reducing inequality (Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights, 2013), or as an engine for the production of the middle class (Madland et al., 2011), or in their role in liberation struggles is perhaps only a fraction of what needs to be done to engage in progressive action. But what could be the themes of "progressive action" in which trade unions could engage?

The program of NUMSA's "Political school" of 2014 provides good guidelines on this: civic, service delivery and housing; gender justice; land and food sovereignty; youth; climate and environmental justice; faith issues; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) groups; democracy, human rights, and economic justice; health, welfare, children's and disabled rights; media and culture; migrants and refugees; the unemployed (NUMSA, 2014). NUMSA has also an international relations department that engages sister unions in neighbouring countries, including Namibia's Metal and Allied Workers Union (MANWU). Such exchanges hold great potential.

The ongoing process of neoliberalisation

The above are a set of observations that are certainly not all the challenges in need of progressive action, but if taken together they illustrate the corrosive effects of an ongoing process of neoliberalisation. Wallerstein (2004) and others have pointed out that they do not necessarily regard neoliberalism as a fixed ideology, but as an ongoing process capable of restructuring in contradictory ways to previously observed characteristics (Aalbers, 2013; Harvey, 2007). A concrete example is that neoliberalism previously advocated that a "small" government was a pre-requisite for the free-market to operate unleashed, but today some neoliberals acknowledge that a powerful and well-armed statecraft can also enable liberal market policies to operate as long as they remain on the side of capital. On the other hand, an example of what has not changed is the way in which privatization continues to be a dogma broadly and strongly promoted by pro-capital media.

The observations presented in this paper so far have to be considered not only along, but in synchrony with the issues affecting us as a society in general: processes of environmental degradation, drought that is not extraordinary but part of a desertification process caused by global warming and other man-made transformations (Al Jazeera, 2013; WMO, n.d.); mining sector's rapacity having abrasive health and social effects on those desperate for a job (Grobler, 2014; Shindondola-Mote, 2009); fishing over-quota and dispossession of natural resources from

⁹ The movement does not have a website, but their statements can be found in the site of Abahlali abaseMjondolo: http://abahlali.org/taxonomy/term/unemployed_peoples_movement/unemployed_peoples_movement

citizens (García Rey and Grobler, 2011); chronically ineffective and murky land reform processes (Cousins and Scoones, 2010; Sibeene, 2011; Werner and Odendaal, 2010); massive housing shortages (Mwilima et al., 2011), timid and fundamentally erred housing programs (Ngulu, 2013), and encouragement of predatory property markets distorting prices, producing millionaires, and ultimately reproducing the apartheid urbanization process (Delgado and Lühl, 2014); chronic unemployment and statistical elusiveness about it (see Mufune in this book); increased (encouraged and celebrated) reliance on a consumer-based economy and a "black" middle class (McKinsey, 2010); jumpy youth movements flirting with ideas between nationalism (Amupanda, 2013), religion (SPYL, 2013), redistribution (Amupanda, 2011), homophobia (Sankwasa, 2013), unassiduous ideas of decolonization (Hangala, 2013), and dogmatic understandings of African-ness which altogether leave few prospects for upcoming "leaders" to differ from the paths taken by the current "liberation movements as governments" (Melber, 2013b). Furthermore we see fragmentary political party system without fundamental differences in their economic programme; declining aid due to technocratic indicators improvements and crises in donor countries (Muraranganda, 2013); unresolved tribal tensions and their complexity vis-a-vis gender rights (Hubbard, 2007) and a whole set of other issues. In the particular context of Namibia, where civil society has still no collective memory of widespread political achievements through social struggle other than independence, the labour movement might still be the best positioned to act progressively and independently.

What is to be done, and who is going to do it?

The challenges outlined in this book are relevant to those trying to understand the on-going and long-standing processes of exclusion: the restructuring of the labour movement, the massive discrepancies and internal contradictions the movement faces, the ambiguity of employment statistics, the stiff regulatory framework that make strikes cumbersome or relegates them to illegality, and ultimately the relevance of the political developments in South Africa, a country to which Namibia is linked in vital and asymmetrically dependent ways. The emphasis in linking these debates to global and historical class struggles is not merely an "appendix", but fundamental in assessing possible scenarios today. This does not mean that it is indispensable to be aware of the history, theory, and other stakeholders' position before engaging in progressive action. As a young participant at the lecture series mentioned to me in private when a trade union leader called on the audience to respect the history of trade unions: "I cannot eat history".

The lecture series of 2013, despite well-attended and documented, was only a partial exercise that appealed to and reached a limited audience that will not necessarily be the one or best positioned to effect the changes needed to transform the labour movement and society. Mazibuko Jara pointed out that regardless of what happens within political parties, trade unions, or other kinds of organizations, it will be organized (or semi-organized) groups with an understanding of the overall process of exclusion, dispossession, and growing inequality, that are the missing link towards a more credible path to an alternative form of development in Southern Africa.

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Namibia's labour movement: where from, where to?¹⁰

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Despite the prominent role played by Namibian trade unions in the country's liberation struggle, and regardless of the fact that the labour movement is still among the strongest of Namibia's "civil society" organisations, trade unions seem to have lost much of their popularity and political influence since independence. Due to Namibia's large rural population and the underdeveloped manufacturing sector, trade unions might seem to represent only a minority of the population. However, as pointed out by Mbuende (1986: 177-9), there are close links between the Namibian peasantry and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system¹¹, whose legacy is still visible 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 the widespread unemployment. Over the past three decades a permanent urban working class has emerged, but most workers in formal-sector employment share their income by way of remittances to members of their extended families in urban and rural areas. The labour force surveys between 1997 and 2012 revealed that almost half of Namibia's national household incomes are derived from wages and salaries (Ministry of Labour 2001, 2002, 2006, and 2010; NSA 2013).

Despite its small population of less than 2 million people, Namibia has over 40 registered trade unions split into two federations and several unaffiliated unions. The largest trade union federation is the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), which represents 60,000-70,000 workers. The NUNW played a key role during Namibia's liberation struggle and continues to be affiliated to the ruling SWAPO party. The second trade union federation is the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA), which was formed in 2002 by unions that rejected the NUNW's party-political link (Jauch 2004: 38-47).

The historic link between NUNW and SWAPO

The NUNW's history is closely linked to that of SWAPO as a result of the particular history of Namibia's liberation struggle. Namibian contract workers formed a central component of SWAPO in the party's formative years. The plight of contract workers – mostly from northern Namibia – was first taken up by the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC) that was founded in Cape Town in 1957 mainly by students and intellectuals. Migrant workers in the Namibian compounds responded enthusiastically to the OPC, which expressed their aspirations. In 1958 the OPC became the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO), its central aim being to abolish the contract labour system. The OPO's political demands for "political, social and economic emancipation of the people" reflected the needs of the workers in the compounds. Its message

¹⁰This paper draws extensively on the author's previous publications, especially on a paper entitled "*Between revolutionary rhetoric and class compromise: Reflections on the Namibian labour movement*", presented at the University of Oslo in 2008.

¹¹ The system was based on bringing black male workers on a contract basis to cities and larger towns to work in white-owned establishments and at mining and fishing companies. Workers were not allowed to bring their families with them and lived in single-sex quarters for periods up to two years.

was also spread to the rural areas through returning migrant workers. In 1960 the OPO was transformed into a national liberation movement – SWAPO. Its aim was to establish a unified, independent and democratic Namibia, free from colonial exploitation and oppression (see Katjavivi 1988: 41-46; Moleah 1983: 98-100; Peltola 1995: 98-105).

Following SWAPO's consultative congress in Tanga, Tanzania, in 1969/70, several new departments were established within the party, including a Labour Department. Although the congress documents did not mention the formation of trade unions, a decision to establish the NUNW in exile was taken on 24 April 1970 (Peltola 1995: 114). Its function was primarily to represent Namibian workers at international fora such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). Another aspect of its work in exile was to train trade unionists under the name of the NUNW in the Soviet Union and Angola (Peltola 1995: 132-3).

In 1978 the SWAPO Central Executive Committee decided to affiliate the NUNW to the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which provided a link between the NUNW and the socialist countries. In 1979 the NUNW set up its headquarters in Luanda, Angola, under the leadership of John Ya Otto who served as SWAPO secretary of labour and NUNW secretary-general at the same time. Ya Otto prepared a constitution for the NUNW for adoption by SWAPO's National Executive Committee (NEC), but it was never approved. Some party leaders even responded negatively to the union initiative, fearing a strong and independent labour movement after independence (see Peltola 1995: 14, 133). These early tensions between a potential working class orientation of SWAPO versus a nationalist ideology were already decided in the run-up to Namibia's independence in favour of the latter.

For Namibian workers inside the country the class struggle was intertwined with the struggle against racial discrimination and minority domination. The class struggle waged by workers was seen as one and the same as the liberation struggle waged by SWAPO (Peltola 1995: 93). Thus class differences were blurred and trade unions (membership and leadership alike) regarded themselves less as representing a particular class rather than as an integral part of a broader national liberation movement opposed to apartheid-colonialism.

By the mid-1980s over 100 000 troops controlled by South Africa were inside Namibia, and 80% of the population lived under emergency regulations. Thousands of Namibians were removed from their homes along the Angolan border, and fields in the north were destroyed by soldiers who were brutally harassing Namibians. In 1985, the South African apartheid government was spending R3 million per day on the war in Namibia. During this time of repression, community activists started organising at the grassroots level. Community organisations emerged in response to the crises in housing, employment, health, education and social welfare. Community organising surged inside Namibia from 1984 onwards, focusing on the crisis in housing, employment, health, education and social welfare. In the absence of trade unions, workers began to take their workplace problems to social workers at the Roman Catholic Church and the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). At that time, the umbrella of the churches provided political activists with a shield under which they could start organising workers. Unlike trade unions, which had been crushed by the colonial state, churches were able to operate across the country. By 1985, workers and community activists had formed a Workers Action Committee in Katutura, which became the forerunner of trade unions (Bauer 1997:70).

The NUNW unions were formally established from 1986 onwards and provided workers with an organisational vehicle through which they could take up workplace grievances as well as broader political issues, which were always seen as linked to the economic struggle. This occurred firmly within the SWAPO fold as the NUNW unions openly declared their allegiance to the liberation struggle and to SWAPO as the leading organisation in the fight for independence. The exiled and internal wings of the NUNW were merged during a consolidation congress held in Windhoek in 1989. At that time, the NUNW unions inside Namibia had already established themselves and were a formidable force among grassroots organisations. They enjoyed huge support even beyond their membership and played a critical role in ensuring SWAPO's victory in the elections of 1989 (Jauch 2007: 57).

The NUNW played a prominent role during the liberation struggle and in the public policy debates after independence. Its history is in many ways similar to that of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), as both were key agencies in terms of mass mobilisation against apartheid and colonial rule. Like their sister unions in South Africa, the NUNW unions linked the struggle at the workplace with the broader struggle for political independence and formed links with other social and political organisations such as women and students organisations. The NUNW understood its role as that of a social movement, which could not address workers' issues separately from those affecting the broader community. Exploitation at the workplace was thus linked to the broader struggle against racial and political oppression (Ibid: 56). Thus the trend in Namibia conformed to that observed in many African states where trade unions played a key role in the democratisation process. Sidibe and Venturi attributed this to 3 major factors which enabled trade unions to play that role: Firstly, their long history of struggle; secondly their massive potential for organisation and action; and thirdly their expectation that democracy will benefit workers and trade unions (1998: 20).

Trade unions and the party after independence

The NUNW maintained its links with SWAPO after independence through its continued affiliation to the ruling party. This link has led to heated debates both within and outside the federation. While the majority of NUNW affiliates argued that a continued affiliation would help the federation to influence policies, critics have pointed out that the affiliation would undermine the independence of the labour movement and that it would wipe out prospects for trade union unity in Namibia. Trade unions outside the NUNW have repeatedly stated that they differed fundamentally from the NUNW over the question of political affiliation. They charged that NUNW could not act independently and play the role of a watchdog over government as long as it was linked to the ruling party. There is also a growing public perception that NUNW was merely a workers' wing of the ruling party, although the NUNW and its affiliates have on several occasions been vocal critics of government policies (Jauch 2007: 57).

The basis for trade union unity, however, needs to be further interrogated. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1929), for example, argued that politically independent unions do not exist anywhere. Citing various European examples, Trotsky claimed that there would never be politically independent trade unions. He thus argued that trade unions should only strive for autonomy from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties but not for autonomy from the Communist Party that had to lead the struggle for the complete liberation of workers (Cited in Trotsky 1969: 15). Trotsky believed that "the question of the relationship between the party, which represents the proletariat as it should be, and the trade unions, which represent the proletariat as it is, is the

most fundamental question of revolutionary Marxism". He argued that only the Communist Party could help the trade union movement to "find its orientation" and that the Communist Party must win "through the trade unions, an influence over the majority of the working class" (ibid: 21-22).

In Namibia, SWAPO claimed to play the vanguard role in the liberation struggle *"of the oppressed and exploited people of Namibia. In fulfilling its vanguard role, SWAPO organises, unites, inspires, orientates and leads the broad masses of the working Namibian people in the struggle for national and social liberation"* (Swapo constitution of 1976, quoted in SWAPO 1981: 257). Furthermore SWAPO's political programme of 1976 was characterised by socialist rhetoric, inspired by the newly won independence of Mozambique and Angola and by the support rendered by the Soviet Union to Namibia's liberation struggle. It stated that one of SWAPO's key tasks was *"To unite all Namibian people, particularly the working class, the peasantry and progressive intellectuals, into a vanguard party capable of safeguarding national independence and of building a classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideals and principles of scientific socialism"* (SWAPO 1981: 275). At face value, it could thus be argued - in line with Trotsky - that the NUNW was correct in recognising the party as the revolutionary vanguard of Namibia's liberation struggle.

However, as the crisis in the Soviet Union deepened in the 1980s, coupled with the counter-revolutionary wars in Angola and Mozambique and the refusal by the South African apartheid regime to implement UN resolution 435 which was meant to pave the way for Namibia's independence, it became clear that SWAPO regarded national independence (and not the proletarian revolution) as the primary goal of its struggle. A contributing factor to this shift was SWAPO's attempt to seek Western support for Namibia's independence by showing allegiance to market-related economic policies (Fanuel Tjingaete, quoted in The Times of Namibia, February 1989). This was clearly reflected in the party's policy proposals for an independent Namibia in the late 1980s as well as the election manifesto of 1989. When SWAPO's "Economic Policy Position Document" was released in November 1988, it no longer called for the nationalisation of key industries but instead promised *"fair and just compensation in those instances where state acquisition of assets from private hands is considered necessary for the rebuilding and restructuring of Namibia's national economy"* (The Namibian, 27 January 1989). SWAPO's secretary for economics at the time, Ben Amathila, confirmed this line of thought when he declared that it was not SWAPO's intention to nationalise mining companies. Instead, the party envisaged using *"revenue from mining to diversify production in other sectors, to decrease the economic imbalance, break dependency on South Africa and give Namibia a better chance for development...A greater part of the mining sector's profits should be reinvested here, for diversification, training and economic growth"*. Furthermore Amathila assured white farmers that SWAPO recognised *"the titles they hold on farms, whether inherited or acquired. We do not interfere with land ownership as set out at present"*. He merely appealed to those who have more land available than they need to *"consider the government's plea to make that land available... We foresee a mixed economy for the simple reason that the present structure of the economy is such that we may not be able to afford any drastic rearrangement. For change from the present state to be effective, it must be gradual"* (The Namibian, 21 November 1989). Thus the socialist rhetoric of the 1970s had been replaced by the "pragmatism" of accepting a non-racial capitalist order, enshrined later on as "mixed economy" in the constitution of independent Namibia. In terms of Trotsky's line of argument, SWAPO capitulated to the bourgeoisie, entered

a path of reformism and abandoned notions of a "proletarian revolution" already in the years preceding independence. What did this mean for Namibia's trade unions?

Defining a new role and Gramsci's "war of position"

The achievement of independence in 1990 required a redefinition of the role that trade unions wanted (and were able) to play. The function of political mobilisation, which had taken centre stage in the years before independence, was taken over by SWAPO, whose leadership returned to Namibia in 1989 and became the government after independence. Given the close structural links between the NUNW unions and SWAPO as well as the fact that most union leaders played a prominent role in the party as well, there was a widespread expectation among workers that the SWAPO government would be a "workers' government." A few years before independence, leading SWAPO intellectuals like KaireMbuende had still argued that the interests of workers and peasants constituted the dominant position in SWAPO (Mbuende 1986:199). However, the ideological shift in SWAPO in the 1980s towards the acceptance of a capitalist order was rapidly consolidated once SWAPO became Namibia's ruling party. Revolutionary working class politics were simply dropped while the capitalist structure of the economy was maintained and the notion of social partnership was introduced into labour relations. Trade unions were expected to define a new role within this framework and although the NUNW had previously called for more radical change, it accepted the new framework with little resistance.

Trade unions failed to mount a coherent challenge to the ideology of neo-liberalism and have failed to alter the dominance of what Gramsci called the "war of position" against "bourgeois hegemony". Gramsci argued that the advance to socialism would require the labour movement to build a counter- hegemony through a prolonged process of moral and ideological reform (Simon 1991: 18). As the dominant class and its representatives exercises power over and gains consent from subordinate classes through a combination of coercion and persuasion, Gramsci stated that:

"The proletariat can become the leading and dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the population against capitalism and the bourgeois state" (SPW II: 443, quoted in Simon 1991: 24).

In Gramsci's view, the concept of "hegemony" has a national-popular as well as a class dimension. He argued that a class could only become hegemonic if it transcends its own class interests by combining them with the interests of other classes and social forces. Thus the advance to socialism requires the building of alliances and the transformation of political consciousness, a process that is both moral and intellectual. During the "war of position", the working class has to build a bloc of social forces with a common conception of the world that is able to isolate the capitalist class and deprive it of its allies (Simon 1991: 24, 64).

Applied to Namibia, Gramsci's notion of working class hegemony would have required the NUNW to engage in a new form of social movement unionism through which working class interests could be articulated beyond the point of production in alliance with other socially excluded groups. Such a strategy was implemented with some success in Namibia during the second half of the 1980s when a broad alliance of trade unions, churches, students' and women's organisations opposed the colonial apartheid regime. This broad-based movement had reached

widespread popular support in 1988 as reflected in the student's boycotts and the general strike of June 1988.

However, with the attainment of independence, the leading civil society organisations were demobilised and decision-making power shifted decisively towards party structures. As the leaders of the liberation movement entered the corridors of state power, arranging themselves with the interests of both local and international capital, they encountered little resistance to their chartered course of establishing a stable environment for non-racial capitalism in an independent Namibia. The secondary role allocated to trade unions and working class interests was reflected in the way tripartism and social partnership became the cornerstone of labour relations after independence as will be discussed in the next section.

A clear demonstration of the failure of labour to achieve working class hegemony in the Gramscian sense was the introduction of conservative economic policies after independence. The NUNW tried to raise workers' concerns mostly through meetings with SWAPO leaders and government officials and only on very few occasions resorted to more militant action like demonstrations. Thus the NUNW's strategy was based on lobbying while demobilising its own membership to a large extent.

The NUNW's task of influencing broader socio-economic policies in favour of its working class base proved to be extremely difficult in the face of an onslaught by the neo-liberal ideology that both business and the Namibian government portrayed as the only practical policy option for Namibia. Klerck accurately described the Namibian government's 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' high-ranking staff members of government economic institutions. Local economists by and large are trapped in the neo-liberal dogma and continue to promote the very policies (e.g. structural adjustment programmes) that have caused severe social hardships in other SADC countries. The Namibian government's increasing slide towards neo-liberal policies manifested itself, for example, in the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and privatisation programmes. Opposition to such policies by the labour movement was frequently countered by accusations that trade unions were still living in the (ideological) past and that trade unions were obstacles to economic growth and job creation (Jauch 2007: 60). Business and government alike coerced unions into accepting the concept of "national competitiveness" which regarded militant labour action as counter-productive and thus paved the way for trade unions becoming scapegoats for retarding "national development" as defined by the dominant class (Bergene 2007:16). The debate around the controversial Ramatex investment in Namibia (see Jauch and Shindondola 2003; Jauch 2008) exemplifies this point. In the absence of a comprehensive alternative development strategy, trade unions were forced on the defensive on several occasions and found themselves sidelined in economic policy formulation.

Thus Namibia today provides an example of what Gramsci termed “bourgeois hegemony” where business interests are portrayed as constituting the “national interest”, accepted by subordinate classes, including significant sections of the trade union movement. Despite the desperate material situation of the majority of Namibia’s working people (see for example Karuombe 2002, Karamata 2006, Mwilima 2006, LaRRI 2003 & 2007), trade unions failed to build a counter-hegemony through a political and ideological struggle for the transformation in popular consciousness, based on socialist values. Instead, trade unions were confined to a narrow “economistic” struggle around “bread and butter” issues, mostly in the form of collective bargaining.

Social partnership and the trade union bureaucracy

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 (Jauch 2007: 58).

In post-war Western Europe, social partnership was introduced as a class compromise, granting workers improved living and working conditions in return for acceptance of the capitalist mode of production and industrial peace (Bergene 2005: 104). Namibia’s version of social partnership, however, was essentially a reward by the SWAPO government for its working class base that had played a decisive role in ensuring the election victory of 1989. Social partnership did not represent a move towards granting labour a “special” status in the post-independence dispensation. The consultative process leading to the formulation of the Labour Act, for example, was driven by government as the dominant partner, which 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 jointly formulate socio-economic policies (Sycholt and Klerck 1997: 88), social partnership in Namibia never took the form of a joint decision-making process.

Although the Labour Act of 1992 constituted a significant improvement compared with the previous colonial labour legislation, it was a compromise between the conflicting interests of capital and labour. It extended its coverage to all workers, including domestic workers, farm workers and the public service. 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 (Bauer 1993: 11). However, the Act fell short of some of the expectations of trade unions, which 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 1992 Labour Act were the 40-hour working week and 21 days of annual leave for all workers (Jauch 1996: 91).

Overall, post-independence labour legislation 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 (Klerck and Murray 1997: 247). The trade unions' main function was thus narrowed to being the representative of workers in a tripartite arrangement. Thus the observation made by Bergene that the class compromise in post-war Europe led to "the embourgeoisement and de-radicalisation of workers, and the de-politicisation of trade unions" (2005: 104) might be applicable to Namibia to some extent. Trade union militancy certainly declined after independence although there was no material base to co-opt the working class as a whole. Instead, improvement of living and working conditions through collective bargaining only benefited the well-organised industrial workers like those in the mining and fishing industries as well as those in the public service, while the vast majority of the working class – the unemployed, informal sector workers, casual workers, domestic 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 those for farm workers and security guards in 2003 and 2005, workers remained exposed to highly exploitative practices (Jauch 2007: 55).

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 contributed to the creation of a trade union bureaucracy that Luxemburg (1906) and Callinicos (1995) described as a "*social layer of full-time officials having a material interest in limiting the class struggle to the fight for reforms within capitalism...*" They regard the interests of labour and capital as reconcilable and thus spend their time increasingly on bargaining, isolating themselves increasingly from the workers they represent. Thus union officials regard "*negotiation, compromise and reconciliation as the raison d'être of trade unions*" and are reluctant to engage in more militant action (Bergene 2005: 100).

This trend is visible in Namibia today where 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 regard 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 the current president of the NUNW as well as the two vice-presidents are all managers, either in the civil service or at parastatals. Notions of worker democracy, worker control and social transformation that had just 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. Lenin and Trotsky had already identified a problem with trade unions embracing only the top layer of the proletariat and thus being prone to compromises with the bourgeois regime. Trotsky argued that unions must become the means in the fight for the proletarian revolution to avoid playing the role of serving capitalism by subordinating and disciplining workers (Cited in Bergene 2005: 98).

Against the background of huge imbalances in terms of economic power between capital and labour in Namibia, 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 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 is a case in point when union leaders were torn between loyalty to government and the ruling party (who wanted to avert the strike) and their own members who were determined to act. Thus the union was caught between what Dolvic (1997) called the "logic of influence" (unions adapting their aims and strategies to the external environment and decision-making processes) and the "logic of membership" (unions heeding the calls of members to retain legitimacy) (cited in Bergene 2007: 17).

The notion of social partnership in Namibia is more of an ideological construct than a reflection of the country's social and economic balance of power. The historic threat of a socialist revolution does not exist at present and thus there is no need for capital to make substantive concessions towards labour. Instead, as Wahl (2004) pointed out, capital pursues an increasingly confrontational policy towards labour once the foundation for the class compromise disappears. Any hope for a national "social pact" under such conditions is illusionary and based on a lack of a proper understanding of the current power relations (Cited in Bergene 2005: 103, 107). During the era of Fordist production, the legitimacy of capitalism rested on social progress, which enabled the labour movement to improve their members' living and working conditions. In the post-Fordist era, the neo-liberal ideology is reflected in supply-side economics, free trade and intense competitiveness. Economic growth and competitiveness have become the key goals while social progress was relegated to a "trickle-down" position. Bergene aptly pointed out that policy initiatives today are driven by business interests, that is, by the rationale of ensuring competitiveness and profitability rather than the general welfare of the population (2007: 10).

A divided labour movement and the crisis of representation

Like trade unions elsewhere, the Namibian labour movement was confronted with a threat of a dwindling membership base due to the increasing "casualisation" of work, the increase in "flexible" forms of employment and a growing informalisation of the economy. In an attempt to cut labour costs and to curb trade union influence, employers in various economic sectors, including retail, fishing, mining, hospitality and manufacturing, resorted to temporary and casual work contracts for low-skilled workers. The emergence of labour hire companies (labour brokers) in the late 1990s in particular, highlighted the threat of "casualisation" to workers' incomes, job security and benefits. By 2006, over 12,000 workers were already employed through labour hire companies, which retained a significant part of workers' earnings as their fees and deprived them of the benefits enjoyed by permanent workers. Due to the insecurity of their contracts and their shifts between different workplaces, trade unions found it very difficult to recruit and represent labour hire workers (see Jauch and Mwilima 2006). Thus trade union membership has become increasingly narrow in focus, covering permanent workers in "traditional" sectors such as the public service, mining, fishing, construction and retail, while unions are unable to reach tens of thousands of workers in precarious working conditions on farms, in private households, at labour hire companies and in the informal economy.

Namibia's labour market today essentially consist of four distinct layers:

1. a small elite enjoying a standard of living comparable to first world countries;

2. a significant group of formal-sector workers with permanent jobs and low to middle incomes;
3. a growing group of casual workers and "labour hire" workers who are the victims of a labour market that virtually forces them to accept any job under any conditions; and
4. unemployed workers who turned to the informal economy, to sex work or to crime as a last resort (Jauch 2007: 56).

Namibia's trade unions essentially organise amongst the second group of workers and thus represent only a section of the working class. Furthermore, the labour movement is deeply divided and failed to live up to the proclaimed ideal of "one country, one federation" and "one industry, one union". A multitude of trade unions compete with each other for membership, for example in the fishing and security industries. Even at federation level, the NUNW now faces a significant rival. The Namibia People's Social Movement (NPSM) and the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU) merged in 2002 to form the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA), which has 18 affiliates with a combined membership of about 50 000. The TUCNA unions focus predominantly on workplace issues, claim to be non-political and are less engaged with policy issues than the NUNW, which represents about 70,000 workers. The main dividing line between the two federations is the question of the NUNW's affiliation to SWAPO, which the TUCNA unions reject.

There are however, even divisions within the NUNW. These emerged strongly during the past decade, starting with the SWAPO party's extraordinary congress of 2004, during which a presidential successor to the founding president Sam Nujoma was chosen. SWAPO essentially split into camps supporting different candidates and the NUNW and its affiliates were drawn into the battle. Although there were no significant ideological differences between those in SWAPO who supported Hidipo Hamutenya and those who supported Sam Nujoma, the union federation became fragmented. In the run-up to the NUNW's congress in 2006, the former acting secretary-general of the NUNW, Peter Naholo, who was regarded as part of the "Hamutenya group," was removed from his post in December 2005. This set the stage for the months to come as trade union leaders mobilised intensively with a view to ensuring that candidates loyal to their own 'camp' would be elected at congress in April 2006 (New Era, 4 April, 10 April, 11 April, 20 April, 26 April & 28 April 2006; Republikein, 31 March 2006).

During the NUNW congress of 2006, this battle for political control overshadowed proceedings despite the many labour, social and economic issues that workers had raised during their regional conferences in preparation for the congress. The "Nujoma group" emerged victorious at the congress but this did not result in a reconciled federation. Instead, the internal division grew larger and by the time of the NUNW's 2010 congress, new dividing lines became visible between those supporting the general secretary Evilastus Kaaronda and those aligning themselves with the NAPWU general secretary Peter Nevonga. Kaaronda had strongly pushed for strong action on the dubious "write-off" of N\$ 650 million of loans given by the Government Institutions Pension Fund (GIPF) while Nevonga as a GIPF trustee had opposed any such move.

Ahead of the 2010 NUNW congress, the GIPF scandal had made headlines in the local media. Despite the shocking revelations that pointed to mismanagement, recklessness and corruption, the trade unions in the public sector whose members were directly affected by the squandering of

the pension money remained silent. The Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) replaced its delegate on the GIPF board but neither the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) nor the public sector unions affiliated to the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA) took any visible action. To make matters worse, the General Secretary of the NAPWU, served not only on the GIPF board of trustees but also as a director of some of the companies that received GIPF loans which were then written off. Hardly surprising, the NAPWU general secretary and his supporters did not want the issue to be discussed at Congress and threatened to walk out. The majority of NUNW congress delegates, however, made their views clear. Workers resolved that all those involved in the failed loan projects should be brought to book. The congress called for the management and board of GIPF to be suspended, for a special commission of inquiry to be set up and for the lost monies to be recovered. This increased pressure on the Namibian government to act, not only as the employer of civil servants but also as the custodian of their pension fund (Jauch 2010).

The second key issue that was debated at 2010 congress was the issue of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) for Namibia. In July 2010, the NUNW's Central Executive Committee (CEC) had decided to leave the BIG coalition which consisted of churches, unions, NGOs and youth organisations. This coalition had campaigned for the introduction of the BIG since 2004 and workers discussed the issue for several hours at the NUNW congress. In the end they decided that the NUNW must rejoin the BIG Coalition and that the BIG should be part of a broader initiative to fight poverty and to effect structural economic transformation. This decision was significant in various respects: firstly it contradicted the expressed sentiments on a national BIG as expressed by Namibia's former Prime Minister Angula and President Pohamba and it nullified the decision taken by the NUNW's CEC just weeks before the congress (Ibid).

However, the 2010 congress could once again not heal the deep divisions and the infighting continued, virtually paralyzing the NUNW. Towards the end of 2012, the elected president was suspended by the NUNW's CEC and the general secretary was dismissed. In a subsequent arbitration case, the dismissal was found to have been unfair and the NUNW was ordered to pay N\$ 700 000 in compensation (see The Namibian, 9 September 2013)

Conclusion

Namibia's labour movement finds itself in deep crisis today. Workers and their trade unions had to realise that the changes after independence did not lead to the expected socio-economic transformation. There are signs that the labour movement lost its vision and now struggles to develop a strategy about how to play a meaningful role in the process of social change. Deep political divisions, not only between NUNW and its rival federation TUCNA, but also within the NUNW itself, worsen this dilemma. These divisions may serve individual political interests but undermine the potential power of the Namibian labour movement as a whole. A multitude of trade unions that are unable to work with each other cannot provide Namibian workers with the strong organisational base needed to advance a working class agenda in the Gramscian "war of position".

Namibia's trade unions are characterised by a lack of ideological clarity. The statements and practices of several trade unions during the past few years revealed deep-seated ideological contradictions. Sentiments of radical nationalism and liberation, for example on the land issue, were mixed with an acceptance of neo-liberalism as the ideology of the "free market." As trade

union leaders entered (and continue to enter) company boards as part of a poorly defined union investment strategy, their views (and interests) increasingly converged with those of government and business. Also, some trade union leaders are now occupying management positions in the public and private sectors, which contradicts the principle of worker control within unions. These developments point to a lack of clarity regarding the working class base of the labour movement and whose interests it is meant to serve. Nationalist and "populist" sentiments are dominant and trade unions hardly advance positions based on a class analysis.

Namibian trade unions thus conform to Gramsci's assessment that unions do not attack the principle of private property and do not challenge bourgeois legality (Cited in Bergene 2005: 93). Those unions who oppose the NUNW's link to SWAPO do not base their position on a working class ideology but merely claim allegiance to a "non-political" trade union "independence" which essentially amounts to confining labour's role narrowly to the economic sphere without challenging capital's hegemony through ideological and political struggles. Economic struggles are thus confined to collective bargaining within a capitalist framework. Such an approach is insufficient to address Namibia's huge socio-economic inequalities and there is currently no material or political base to win significant concessions for labour through social partnership arrangements.

In order to become an engine of social change, trade unions will have to deepen their roots in Namibia's working class constituency and articulate its interests beyond the workplace. This requires a dedicated cadre of activists and worker leaders who can develop effective strategies to build a counter-hegemonic bloc against capital's dominant influence in the economic, political and ideological arena. Linking short-term demands with the long-term goal of social transformation (similar to what Trotsky had proposed in the "transitional programme") could be a strategy for building solidarity between workers and other sections of the dispossessed.

Confronting the current crisis thus is a mammoth task and Namibia's trade unions are currently preoccupied with internal conflicts and short-term achievements around bread and butter issues. Provided they can meet the challenges outlined above and redefine their role as "struggle organisations" with a specific class base and a strategic agenda, they could once again become influential social actors. Otherwise, they may continuously lose their mass base while union leaders are absorbed with bargaining issues, party-political careers, union investments and tripartite participation without addressing (and challenging) the fundamental socio-economic structures that uphold the continued skewed distribution of wealth and income.

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In their own words: Namibian trade unions today

This chapter is based on the panel discussion which took place on 7 August 2013 at the Windhoek Multipurpose Youth Resource Centre in Katutura. It highlights the current positions taken by Namibia's trade unions on a range of organisational and policy issues. As far as possible the unions' views are reflected exactly as they were presented at the discussion with minimal editorial additions.

Trade union history

Namibia's two trade union federations, NUNW and TUCNA have distinct histories and political orientations as pointed out by the panelists. Alfred Angola who was the acting secretary general of the NUNW at the time of the discussion pointed out that: *"the NUNW is the oldest federation in this country. It has also played an important role in the liberation of this country...In one house, in one room that is our federation, we have kept together [as a federation]. That has kept us going. We are not ashamed of saying we are affiliated to the ruling party!"* .

Mahongora Kavihuha, secretary general of TUCNA outlined how TUCNA came about as a merger of the Namibia Peoples Social Movement (NPSM) with the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU) in 2002: *"I remember very well the founding congress, it was 25 May 2002, in Continental Hotel. They merged and formed a federation called the Trade Union Congress of Namibia. We are independent. It is time for us to start to mentally decolonize and to educate the workers and to say 'you can do best if you are yourself ... If you can find who you are; then you can position yourself and bargain' ... That is the principle that underlies TUCNA. We can collaborate with any social setup, be it a church, a political party, and NGO or whatever, as long as that establishment speaks the language for the workers"*.

In both federations, the public sector unions are the largest affiliates. Victor Kazonyati, the general secretary of the Public Service Union of Namibia (PSUN) explained that his union *"started as an association in pre-independence era, because trade unions were not allowed. Its name then was Government Staff Association. It was only after independence in 1992 that it adopted the name of PSUN"*. Today it is one of several unions operating in the public sector and it is the largest TUCNA-affiliated trade union.

Worker control

Several speakers pointed out that unions must be workers-controlled organizations. Justina Jonas, general secretary of the Metal and Allied Namibia Workers Union (MANWU) pointed to union structures as the guarantor of workers' control and stated that: *"We are governed by our constitution... The constitution is a guide for any organization, and we have to make sure that any elected leader abides by this constitution... The congress [as the highest decision-making structure] is made up by our members from the shop-floor level. Our shop-stewards from all over the country and other delegates, about 300 people meet and make decisions to guide the organisation in the four years to come. Whoever is elected as a leader must make sure that s/he obeys this. After the national congress there is a Central Executive Committee (CEC) consisting of thirty members. They are elected by the delegates at the National Congress. They are given the task to make sure that they run the organization for the next four years regarding any major decision that has to be made. Then there is the National Executive Committee which is in charge*

of the day-to-day activities of the organization. Finally there is the secretariat which has to make sure that we implement the workers' decision.

We're also asking: Are we really champions of our members? Then we look back: in 2007 we had 3,088 members and now ... we have grown to 15,000 members and growing. And we say, yes, we are champions of our members; and the members are there to confirm this".

TUCNA advanced a similar argument to point to members' control over the union federation. Its secretary general Mahongora Kavihuha stated that *"many people have said: are leaders in TUCNA power-hungry? No. We have a principle that says: a federation must be run by its affiliates. What is the meaning of that? ... I am the president of the Teachers Union of Namibia and I am the secretary general of TUCNA, and if lose my position as president at the Teachers Union of Namibia, what would give me power to run a federation? All our leaders must have positions in the affiliates... We want the unions to remain in the hands of the members"*.

Whom do unions represent?

On the question of representation, Victor Kazonyati of PSUN asked: *"what is the role of trade unions in society? Where do trade unions fit? Do they have the legitimacy to make claims? Maybe that has to be investigated. This investigation should start with the constitution. The constitution of Namibia gives Namibians the right to form and belong to trade unions, in Article 21. Which means that all of us who are engaged in any kind of work have the right to form and belong to a trade union of our choice. In fact, the constitution goes further and it [calls for] the state to encourage the formation of independent trade unions; that's if we go to Article 95. Therefore, we as trade unions and all of those who'd like to become trade unionists have a legitimate claim to contribute to discuss and engage in any discussion relating to society.*

There is another question that was posed: whether trade unions today are only for their current member or also for the unemployed, the informal sector, and other members of society. The answer is very simple. We are an organisation formed by the working class, the poor. Even if today the tendency or trade unions are more concerned with strikes and bread and butter issues for their members. There is a study that was done very recently [which shows that] those of us who have a job in Namibia are responsible for eight people in our society. The salary that you receive is not only distributed amongst the members of your family, but amongst eight other people".

Justina Jonas added: *"There is the issue of the rural, the informal, and the formal workers. The construction workers are very much affected by precarious jobs, but because you are a worker we encourage you to become part of the union. We've managed to get a minimum wage for the construction industry, which is the best in Namibia. It applies at the national level, and binds every company in the country. We're the first union in 2007 when the Chinese started to come to question the issue of their companies"*.

Key activities and achievements of unions

Justina Jonas outlined the key aims and objectives of her union: *"One is unite and organize all workers in the various sectors [we work in]; to strive for the economic improvement and betterment of all Namibian workers; to strive for the improvement of working and living conditions of our members. We also ensure that we regulate [industrial] relations and negotiate*

dispute between members and their employers; we strive for fair and equitable wages for members; promote education, safety, sport, culture and recreation; we also promote the spirit of solidarity nationally as well as internationally; and we oppose any form of discrimination in the workplace”.

In terms of MANWU’s achievement, she pointed out that “we have managed to negotiate one of the highest minimum wages in the country... Currently workers need to be paid N\$11.11, to us this is an achievement. Our members are at least benefitting from that. We have over 400 recognition agreements across the country, our achievement is to safeguard our members. We do this on a daily basis, be it in a disciplinary hearing, or anywhere. We provide education for our leaders and our rank-and-file members, negotiate better wages and conditions of employment.. We need to continue improving our workers working and living conditions! This is very important. If you improve wages workers will be able to go back home and say ‘let us improve our living conditions’. We are also saying that we need to continue to influence national policy through our federation, the NUNW.

We also have a Youth Executive Committee which is part of the youth structures that we established after our congress in 2012. The union has [noticed that] young people are coming to the labour movement, to the labour market, and we need to mobilize [them]. We also have women structures”.

Alfred Angula added: “Now, what is the strength of NUNW? If you see the leadership that we have produce, it’s amazing. How many members of parliament? A lot of them, that we have produced. Leadership that has come from NUNW and then went into national politics and projects, and that’s our success, and we should be proud. The industrial unions [affiliates] deal with issues of health and safety at work, they mobilize members, represent them and so on. As a federation, we will back them... Look at NUNW, we have expanded. We provide services, we have a research department that we have created: LaRRI”¹²... If you compare the situation of workers in the 1980s to that of today, we have moved forward! In the 80s and early 90s, there was no social security, there was no pension scheme, we had nothing! Today, workers have social security, pension, transport, housing...

Overall, the measurements of success depend on what you want to measure. If you can produce leaders, who are perhaps not dealing with the issue you are concerned with [as workers] but that are addressing issues at the national level, then you are producing leaders that are addressing holistic issues”.

Strategic interventions and influencing policy

The question of unions influencing policies in favour of the poor in general and not only their members featured prominently during the discussion. Mahongora Kavihuha outlined how best unions could influence policies that are affecting the constituency that unions represent: “Because trade unions are not only to represent the working class alone, you have a potential

¹² The Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) was established in 1998 as a Trust to serve all trade unions in the country. Although the NUNW played a leading role in LaRRI’s establishment, it is not a research department of the NUNW.

working class: the unemployed, the youth. If you want to represent these people, you have to have programs that also accommodate them for them to be pulled along into the economy”.

Kavihuha also raised the issue of capacity within unions and called on improved social dialogue: *“Of course, we don’t have capacity. I recall when we were called to Botswana to discuss the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), I was preparing a position [paper] of the trade unions in Namibia, and I called the Ministry of Trade and Industry. One gentleman there told me that the reason why we don’t invite trade unions [to discuss EPAs] is because we don’t have capacity. I said ‘what capacity? Have you tried us?’. I learned about what is an EPA in Botswana not in Namibia. And I’m saying to all of you, you don’t know what EPA is. Do you know what Vision 2030 is? The answer is no. You only heard about it. NDP 4! Can you mention its elements, what do you know about it? The national budget, how it is developed? The answer is we don’t know. We lack what we call ‘social dialogue’. Now, who should establish this social dialogue? It should come from us, the workers. We cannot expect to wait for the government to do it, nor the employer. We as trade unions are interrogating the Labour Act, to ensure it strengthens the elements of social dialogue”.*

Kavihuha stressed the need for unions to tackle issues beyond wages: *“We went to the education conference, for example and we had prepared a position paper... The document says: ‘This is what we want!’ I want to give it to the universities... It is a proposal for social dialogue, how do we engage all the stakeholders to participate in the economy? We have also spoken about issues on child labour, of water and tariffs, we talk about the health sector. Remember when I said that Minister Kamwi [the Minister of Health and Social Services] should do something or resign? Someone asked me: ‘but you’re from the teachers union, what does this has to do with health?’. Then I said: ‘when you go for [wage] negotiations, you also talk about issues of health’.*

In South Africa, with the issue of the toll gates¹³, COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions] has partnered with the DA [Democratic Alliance, South Africa’s opposition party] in opposing the tollgates, an initiative of the ANC [African National Congress, South Africa’s ruling party]. That’s what I’m saying: ‘be yourself’. In this way, you’ll be best positioned to cooperate with each other. If you’re only favouring those who are powerful and have resources, you are lying to yourself.

Regarding the informal sector, we are convening an event on the informal sector. We are working with LaRRI and we have two experts from ILO coming, because we want to take this issue very seriously. It is not true that we are only focusing on ‘bread and butter’ issues”.

BIG

Alfred Angula cited the example of the social security system that the NUNW wanted to be restructured: *“The federation has discussed this: there is a problem here. The [social security] system will not be able to cover everybody, why? We need to deal with unemployed workers, how do we deal with that? There was the introduction of a programme that we’ve supported initially, the Basic Income Grant (BIG). There was a research done, and then we said: let’s do something*

¹³ The South African government is planning to install toll gates in some of the country’s main roads, who will charge automatically to those who transit through them. This has sparked controversy, and the issue appeared to have polarized the trade unions and the ruling party. In South Africa, the ruling party is in an alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

better. Is there anything else that will not create these dependencies? People will just get N\$100 every month. Then we said: let's develop a different concept! ... We need a deeper analysis and it is the duty of the federation to make analysis and to ensure that what we are proposing is a well-thought proposal aimed at improving the needs. The concept of BIG might look good, maybe because everybody gets money.

Now we say: hang on a bit. We sat down as a federation and said: there is a better way. How is that better way? We have seen that in the country we have a fragmentation of the social grants, too many of them! Veteran grants, children grants, grants for vulnerable groups, so many of them! Then you have the social security commission, then you have private grants there under you Sanlam, your Metropolitan... We said: No, no, if you harmonise them and put them in one, and extend grants to the unemployed, you will be able to cover everybody in this country.

If we can't cover everybody, let's put forward an alternative. If there are households that have no employed persons we propose that all this public work that is currently given on tender, should not be given on tender anymore. We say: identify the people in your neighbourhood that can sweep the street, and give it [public work] to them [so] they can benefit from this programme... Public work should be reserved for every Namibian that is not employed¹⁴. Then there is a need for all of us to say: every household that has people that are not employed should be guaranteed four months work every year. Then, the question of granting N\$100 per person falls away, because every household is being catered for. Then we create no laziness, but people should work for that! ”¹⁵

Union investments

Another issue that has caused much controversial debate within unions is the question of unions investments. However, most union leaders now seem to be in favour of such investments as exemplified by Mahongora Kavihuha from TUCNA: *“There is the question of trade union leaders becoming members of boards of companies and what this contributes to workers wellbeing. I had a very heated discussion with someone on ‘why don't you become member of this board?’ meaning that you have to forget where you're coming from. I said ‘No, I came here as TUCNA. What I say here I'll say it as TUCNA, if I differ I will differ as TUCNA. Other trade union leaders there were saying then you're not one of us”.*

Challenges today

The panelists admitted that unions are facing many challenges today, ranging from their image amongst the general public to organisational and political issues. Justina Jonas said: *“We also look at internal challenges, but here we are looking at external issues that have been challenges to the organization. Firstly, we have realised in MANWU, is that there is a negative thought about trade unions in Namibia. We look at it as a [media] challenge. People look at trade unions as something funny... if you look back, there was a good image of trade unions but now there is so much negativity happening around trade union activities in the country. Another challenge is the limited resources we have available to meet the expectations of our members, of society, and*

¹⁴ This is a trend in neoliberal and austerity-driven governments: conditioning social grants. I can include some references to academic papers observing this trend.

¹⁵ Contrary to Alfred Angula's views, the NUNW Congress of 2010 passed a resolution in favour of the introduction of a universal basic income grant for all Namibians.

anybody in the community... We also lack [a good] communication network within ourselves, within related stakeholders... We need to create networks and say 'let us do it like this'... The lack of communication network is affecting our work as trade unions, especially as MANWU.

There's also a lack of labour forums. When UNAM contacted us [in relation to this public debate], we thought wow, at least through public discussions people can come up with new ideas on how to do things differently... We also look at issues of solidarity affecting common workers. This is a very serious issue... Recently there was a demolitions of shacks in the location¹⁶. People were our members, and you can see how solidarity was not there. You cannot just have 'external challenges' and not do anything about it. What we're saying is 'why do we have [these] challenges? [let's] do something about it'.

What we have developed is a four-year strategy plan, which we are working on now. This includes all the [union] structures earlier alluded to. When the General Secretary drafted it, it went to the NEC, the CEC, it was endorsed and now we need to implement this strategy plan. What is in the strategy plan? [...] We have to hold consultation with all our stakeholders. we have already started: this includes employers, youth organizations, so that we can have a common understanding of issues affecting the workers. These stakeholder consultations have started already in February. We're also starting communication networks, because it's very important [that if] there's a new issue affecting our stakeholders doing a common thing, for us it's very important to have that communication; even further assistance if we need to.

So we have our strategy plan. We also have education; from the leaders up to the rank-and-file. You need to close the gap between the two, and that's why we're staying we need to provide education. We have extended this in the strategy plan, we need to extend this to the community as well. The community makes up the workers, workers make up the community. We go maybe to Havana and [ask] who are the organizations working with the community? And we work with them and say that we want to come and educate, whether you are employed or not employed. If we prepare you, then maybe you will have a job, you will be able to help yourself in any direction you might encounter when you get employed.

Another issue in the strategic plan is [that of] a recruitment campaigns. The unions are made up by the workers, and it's very important for us to recruit because unions are workers, not union officials. So we need to continue to do recruitment, and this includes informal sector as well. We are also doing collective bargaining, because this is the fundamental foundation of the organization: to continue doing collective bargaining. We are also continue to do staff and leadership capacity building, because you need to have a well-equipped staff in the office, as well as leadership. It needs to be capacitated so that it will be able to fill the many gaps in the organization.

We are also dealing with external challenges. We are holding labour conferences [on topics such as] health and safety and on participating and supporting national and international solidarity.

¹⁶ During Namibian winter of 2012, a series of shack demolitions took place; LaRRI documented this process in the following publication: <http://issuu.com/larri-namibia/docs/psa-citizens-of-windhoek>

We need to continue respecting our history, the history of the labour movement needs to be respected and we need to continue to do that as well. We need to continue to mobilize workers to know their rights at the workplace. We need to continue the norm of workers' control within our structures. We need to continue to provide our workers with true information, because at the moment you start recruiting workers on false information, at the end of the day it will be a problem. It is very important that when you educate workers you give them education, give them true information, not lie to them just because you want to gain membership.

I would also like to talk on the issue of how do we fight poverty when we are fighting each other. It is a very serious question. Instead for us to focus on the way forward, we're focusing on whom to blame for what. Here we are talking about what MANWU did, what NUNW did, what TUCNA did; we have to talk about what's our common understanding. NUNW and its affiliates are doing their best to influence policy, and we continue to do that. I always invite people, come to our center, we will give you documents; come to our offices, we are a public place, we can give you information. Come to my office tomorrow, and you'll see the reality."

Mahongora Kavihuha stated that "the challenge that we have is that we need to decolonize the minds, we need to let the workers start feeling independent. Have we achieved in this? Very clearly, yes. And are determined on this, without the assistance of anyone; the workers themselves have decided. We want to liberate the mind of the workers. Once workers define and find that we are a force to be reckoned with, they will take ownership of the unions, of the policies developed. Where will Namibia be? There, where we want it to be".

Victor Kazonyati added: "I have been at the helm of this trade union for 13 years now, which means that I've been an observer of these trends for quite a while now. And if I say to you that the situation is not getting any better, I'm not lying to you. When we see the schools in the rural villages, you just want to cry. These are places that ten years ago were reasonably maintained facilities of learning, and instead of them being improved [...] to provide the learning facilities for our people, they are deteriorating all the time. This is why some of the people who question the progress of Vision 2030 are justified. Are we really doing something towards the goal we're setting for ourselves? ... I just want to reinforce the fact that the truth is there for everybody to see; whether we are trade unions, doctors, or whatever. Namibia is on a sliding scale downwards, and something has to be done in a very serious way.

We enjoy a position of being a middle to high-income country. I think this is the status that we've been given due to our resources, what we can produce as an economy... With the resources that we have, the only thing that is lacking ... is political will. That is probably where trade unions and other groups need to pitch in. Before independence we fought a very strong common enemy which was apartheid. We fought and we defeated it. I don't know whether or not we have identified the enemy that we have to fight now. We probably haven't done that. Trade unions need to come in and say that our enemy is poverty and we need to ensure that there's political will from the political office bearer to turn the resources of this nation towards eradicating poverty."

Alfred Angula emphasised the external challenges facing the unions: "It's not your own making, it is what you call external forces. Have you heard of this animal called globalization? They globalize everything and they want you to play the game they're playing... That has influenced Vision 2030, because we don't have sufficient resources, you don't have capacity; the colleague

[Mahongora Kavihuha] says he does not go to a workshop because he does not have the capacity. I don't know whether when he came back he got the capacity... Capacity is not going to be built only in one or two days. Capacity-building is identifying the issue that we need to deal with and find solutions".

Unions and politics

This aspect represents the dividing line between Namibia's trade union federations as was confirmed during the discussion. Mahongora Kavihuha said: *"We are an independent block of trade unions. We write our own chapter. We walk our own path. We find our own ways to fulfil our own destiny. That is what I want to say, and that will underline my presentation.*

Colleagues, before independence we had one common enemy. That common enemy was the apartheid regime. We fought together until we attained our independence in 1990. From independence, many workers sat back and asked: what is our new role in independent Namibia? What is the best approach that we can take to tackle our issue head on?

The problem is that many Namibians don't want to recall [the meaning of] independent thinking. They don't want to become independent thinkers, become yourself. [When you do so,] then you start receiving many names. That is what is sad.

We tend to confuse things. We cannot ask a cow to perform a task performed by a dog. Can you? Therefore, you cannot expect for a political party to perform a task performed by the trade unions. And then you start blaming the system. The government has its responsibilities. Since this government is there, how many privatizations have we been through? Were all these privatizations in the interest of the workers? Were these privatizations in the interest of ordinary citizens? The answer is no.

Many people say that when you become independent, you are against the government. You are against A, against B. What we're saying is that we are constituting our own identity. And I remember well: in issues that we worked closely with the government, we supported government".

Victor Kazonyati added: *"I want to bring the attention to our constitution, where it deals with the issue of independence and affiliation. Article 95, 'promotion of the welfare of the people', and it reads like this: 'The State shall actively promote and maintain the welfare of the people by adopting, inter alia, policies aimed at the following' and I read here: 'active encouragement of the formation of independent trade unions to protect workers' rights and interests, and to promote sound labour relations and fair employment practices'. It says 'independent', and this is the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia. I don't see anywhere something that reads 'promotion of affiliated trade unions'. Now obviously, the framework of this constitution, the idea of independence is a very important issue. Some of us took up arms or went into exile to fight for independence. So we can be independent, think independently. Maybe this is a point we would like to discuss, as students of industrial relations and politics".*

Alfred Angula defended the affiliation of the NUNW to the ruling party as a strategy to influence policies: *"the role of the federation is to address policy matters, be it economic, be it environmental, be it general politics. Now, if a federation does not address policies, it doesn't address the matter; if it shies away from this role, you are not a federation... Let us put an*

example: we say, the process of land reform in this country is very slow. We are always discussing this, but how do we change this if we are not at the fora where the policy can be changed? Now you want to be a spectator outside the field and you want to score goals, you can't! [...] You have to be in the field to score that goal. That's why it's important for us to deal with politics, and you mustn't shy away from that...It should not be seen as if NUNW is the first organization to play this game. If you go to Britain, if you go to Germany, all over the world, these are the same structures. This is how the game is played...Do you know why the countries that are rich become rich and the ones who are poor become poor? They will climb up there on top of the roof, then kick off the ladder and say hey, come on up! But how do you want me to go up there? ... This is how they become rich! Now, we say: we should play the game... Our role as a federation is to make sure there are policies that protects the workers. If we see that there are farm workers that have been dumped [along the road], it is the federation's role and industrial unions to say: let us put policies in place that are able to protect these people.

Some people are crying and say: no, no, you must disaffiliate. When you disaffiliate from SWAPO you won't be a better organization, you will not be stronger. There is another federation that is not affiliated to SWAPO [i.e. TUCNA], are they stronger than us? Why are they not stronger than us? Why are they not performing better than us?

We have to go to the history, the history of NUNW and SWAPO, is a unique one... The Ovambo People's Organization realized the Ovambos were not the only ones having problems, so they decided to extend it to everyone and form a political party, SWAPO. Then they realized they needed to focus on issues of labour, then they formed NUNW. Now, people are coming telling us: no, now you must divorce. Let the workers decide! Therefore the issue of affiliation and disaffiliation is an organizational issue, and it must be decided by member unions.

It is true that if you are allergic to SWAPO, you are indeed allergic to SWAPO. Sorry, we don't have these tablets to give you. It's not true that the best way is disaffiliation, respect what is there. In NUNW meetings, I've never seen any SWAPO member in our meetings; I've never seen that. There must be a proper forum to discuss the issue of affiliation and disaffiliation".

These sentiments were echoed by Justina Jonas: "MANWU being an affiliate of NUNW, is a child of NUNW, let us respect the history. The issue of affiliation or disaffiliation won't take us anywhere. Let us respect our history. As a child of NUNW, we'd like our history to be respected and let the structures speak for themselves. I have travelled the world a bit, and I now ask you: tell me one country in the world where there are trade unions and federations who are affiliated or in contact with the ruling party. The only country that I know is Ghana, and even they are in close contact with the ruling party... It is an issue of saying are we independent or are we not? What is the point on talking to opposition parties if they're so bad, why can't we speak to SWAPO? I'm not going to discuss affiliation or disaffiliation. For me, we should respect history and focus on something else. Workers are the owners of the unions, they should decide".

John Kwedhi, the general secretary of the Namibia transport and Allied Workers Union (NATAU) which is also affiliated to NUNW added: "I'm representing the transport sector and security guards... What have we achieved in terms of labour? We have a platform which is tripartite. In it, the workers are represented by the unions. We all stood behind the banning of labor hire, and this is why the labour act was amended to regulate labour hire. This is one of the achievements. MANWU has already mentioned the minimum wage, we have also done it in the

security sector [is this true?]. In my sector, we don't give special treatment to the companies owned by the ruling party. We confronted them when they started to unfairly retrench and mistreat workers, and still we are affiliated to SWAPO. We are not prevented to address an issue just because affiliation. Because you hate SWAPO, you think that those who are affiliated to SWAPO are not doing well. I am saying to comrade Kavihuhua: we are aiming for the same interest! Protect the workers”.

Cross-border solidarity

Unions are increasingly realising the importance of working with each other across borders, particularly when dealing with transnational corporations. Justina Jonas explained: *“We are affiliated to Building Woodworkers International, which deals with the construction workers internationally. We are also affiliated to a global union federation which deals with metal and engineering sector. We are also having cross-border [cooperation] with other sister unions in the SADC region, Africa, and abroad. The cross-border relationship is very important because there are so many multi-national companies coming to Namibia...we need cross-border agreements. If they come here, we need to ask NUMSA [MANWU's sister union, the National Union of Metalworkers in South Africa, with which MANWU closely collaborates] do you have a recognition agreement with these companies? What does it contain? Let the shop steward from NUMSA come to Namibia and let the shop steward from MANWU go to South Africa. This is very useful, and this has helped very much the industry in which we operate”.*

Mahongora Kavihuha pointed out that: *“We are members of ITUC [the International Trade Union Confederation]¹⁷, and we were the first trade union federation [in Namibia] to affiliate to ITUC, when it was formed [after the merger of the International Confederation of Free trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL)]. We are affiliated to SATUCC [Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council], from which I just returned from Zimbabwe. I was on the SATUCC delegation to observe the elections in Zimbabwe... We want to maintain that the workers should be a stakeholder of any setup”.*

¹⁷ The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) represents 174 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 315 national affiliates.

Trade unions and politics: lessons from South Africa¹⁸.

Mazibuko Jara

Deputy editor, Amandla! Magazine

As a socialist, I see my coming here partly as contributing to that long-standing principle of solidarity amongst people of the working class. Also, as South Africans, we have a common history of apartheid and colonialism, and now the common problem of liberation projects and liberation movements that in my view have made peace with capitalism and have abandoned redistribution, social justice, let alone any idea of socialism. I think those common problems and that common history need a discussion of this kind, but obviously we also need much more than a discussion.

I also see my coming here as a South African as important because one also needs to consciously break South African arrogance. We need to challenge the accumulation drive of South African capitalism at the expense of Namibia, as well as other African countries. Apparently there is an “African renaissance” which we don’t see. Instead, we only see more expensive houses in Camps Bay and Sandton¹⁹ in South Africa.

The topic I have been asked to talk about is the relationship between South African trade unions and the African National Congress (ANC), what lessons could be learned from the events in South Africa? Today is the day that the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions)²⁰ is meeting. Tensions have been rising in COSATU, particularly around the personality of Zwelinzima Vavi, who is the general secretary of COSATU since 1999, and who has proven to be a thorn in the flesh for the ruling ANC. Challenging corruption and raising critical questions on why the ANC is not able to redistribute wealth, why it is not able to achieve social justice, and why it is not able to transform South Africa along the lines of the Freedom Charter. This charter is the 1955 document that the ANC adopted at the “Congress of the People” which COSATU sees as the people’s mandate to transform South Africa.

Tensions have risen in COSATU around the personality of Vavi and his role as the leader of COSATU because of some fundamental differences between the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP). COSATU, who can pull out a million workers to the streets at any time wants to pursue a more independent and radical agenda. Obviously I don’t know the outcome of today’s CEC meeting. Vavi may be suspended by the forces opposed to him. That raises a crucial question because the suspension of Vavi may mean the split of COSATU. The split in COSATU would have very serious implications for the political future of the ANC.

Furthermore, what is significant about this week in the struggle of the working class in South Africa is the first anniversary of the Marikana massacre on Friday. As you may know, 35

¹⁸ This paper is based on the transcript of Mazibuko’s presentation on 14 August 2013

¹⁹ Two upper class areas in Cape Town and Johannesburg respectively

²⁰ COSATU is the largest trade union federation in South Africa and together with the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress is part of the tripartite alliance in South Africa

workers were gunned down partly because they were raising a demand for a living wage²¹ which for many workers has not been realized despite the ANC being in government for some 19 years. On Friday, my organization, the Democratic Left Front (DLF) is supporting a massive rally in Rustenburg with the new union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), to commemorate the massacre.

The NUMSA challenge

At the beginning of this week, just before the COSATU CEC, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)²², issued a very strong statement that is at the very heart of my topic for today. I will quote from it because I think it captures the issues of the COSATU – ANC relationship and what lessons could be learned. The NUMSA statement starts with a fairly famous but at times largely forgotten quote from the Communist Manifesto that reads as follows: *“the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”*²³.

Indeed, South Africa today is about heightened class struggle. The very meeting of COSATU today is about that. The question that arises is a very crucial question, not only for South Africa but for a whole working class and progressive forces on the continent. Is the South African working class a class in and for itself in this and other class struggles? In other words, what will be the fate of this heightened class struggles? To what extent will the South African working class, if it is a class in a for itself, be able to stamp its imprint in the outcome of those struggles? At this point, this is too early to tell.

The NUMSA statement was issued after the special Central Committee meeting on Monday [12th August 2013]. It is the highest decision-making body after Congress and brings together about 500 people. It was called precisely because NUMSA needed to prepare for today’s COSATU CEC. NUMSA’s national office bearers had prepared a discussion document detailing the crisis within COSATU. That analysis was entitled “COSATU at the crossroads”. The Central Committee adopted this discussion paper which has now become the Central Committee’s position paper and which shall be taken to NUMSA’s regions and local structures. *“The position paper provides an overarching working-class analysis of the cause and sources of the crisis in COSATU. This analysis was based on NUMSA’s Marxist-Leninist philosophical and theoretical, political, ideological, and cultural traditions. The central message delivered by the NUMSA national office-bearers to the special central committee sought to achieve a number of tasks: 1. To defend and protect the integrity of constitutional decisions of COSATU. 2. To defend and*

²¹The minimum income necessary for workers to meet their needs that are considered to be basic. This is not necessarily the same as subsistence, which refers to a biological minimum, though the two terms are commonly confused. A minimum income needs to cover shelter (housing) and other incidentals such as clothing and [nutrition](#). In some countries like the [United Kingdom](#) and [Switzerland](#), this standard generally means that a person working forty hours a week, with no additional income, should be able to afford the basics for quality of life, [food](#), [utilities](#), [transport](#), [health care](#), and minimal [recreation](#), one course a year to upgrade their education and childcare although in many cases [education](#), saving for [retirement](#), and less commonly [legal fees](#) and [insurance](#), or taking care of a sick or elderly family member are not included (Wikipedia, 2014). In South Africa, campaigns for the 'living wage' promote a wage of around the R12,000 (Amandla, 2013).

²² NUMSA represents construction and auto workers in South Africa with a membership of about 340 000. It is the largest industrial union in South Africa and is known for its staunch criticism of the lack of transformation in South Africa and for its critique of capitalism.

²³ This is a quote from The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, of 1848.

advance the revolutionary socialist traditions and trajectory of COSATU. 3. To prevent the conversion of COSATU into the labour desk of either the ANC or the bourgeoisie. 4. To defend the unity of the federation. 5. To defend the revolutionary basis of the ANC-led alliance, that revolutionary basis being the Freedom Charter²⁴. 6. To ultimately defend COSATU itself from being destroyed.”

These are the decisions that NUMSA took after the Central Committee discussions. The main conclusion is to point to the failure of South Africa’s tripartite alliance²⁵ to pursue consistently a radical national democratic revolution which is at the heart of the crisis of COSATU today. In NUMSA’s view, the struggle for freedom in South Africa cannot be achieved without the popular democratic forces advancing a socialist-oriented national democratic revolution. The crisis in COSATU today is in fact about whether or not COSATU should continue be a socialist trade union federation, or whether it should simply become a capitalist federation of the workers, or a labour desk of the bourgeoisie. From NUMSA’s perspective, this rupture in COSATU is between the forces of capitalism and the forces of socialism. The rupture in COSATU is between those who want to give capitalism a human face through social-democratic approaches and those who believe we should in a radical fashion do away with colonialism and capitalism in South Africa. Inevitably, the rupture in COSATU is between those who want to see a thorough implementation of the Freedom Charter and thus reject the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy of 1996 that the 2013 National Development Plan (NDP). On the other side are those who are consciously or unconsciously defending South African capitalism and imperialism by defending the neoliberal NDP and who are not supporting the implementation of the Freedom Charter, especially its nationalisation demands.

Those who want Vavi out of COSATU, want a COSATU that is a “toy telephone”, a labour desk of the ANC, a capitalist COSATU. Those who are defending Vavi want a revolutionary, socialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist COSATU. NUMSA confirmed that the centre of the crisis in COSATU resides in the capitalist trajectory of our post 1994 socio-economic formation. It stated that: *“This central committee of NUMSA resolved that NUMSA should engage with affiliates to request the convening of a special national congress of COSATU to once and for all to resolve the crisis in our beloved federation. NUMSA is calling for the implementation of COSATU 11th National Congress resolutions as well as the execution of the COSATU national campaigns organizing and collective bargaining resolutions. COSATU must also fast-track the process to declare disputes so that workers proceed to embark in industrial action. What has happened and continues to happen in the last twelve months in our country in general and COSATU in particular, made the NUMSA’s SCC to resolve that a special NUMSA National Congress be convened in December 2013. The agenda items for the NUMSA special NC are the following: 1. Building a unified COSATU and labour movement. 2. NUMSA’s approach to the 2014 elections.”*

The part on collective bargaining in the resolution reads as follows: *“In the main, employers appear to be unwilling to respond positively to the perfectly normal demands NUMSA has made*

²⁴ The Freedom Charter is a declaration containing the key demands and principles of the South African Congress Alliance which consisted of the ANC and its allies, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People’s Congress.

²⁵ This alliance consists of the ANC, the SACP and COSATU.

in the ongoing collective bargaining process. We want to make it clear that it is very unwise to treat lightly the extremely difficult situation of the black and African working class in South Africa who continue to suffer abnormal, low colonial wages, inferior social conditions, extremely unequal pay, and thus live miserable lives. NUMSA will not accept any fake excuses for not awarding workers reasonable increases during these hard times. We continue to press on and demand all our members to be battle-ready should the bosses prove impossible to persuade to appreciate the plight of the metal [and allied] workers.”

After 19 years of the post-apartheid political dispensation, South Africa is experiencing heightened and acute class struggles. What is interesting about the NUMSA statement is that these class struggles have significant political outcomes. Throughout the 19 years of post-apartheid democracy, South African workers have not stopped to fight whether in the workplace or as the unemployed. They have been fighting throughout even though they continue to vote for the ANC. The difference is that NUMSA will convene a special congress in December 2013 to discuss their approach to the 2014 elections. This is quite significant. Until now there was not a single union in COSATU that would have a doubt regarding electoral support for the ANC, given that COSATU has an alliance with the ANC. The question would *not* be whether they support the ANC or not, but the question would be: what issues the unions would raise for inclusion in the manifesto of the ANC, and at times the inclusion of some union leaders into the ANC list for Parliament.

It is quite significant therefore that NUMSA has taken a different position. NUMSA's regional and local structures were tasked to convene worker indabas and this call for workers to be battle-ready shows that NUMSA is preparing itself for working class mobilization that will combine political and economical issues. NUMSA's appeal is directed to “to all democracy-loving South Africans in general, and to the working class in particular”. It states that “*the role that our COSATU has played in the national and international struggles for the attainment of the democracy that we enjoy in this country cannot be denied. COSATU played and continues to play a role far larger than its legal boundaries. As a socialist trade union federation, COSATU continues to defend some of the most positive gains of the 1994 political breakthrough. This fact makes COSATU a national political asset for all peace-loving and progressive formations in South Africa and in the world. The defence of COSATU as a socialist and progressive trade union federation must be the responsibilities of all South Africans who care about the future of this country and the world community of progressive revolutionary socialists and workers alike. Thus we call upon all South Africans, black and white, workers in the middle class, to defend COSATU from all those who would like to see it reduced to a useless yellow [sweetheart] trade union federation fit only to abuse by those in power. For the working class, especially the progressive and socialist workers of South Africa and the world we say: let history be written not by those who stood aside when COSATU was imploding, that you did nothing to save a giant revolutionary shield of the working class and the poor, it is time to raise your voices and defend your organization*”.

The crisis of COSATU

This is indeed a significant political statement issued by the largest affiliate of COSATU, the most militant and the most left in the affiliates of COSATU with some 338,000 members. The question that arises is: how did it come to this? That NUMSA would feel necessary to issue such a controversial political statement some seven to eight months before the 20th anniversary

of democracy, before the next national elections. What is happening? Why is it happening? What does it mean for COSATU? What does it mean for the ANC? What does it mean for workers? What does it mean for South Africa and for progressive forces in Southern Africa?

I've been asked to talk about lessons from South Africa, and the relationship between COSATU and the ANC. There are only six points that I really want to make. The first one is that COSATU, today, represents an interesting paradox, and interesting irony. It is the paradox of power and victory. The victory of South African working class defeating apartheid, and its access to power. It is not just power, but it is access to power. I'll explain what this paradox means later on. But this is at the heart of the crisis: the contradiction of victory.

Secondly, the COSATU crisis and what is happening in the relationship between COSATU and the ANC, speaks to a broader set of issues. This set of issues relate to the dilemmas of the trade union movement in South Africa. What are these dilemmas? Firstly, that trade unions are caught within capitalism. They are caught in an endless cycle of exploitation, where they have to mediate exploitation of the workers. As they do this mediation, they do not necessarily challenge capitalism, they do not necessarily pose an alternative. Despite COSATU and NUMSA asserting socialism as their perspective, they ultimately still operate within capitalism, within its limits. It is the same for trade unions in Africa and in the rest of the world; that is the first dilemma. The second dilemma has to do with what Frantz Fanon referred to as the "limits of national consciousness". To put it differently, the ideal of national liberation has been achieved by almost all throughout Africa. This idea of national liberation leads workers, leads poor people into a strategic cul-de-sac, a strategic dead end, in the sense that the working class, through the national consciousness ends up tailing behind former liberators who now serve capitalism. They do not only trail behind these national liberators, but they also subordinate their working class interests to a national project, however defined. Whether it is "one Azania, one nation" or whether it is "one Namibia, one nation", it is some kind of national project. Now, once that happens, some crucial questions are not asked. Some crucial social, political, and economical questions remain unresolved. Those questions essentially being about the class interests of the working class. They cannot be addressed fully and completely within a national liberation framework that does not pose questions about the capitalistic economic system.

The subordination of working class interests to former national liberators normally takes place at the expense of the very working class and others who are still exploited. This is part of the fundamental dilemmas facing trade union movement in South Africa, and in Africa broadly. COSATU in its relationship with the ANC has not been able to go beyond those dilemmas, it has not been able to offer us new answers to these dilemmas.

The third point is that the problems within the COSATU and ANC relationship are not problems from the outside. Seeds of decay within COSATU exist also in the very relationship between COSATU and the ANC. As far as COSATU alone is concerned, here are some of the seeds of decay:

Firstly, what you have seen in contrast to the very radical traditions of worker-control of the 1980s in which COSATU was born under and evolved in its first decade, and the contrast with what you have now in COSATU generally is bureaucratization and decline of democratic worker-control. You see the same managerial principles that neoliberalism talks about in the workplace but also now finding life in COSATU. How does the very radical Zwelinzima Vavi

justify a salary of R50,000 per month as the general secretary of COSATU compared to the salary of R5,000 of most workers? Many are even earning less than R5,000. How does the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Frans Baleni, justify an annual salary of almost a million Rand per year? There is obviously a problem.

Secondly, despite COSATU's commitment to socialism and its actually very radical positions in many instances, in practice what you have is reformist collective bargaining, selling out workers' grievances and demands. The reason the Marikana workers rose up against the NUM, was because NUM did not address the grievances and demands of workers. It sought accommodation all the time with mining bosses. It did not seek to raise demands that would challenge and transform the mining sector in systematic and significant ways. That's why, in a space of three months, from August until the end of October of last year, one hundred thousand workers could leave the NUM so easily. They have been hit hard by the failure of the NUM to advance progressive collective bargaining strategies, instead of reformist collective bargaining strategies.

The third seed of decay is the fact that the very socialist COSATU has one leg with the workers and one leg with capitalism. The majority of COSATU unions established investment companies, the Clothing and Textile Union (SACTWU) is the most complex and sophisticated. In cases where the Clothing and Textile Union investment company invests in mining assets, in insurance, in retail, and so on, how are the clothing workers going to be in solidarity with the other workers within the companies that it invests? In theory the clothing investment company of the workers is supposed to be advancing investment interests of workers. Now, those investments directly stand against working class solidarity. Workers have to decide whether to protect their investment interests or to stand side by side with their fellow workers when they go on strike or when they engage in struggle. To make matters worse, many of the directors of investment companies are the very leaders of the unions themselves who take decisions about where investments should go. There was a huge battle at the last congress of the NUM about NUM-Prop, the NUM property company, which has huge assets. Now, who controls them? In a number of instances former general secretaries and presidents have become either CEOs or chairpersons of significant investment companies. The founding president of the NUM, a migrant worker from Lesotho, James Motlatsi is now a leading mining capitalist having left the NUM to become the NUM investment company. That's the third seed of decay.

The fourth seed of decay, is the fact that the alliance with the ANC, opens the path to political careers for a very significant section of the leadership of COSATU. That amounts to political co-optation. To its credit, COSATU has for many years refused to be part of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the ANC. However, at the last congress of the ANC held in Mangaung in December 2012, at least five national leaders of COSATU have accepted to serve on the CEC of the ANC, including the COSATU president. To his credit, Vavi refused nomination to the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC).

Democracy in COSATU does not work at its fullest. At a COSATU congress, no worker can stand up and speak, it is the general secretary that can speak at a congress and say "this is the NUM position", "this is the NUMSA position". So when there were already tensions between those forces represented by Vavi, politically, and those forces represented by Sdumo Dlamini, the COSATU president, politically, when there were these two members at the congress last year, both sides decided not to go for the political fight. They decided not to go for elections,

they decided to withdraw any other nominations and to return both of them uncontested. Avoiding the political battle we see now. If Vavi would have gone against the candidate of the other side, he would have won, hands down. [...] That speaks to a complex balance of forces. It's not easy to say very clearly "this set of unions goes for that". For example, yesterday, the president of the Teachers' Union was suspended so that he could not attend today's central executive committee of COSATU. The reason for his suspension is because he opened up the platform for Vavi in the Eastern Cape for two big meetings. Officially the teachers' union is against Vavi. So you see how [...] within the unions there's significant political contestation.

Actually, the crisis in COSATU means that we're losing a significant force that could be fighting these and other battles. The forces that have sought to capture COSATU to be subordinate to the ANC are not concerned about COSATU not fighting those battles, and actually it's quite significant that things have been playing in this way because it means that this process will continue.

COSATU's achievements and failures

There are many other features that confirm the notion of seeds of decay. I have not mentioned other seeds of decay in the political relationship between COSATU and the ANC but will expand a bit in COSATU's "score sheet", namely COSATU's achievements and failures. There are "golden moments" of COSATU's influence, of COSATU's power. These happened mainly between December 1985 to June 1996 when Trevor Manuel, the former Minister of Finance released the neoliberal GEAR strategy that COSATU opposed. Since 1996, COSATU experienced the paradox of victory, the contradiction of having access to power.

Here are some points that point to the strength of COSATU. The federation is still committed to socialism. COSATU represents the most militant, the most organized, the largest section of South African society. Legislatively, it has done well in amending a number of laws, including the Labour Relations Act of 1995. It was able to discredit the 1996 GEAR strategy through sustained mobilization, through sustained general strikes against privatization, against job losses and so on. What that means is that it did not surrender to the ANC. Mandela himself had said that their policy is not negotiable, that 'it is cast in stone'. COSATU was able to force the ANC back on that because it fought. In addition to that, it put forward economic policy proposals on a whole range of fronts. It has that capacity, it has a research body, it has missions in Parliament, it engages employers on a regular basis with NUMSA being the most advanced here. NUMSA made an array of policy proposals across the board. Thanks to NUMSA, thanks to COSATU, the South African government has finally adopted the idea of the need for an industrial policy.

COSATU is also consistent regarding corruption. It setup an NGO [non-governmental organisation] called Corruption Watch, which is basically ensuring that civil society has power and ability to investigate and lay charges on corruption. Corruption Watch has even investigated corruption in COSATU unions. COSATU also stood together with the Treatment Action Campaign against Thabo Mbeki, when he was an HIV-denialist.

Without COSATU, Jacob Zuma would not be president. Without COSATU, the co-opted, neoliberal Thabo Mbeki, would remain powerful and influential. COSATU was responsible for Mbeki's ejection at the ANC congress in Polokwane. Without COSATU, he would have not been ejected.

COSATU has also been able to raise public sector wages, which were quite low and also had a racial basis. There is much more that could be added on the positive side but I want to focus on some of the fundamental challenges now. Despite all its achievements, COSATU followed a reformist approach to workplace struggles. COSATU takes all issues to corporate bodies that bring together government, business and labour and seems to believe that it will win in the boardroom what it has not won on the shop floor. Because of its alliance with the ANC, and because of its increasing interpenetration with the ANC and the SACP, COSATU has lost political plurality. For the first ten years of its life, COSATU was characterized by political plurality. The ANC and SACP politics were dominant, but they were not the only politics; others had legitimate presence in COSATU. The South Africa Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), NUMSA, and at times the Chemical Workers Union, would from time to time sponsor resolutions calling for a workers' party. That happened up to the late 1990s. There was political plurality, there was tolerance. Now, that is gone. Since 1996, that has been destroyed completely. As a result, the pro-Jacob Zuma forces within COSATU are now able to question radical COSATU positions and say that those radical COSATU positions will sacrifice or undermine the ANC.

As much as public sector wages have increased, these wages have increased through pressure from below. The leadership of public sector unions has turned to seek accommodation within the ANC, because the ANC is in government and they did not believe that they could challenge government. What you have seen with the two major strikes of 1997 and in 2007, and a bit of strikes in 2009, is that public sector workers said we don't care about such union leaders, we are going on our own and then the leaders followed behind the workers.

COSATU has also not been able to yield stronger alliances with broader social forces of the working class such as the unemployed and other social forces. For example, it convened a People's Budget Coalition, together with the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the South African NGO coalition SANGOCO. The People's Budget Coalition ended up being a meeting of three people, one from each of these organizations, and never became a movement to mobilize around the demand for democratising the budget process.

Similarly, on the Basic Income Grant (BIG), COSATU ended up bureaucratizing the demand and taking that struggle to boardrooms, instead of really building a movement that connects the employed and the unemployed.

Politically, COSATU has scored negatively because it did not manage to change the ANC's neoliberal course regardless of who was the president in power. Even when COSATU had its man on the helm of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, the ANC has been consistent and committed to neoliberalism. Of course, it will talk about free basic services, it will talk about the developmental state, it will talk about industrial policy, but if you look at the fundamentals of monetary policy, if you look at the fundamentals of fiscal policy, of trade, a neoliberal approach remains coherent.

COSATU has repeatedly claimed that there would be a "shift to the left" after Polokwane, after Mangaung, and after other ANC conferences. There was always an anticipated "shift to the left" while working class struggles were demobilized in anticipation of such a shift. Despite the claims of a shift, Marikana happened. How do you explain 100,000 workers walking away from

the National Union of Mineworkers, (NUM) and forming AMCU if there was always a “shift to the left”?

There’s a huge problem with the political positioning of COSATU in terms of theoretically, ideological and programmatic aspects. For example, despite NUMSA being critical of those who seek to limit COSATU, you still find NUMSA saying it remains committed to what I regard as a stalled and possibly failing national liberation project of the ANC. So despite radical rhetoric, and even radical actions, ultimately there’s always this political conclusion: we must get back to the revolutionary alliance of the ANC. This is a dead end and it closes the possibilities for COSATU to seek out a new path. To seek out a new path, does not mean that you have predetermined answers at the beginning of such a journey, or that this journey will automatically lead to successful outcomes. But the working class has to search for answers, because 19 years of post-apartheid democracy have entrenched capitalism, a capitalism that continues to be based on cheap black labour. Let me give you a concrete example. Between 2000 and 2010, data collected by Statistic South Africa, a government body, shows that workers lost R410bn that was previously in their pocket as their wage share of national income. That went over to the bosses’ pockets as profits. How did this happen? Through increased productivity of workers not matched with equivalent salary increases; through the outsourcing of labour, so that the company who had 5,000 permanent employees and cuts 2,000 workers that will then be re-hired through labour brokers with lower incomes and benefits; and of course retrenchments. In the end, those who remain end up needing to work harder and more, in order to produce more profits. As a result of this shift of R410bn from workers’ pockets to the bank accounts of capitalists, there are huge un-invested profits and reserves. At the beginning of 2013, South Africa’s non-financial firms, mainly manufacturing firms, held R 550 billion in reserves in banks. That explains basically to why post-apartheid democracy has reached its limits if it does not address the huge economic questions, particularly around ownership, about wealth redistribution, and basically positioning the workers and the poor economically better. This does not even touch the required systemic and social transformation of the economy, away from minerals-based economy, away from an economy dominated by a few large conglomerates, away from domination by international investors.

In other words, what the ANC has been able to achieve in relation to COSATU has been to land three powerful blows, which significantly weakened the federation:

1. The neoliberal restructuring of work, that I’ve already given examples of, has meant that COSATU has not been able to respond to it effectively. COSATU has no strategy today how to ban labour brokers and labour hire. It has been fighting it, but whenever workers take it to the streets, COSATU takes that energy to the boardrooms. If it is not taken to the boardroom, the ANC says ‘we can’t do it’. That is how the neoliberal restructuring of work has proceeded despite opposition by workers.
2. Structural unemployment. Despite COSATU remaining with two million members, general unemployment takes away from the income of the workers, but also takes away from the political and social power of workers. This means that there is a huge underclass in South Africa. Of the 51 million people in South Africa, between 7 and 8 million are employed in the formal sector. No one knows how many are in the informal sector. But there is a large number of those without income, permanently outside the economy.

3. The third punch COSATU has suffered, is a politically-arrogant ANC that has stayed the cause of neoliberalism and reaches out to the working class for its vote. As soon as they have got that vote, it proceeds head on, at high speed, to continue with corruption, to continue with capitalist policies.

That is at the heart of the problem that COSATU is facing today. In its political alliance with the ANC, it has not been able to wean the most critical, the most important, the most significant demands. That is why I argued earlier that the ‘golden moments’ of COSATU took place during its first ten years, 1985 - 1995. After that, it has continued to fight, it has continued to mobilize, but those energies, that influence is slipping away.

Today’s crisis in COSATU is a culmination, an accumulation of a long process of political decline in the context of an hegemonic national liberation movement that has not been able to transform South Africa structurally and systematically. South Africa still has an apartheid geography; if you thought the homelands were dissolved, they continue. Not because the ANC calls them homelands, but geographically, economically, and socially, they continue to exist. Townships remain zones of rotting poverty. Camps Bay, Sandton, and other white suburbs, are hubs of opulence, even better than California.

There is a vast discrepancy between what a COSATU resolution paper says on socialism and what the actual experience of millions of working and poor people on the ground. This just reaffirms the terms of the paradox of victory I was talking about.

On all fronts you can point to COSATU influence. You can point out at COSATU’s influence on a whole range of policies. For example, Mandela convened a presidential job summit in 1999 thanks to COSATU. In fact, the very political manifesto that the ANC put in their 1994 elections was [also thanks to] COSATU, because they said we want a “reconstruction pact”, and what did that reconstruction pact become? The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) that the ANC campaigned on. That was the first major point of influence COSATU had [then]. Even the very notion of “corporate social dialogue” goes back to COSATU in the apartheid days, forcing apartheid government and capital to the table. You can point at many more: the Labour Relations Act, the Industrial Policy, and so on. The point though is that where it matters, monetary policy, fiscal policy, trade, the structure of the economy, the fact that we continue to produce an economy that’s mineral[-energy]-based, that it’s a mining government... where it matters, when it comes to deepening political democracy beyond liberal notions in the constitution... where it matters, COSATU has not been able to have influence.

NUMSA has a strong position on a socially-owned renewable energy sector. But that’s the NUMSA position, it hasn’t become COSATU position. Government is going ahead with a R1 trillion nuclear program for energy. COSATU was against the arms deal, but the ANC went on its way to take R60bn of public money to buy arms. Yes, you can have all the participation and all the forums countrywide, publish that document, release that policy perspective, but, the political culture in South Africa is such that the ANC remains hegemonised by capitalism and neoliberalism where it matters. And now COSATU, even though it is a player in the field, has not been able to remove that referee that’s making the game so unfair.

The role of the SACP

I still need to touch on the role of the SACP, of which I was a member for some twenty years. It is crucial to understand the role of the SACP in the relationship between COSATU and the ANC. The existence of a large communist party, is fairly unique in South Africa and in the African context today. In Tunisia, in Egypt and Sudan, there are communist parties of some kind but they are not as big or as influential as the SACP. Let me give you a few examples about influence and size.

At its last congress, the SACP claimed some 140,000 members. The ANC has one million members. That makes the SACP the second largest political party in South Africa. In Zuma's cabinet, it has about ten ministers. Of the eight provincial premiers of the ANC, half are from the SACP. Of the 233 municipalities, probably a hundred majors are communists. The local mayoral cabinets, the provincial cabinets, the national cabinets, there are tens if not hundreds of communists. In the personnel of the state, probably a thousand SACP members are employed as public servants.

In the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the ANC, there are a number of SACP party leaders. The secretary general of the ANC, Gwede Mantashe, was the regional chairperson of the SACP. So there's a close interpenetration which shows the presence of the communist party that goes back to 1921. Historically, the SACP built the ANC as a force to fight apartheid because the ANC was fairly regional in its early years. This is quite significant and the SACP played an important role in building class consciousness. It built socialist consciousness. Socialism in South Africa, is popular because of the rhetoric of the SACP, because of the personality of those like Chris Hani and Joe Slovo, who had no other interest but to stand for ordinary people. It is this historical prestige that continues to affect large numbers of people. This political prestige was accumulated especially in the period running up to the first democratic election, between 1989 and 1994.

Now, the point that I'm going to make is fairly controversial. In the post-1994 period, the role of the SACP has been to use socialist rhetoric and some modest social reforms to win working class loyalty to the ANC. It is not the socialist rhetoric to challenge the ANC but a communist party that uses socialist rhetoric to say "...therefore, we must build a stronger and more progressive ANC". By keeping working class loyalty to the ANC, the SACP holds the working class back from its political consciousness and class struggles although the working class has actually proved that it is capable to challenge the ANC, to challenge capitalism, and to challenge neoliberalism.

There is a similar pattern of interpenetration between COSATU and the SACP. Except for the first general secretary of COSATU, Jay Naidoo, all general secretaries of COSATU have been communists. All COSATU presidents have been communists, you can count similar numbers in national leadership and provincial leaders of COSATU. The SACP has a significant influence on COSATU and it is interesting that the entire leadership of NUMSA is also in the communist party, and yet NUMSA opposes the political strategy of SACP.

The political strategy of the SACP is to sustain Jacob Zuma, because they see Jacob Zuma as the path-opener. Unlike Thabo Mbeki who was arrogant about his neoliberalism, at least Jacob Zuma is more open to be influenced in his stance towards neoliberalism. He is there for the

public show, to give hugs, to sing and dance and so on. The SACP is fine with that. NUMSA, however is raising some challenging questions and this complicates the relationship between COSATU and the ANC and the broader political relationship in the tripartite alliance.

When I worked with Blade Nzimande, the general secretary of the SACP at the head office, he would say was that the problem of the split in any of the organisations (the ANC, COSATU, SACP), is that it would not only be a split in one organization, but that it would have significant ramifications for the whole ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance. Thus what is happening today at the COSATU CEC, is quite significant for the ANC and for the SACP as well. It is not simply a matter of a union federation affiliating or changing political allegiances but it is a complex process about the relationship of the working class and its trade union movement with its national liberation movement that is failing to challenge capitalism.

The crisis in the unions as arena for class struggle

Capitalism in South Africa needed the ANC. It needed it in 1994 to overcome the limits of an apartheid economy which had a small market and which disabled them from accessing Africa and global investment. So 1994 liberated, more than anyone else, capitalism. Economic figures show that this is the case. Now, that's the dilemma within COSATU. What do you then do? Because you said to the workers "the ANC is your shield, the ANC is you". [They did this when] Zuma was rallying against Thabo Mbeki, "in Zuma we see ourselves". So there's a real contradiction in all COSATU and its strategy, and it's not easy to get out of that, because it's a message we have cultivated for so many decades. What they are now unable to do is to break away from that. That is what COSATU is caught in.

This links to the question of political strategy and the alliance. The message of saying "break the ANC-COSATU alliance" is not going to work, because whilst you do that, you are taking away the identity of people. For me, the answer doesn't lie in political purity of the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance; for me the answer lies in mobilizing social forces to fight the battles that must be fought. For example, when we won HIV/AIDS treatment, we formed a massive social movement which at its height it had some 30,000 people that could reach hospitals, close down hospitals, occupy hospitals and protest and so on. We need many more Treatment Action Campaigns on a whole range of other social issues that concern society, and we have not done that. The DLF is still a small baby, a new baby which is trying to think through its political questions. Of course, ultimately the political party instrument will be crucial, but I don't think it's the moment to be a political instrument. In fact, what you see in the NUMSA statement, is that what it implies is political reconfiguration. Whether it's the emergence of Agang²⁶ or the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)²⁷ of Julius Malema, there is political reconfiguration that it's taking place. What is still missing is independent autonomous social movements of the working class that have critiqued and thought through capitalism. For me, the answer lies on that. What we're seeking to do is to open up the space for democratic left politics so that these social movements can connect with the notion of democratic left politics, that doesn't look up to

²⁶ A political party recently set by Mamphele Ramphela, based not much in alternative economic propositions, but liberal claims: anti-corruption, better governance, etc.

²⁷ A political party started by former ANC-Youth League leader Julius Malema after being expelled from the party.

vanguard parties but actually seeks for a new notion of what we could put forward the notion of a new political party or other instruments to fight.

That's political reconfiguration on the left, what we just talked about. The other political reconfiguration that has taken place is on the right. Liberals are on the rise in South Africa: Agang as well as the Democratic Alliance (DA). They are made more confident by the crisis of a failing ANC, that is failing to manage the state, that is corrupt, that is failing to deliver services. Now, they speak about good governance, they re-appropriated Mandela completely. Mandela is no longer seen as a revolutionary figure whatsoever in South African political consciousness, he is seen as this reconciler who dissolved political differences and social divisions. They are saying: "this is not the Mandela of the ANC, *we* represent better the ideals of Mandela". That political reconfiguration on the right must not be forgotten by the left. The advantage of the right is that they have significant social capital: they have many professionals, media, and so on. They can spin a message and sustain it over a period of time.

In my view, Julius Malema represents radical populism. Actually he is a capitalist at heart, who's had investments, who is corrupt and so on. But he is concerned about the plight of young people, so he is able to be radical about that. The EFF is still new still new and it remains to be seen if they can make a dent in the support for the ANC.

Apartheid and colonialism were about the humiliation and subjugation of black people. That order that went about exploitation and social oppression, that positioned the black person structurally in the position they're in today. It's not a surprise that they're still disadvantaged. It has been reproduced even after liberation. In South Africa, the ANC has not ended cheap black labour. This continues in that economy. Then, cheap black labour means that there must be millions in shacks, unemployed in the rural areas without land. In addition of failing in ending cheap black labour, the ANC has not dismantled apartheid geography. The townships remain the dormitories of both cheap labour and the reserve of the army of cheap labour, and the unemployed. If we reproduce these things, we should not be surprised if black people continue to be disadvantaged. The only change is that, as Gwede Mantashe puts it, the change you've seen is like "the Irish coffee phenomenon", where you have the bottom of the cup, the first three quarters, are black; on top of that you put white foam; and on top of that you put a bit of black chocolate. Cyril Ramaphosa is that black chocolate on top of this Irish coffee, and otherwise the rest of the people remain at the bottom of this Irish Coffee. I don't know if that equals in Namibia, but I think it does.

On the other point, it is ultimately the new generations are beset with the problems that all liberation struggles did not solve. The new generations in Southern Africa have not taken up the hint from Tunisia and elsewhere. In Egypt and Tunisia it is the new generations that have actually posed the unresolved questions, that's the challenge. But what is their understanding of the social, economical and political situations? How are they going to respond to the crucial issues? That's the question.

Now, when it comes to peaceful strike action, actually the majority of the strikes are peaceful. What you see on TV are not the peaceful strikes because they're boring; from the point of view of footage. The majority of the strikes are peaceful, I don't have the figures with me but I have it somewhere. In a thousand strikes, you get ten violent strikes and then the ten violent strikes make it to the news; it's that kind of ration. But, the violence in the strikes points at desperation,

points at unions also failing to advance worker interests; so what do people do? Use their physical force. Then the danger with violent strikes is that they get used to say “they disrupt the economy”; they make that point. But when the media makes that point, what it doesn’t say is that what disrupts the economy are the low wages. That’s what disrupts the economy. As much as we should be correctly critical as a matter of principle against violent strikes, as we work out strategies for strikes that build social power, because violence divides workers; you don’t build unity like that. But while you think on how to resolve that, what we must not forget, is the terrible violence the working class suffers from this system, which is “hidden violence”.

Conclusion

The story of Southern Africa is that all its liberation movements have been co-opted and now only manage capitalism. They might be doing it quite well but that happens at the expense of what I think are the historical grievances that gave rise to the national liberation struggle. There is a strong lesson to be learned which is linked to what I said at the beginning: can the working class pose itself as a class in and for itself in Africa in the context of captured, co-opted, compromised national liberation movements? If the working class seeks to pose itself as a class in and for itself, what is the most appropriate political instrument? I don’t have an answer, I think it is a question we must debate. What is the most appropriate political instrument for it to advance its interests? Or should the working class move beyond the notion of political instruments to think of a political strategy to advance its interests in the workplace, socially, economically, and politically? What are the instruments then?

There is an interesting experience and some interesting lessons from South America where you have significant trade union movements in alliance with significant indigenous movements and social movements of the unemployed, of the landless, and so on, which then constitute a significant social power outside of the political system dominated by political parties that manage capitalism.

The other key question is: how do trade unions move beyond collective bargaining? How do trade unions think and work out strategies around the systemic, structural core issues such as the system and the structures that produce the very low wages? What is the point in engaging in collective bargaining every year and getting half of what workers were demanding if conditions that sustain exploitation are not addressed? This raises the need for trade unions to really confront capitalism. Firstly, understanding capitalism; how does it work as an economic system? Why does a worker work for eight hours or longer and the wage the worker gets is equivalent to the value produced in one hour of those eight hours? That is capitalism. The rest of the hours you work to produce profit. Now, how do trade unions make workers understand capitalism a bit deeper in this systemic and structural sense?

Understanding capitalism is one thing, but the next thing is whether unions want to accommodate themselves within it or not. Do they see capitalism as the father in the family who feeds the children or do they see capitalism as an exploitative system? Depending on that, what is the union strategy? What strategy do unions and workers work out to implement in practice to challenge capitalism? I cannot give the answer to that question but it will not be easy to defeat capitalism. There is no determined outcome in history, but this does not mean that capitalism cannot be challenged.

This question I am raising is related ultimately to the fate of the anti-colonial national liberation project. I think Southern Africa speaks loudly about the limits of that project, and very clearly the issues of the workers have not been able to be addressed in this project. Do trade unions imagine and envision possibilities of going beyond such a national liberation project? Is there a broader emancipatory project that goes beyond the rhetoric of national liberation? In my view, that broader national emancipatory project is socialism, but as a socialist I am still willing to engage with other notions of emancipatory projects because I do not think there is only one given answer, one possibility.

Latin America is interesting in this regard, because the indigenous movement and social movements are going back to notions of humanity, to notions of social justice that draw from their cultures, from their traditions, that draw from their civilizations that existed before capitalism, that existed before colonialism. In my view, there's something quite emancipatory about reclaiming one's identity in a progressive sense, like the Bolivians have done. For example, by banning Coca-Cola, they are actually saying "we're reasserting our own national dreams", and a number of other things. At the same time they made a statement against capitalism and globalization by ejecting Coca-Cola out of Bolivia. What then is the indigenous Southern African emancipatory project that connects with our identity, that draws from the best of our histories, the best of our traditions? That question is crucial.

The NUMSA statement said that they draw their conclusions from Marxism-Leninism "and our cultural traditions". They don't elaborate on this point, but I think it is related to this question. If it is an emancipatory project and it is valid, if there is traction, if there is momentum, how does it connect with who we are in the African context? This question is important, because the national liberation movements continue to imprison us in a particular identity: because you are African, there's certain things you are not supposed to do. ZANU poses itself as anti-imperialist, and yet it is the one that drove a neoliberal programme that marginalised the working class in Zimbabwe. The ANC does the same, I will not say much about SWAPO because I do not know enough. In my view, that kind of ANC [or] ZANU strategy imprisons people in some ideal of an African identity and yet this ideal does not speak to a structural, emancipatory, political project that could ultimately resolves inequality, social injustice, and so on. But whatever happens in the political party scene, for me, it's still only a fraction of what it's required. I'm going back to the point I made earlier about the need for mass movements that are conscious of capitalism and want to fight.

These could be some of the lessons which are not only South African but speak to a broader African community of progressive forces.

Update by the editors:

From 17-20 December 2013, NUMSA held a Special National Congress in Johannesburg, South Africa. The event was extraordinary as NUMSA decided not to support the ANC in the 2014 parliamentary elections. However, NUMSA did not leave COSATU as such a move would have fragmented the working class. Instead NUMSA called on the other COSATU affiliates to join them.

NUMSA has been one of the most critical unions for years and on numerous occasions has exposed the elite as acting against the interests of the working class. Three issues stand out: the massive R 230 million cost to taxpayers' for the private residence of President Jacob Zuma in Nkandla; the scandal when the wealthy Gupta family (patron and 'friend' of the ANC top leadership) was allowed to use the Waterkloof air force base for guests to arrive to one of their sons' wedding; and the Marikana massacre in which 35 striking miners in the Lonmin platinum mine were killed by the police in August 2012 (Marikana Support Campaign, 2014). NUMSA also supports ousted COSATU secretary general Zwelinzima Vavi's outspoken critique of the new National Development Plan as "anti-worker" (Marrian, 2013), and refused to endorse it. The NUMSA congress thus appears to be a crucial point in a long process of disillusionment since "liberation" which some described as "an elite transition" (Bond, 2000).

The special NUMSA congress gave rise to what could become an anti-capitalist movement and various resolutions taken indicate what NUMSA envisions: to start walking a path towards socialism, to consolidate NUMSA as a worker-controlled union, to mobilize the working class and dispossessed, etc. The emerging movement, for now, will not act as a political force in elections, as it will firstly aim at consolidating as a movement with a strong social base. NUMSA has also started a "political school" that appeals to all progressive social forces to unite (NUMSA, 2014).

NUMSA's decisions could alter the political landscape not only in South Africa but even in the Southern African region. The union proposes political alliances not between parties, public office-bearers, and the public-private sector, but between social forces gathered to address a large variety of issues affected by the overall process of exclusion. As observed by Leonard Gentle "neo-liberalism relies on the passivity of ordinary people" (2014), but this might well be about to change.

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Changing figures or changing reality? Making sense of unemployment statistics.

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Unemployment is widely regarded as a problem in Namibia. It is against this background that the various National Development Plans (NDP 1, 2, 3 and 4) have given priority to employment creation. NDP 1 and 2 gave specific employment targets but NDP 3 and 4 refer to policy statements of commitment to employment creation. For example NDP2 targets were to (a) increase employment by 2.6 per cent a year over the period 1999-2006 (at the same rate as population growth) and (b) ensure a three-fold increase in the number of jobs in manufacturing from 6.4 per cent of the country's total employment to 20 per cent. Despite this commitment the Namibia Labour Force Surveys (NLFS) of 2000 and 2004 showed that employment had in fact declined by an average of 2.7 per cent per annum during 2000-2004. In 2008 unemployment reached its highest (Figure 1). The NLFS of 2008 showed that unemployment had risen from 36.7% in 2004 to 51.2% in 2008. The 2012 NLFS however showed that unemployment had dropped to 27.4% in four years. The employed population increased from 331 444 to 630 094, that is by 90.1%. How could this be? Few people believe that Namibia had managed to raise employment to this level given that the country had also experienced slow economic growth during this period characterized by slow recovery from the global financial crisis. Employment creation depends on overall growth dynamics and especially on the expansion of the formal manufacturing and services sectors. Manufacturing has an unusually low share in the national output, employment and exports of Namibia compared with countries such as Singapore, South Africa and Ireland. In Namibia the manufacturing sector accounted for an average of 10.3 per cent of the GDP for the period 1995-2005, 8 per cent of total employment in 2001, and 34.8 per cent of exports for the period 1995-2005 (Kadhikwa, and Ndalikokule, 2007). It must also be mentioned that the Namibian economy displays a *dual structure* i.e. subsistence and/or family-oriented economy on one hand and a more modern market economy on the other. Both sectors contribute to the livelihood of people – but can the categories 'employment' and unemployment be equally applied to both sectors? Should we categorize communal farmers and their families that produce mahangu, milk, meat, and vegetables for family consumption as 'employed' or not?

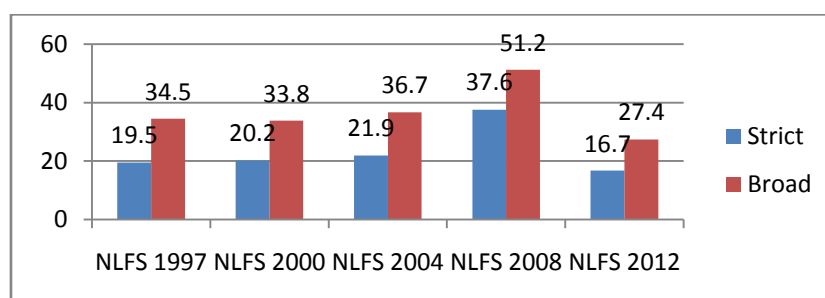
It is in this context that the spotlight has been placed on how Namibia defines and measures employment and unemployment. This paper takes a critical look on how employment and unemployment are defined and measured in the various NLFS. The objective of the paper is to:

1. Assess the definition and measurement of employment and unemployment as used in the various Namibia Labour Force Surveys.
2. Investigate the 'treatment' of the informal sector in NLFSs
3. Assess the changing role of subsistence economy (subsistence farmers) and/or family-oriented economy ("homemakers") in definition of employment and measurement of unemployment in Namibia in NLFSs.

The rationale for the paper is that contributing to the debate on measurement of employment and unemployment may provide insight for practitioners, trade unionists and policymakers on how

best to clarify labour force concepts and definitions used in surveys that deal with employment issues. To know about unemployment—the extent and nature of the problem—requires information. How many people are unemployed? How did they become unemployed? How long have they been unemployed? Are their numbers growing or declining? Are they men or women? Are they young or old? Are they rural or urban? Are they skilled or unskilled? Are they the sole support of their families, or do other family members have jobs? (Denniss, 2001: 14). It is thus important that unemployment is measured (and defined) reliably and validly. Reliability - that is the degree to which the measure of a construct is consistent or dependable. In other words, if we use this scale to measure the same construct multiple times, do we get pretty much the same result every time, assuming the underlying phenomenon is not changing? Validity –that refers to the extent to which a measure adequately represents the underlying construct that it is supposed to measure. *Face validity* refers to whether an indicator seems to be a reasonable measure of its underlying construct “on its face”. Who uses this data? Unemployment data is widely used in Namibia. Policy analysts use employment and unemployment statistics to assist in the planning, development, interpretation and review of government or industrial policies. For trade unionists information on employment and unemployment is crucial in order to develop guidelines and activities to safeguard the livelihood of workers, both employed and unemployed. Policy makers at various government levels use these statistics to make decisions on how to manage the economy. University economists use the employment/unemployment data to estimate the impact which unemployment has on the economy. They monitor economic trends, and develop forecasts.

Figure 1: unemployment figures in Namibia.



Importance of measuring employment and unemployment:

The unemployment rate is widely recognized as a key indicator of labour market performance. Changes in employment and unemployment provide indications to changes in labour market conditions therefore the unemployment rate is the principal measure of labour market performance in many countries including Namibia. Unemployment means that human resources are not being used to produce goods and services to meet people’s needs and wants. Information on unemployment is meant to reflect unutilized productive capacity in the economy. The unemployment rate is probably the most closely watched economic indicator in Namibia. It is also very sensitive politically as evidenced by the long delay in the release of the 2008 NLFS. When workers do not have access to jobs or lose their jobs and become unemployed it does not

affect them alone, because their families, and the country as a whole lose as well. In this regard workers and their families lose wages and sources of income, which means that they cannot sustain themselves financially in the same way that they used to. Namibia as a country loses the goods or services that could have been produced by the displaced workers. In addition, the purchasing power of these workers is lost, which can lead to unemployment for yet other workers.

Measuring and defining unemployment in Namibia

According to the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA) a person is employed when he or she has worked for pay, profit, or family gain for at least one hour during the reference period of seven days preceding the interview (NSA, 2012: vi). Does this definition really distinguish between the employed and the unemployed? Take 3 cases in the month when the NLFS interviews take place:

- a. **Case1:** Nepeti has worked for one hour for pay, profit or family gain during the week of interviews
- b. **Case2:** Nangula worked for one hour for pay, profit or family gain during the week preceding the interviews
- c. **Case3:** Nakuti works for one hour for pay, profit or family gain during the week after interviews

These three hypothetical women have worked for the same period, in the same month and probably for the same amount of money, but according to the NLFS only Nangula is employed and will be included in NLFS employment statistics. For me there is really no difference between these three. For the NLFS they represent different social realities with regard to employment. But are statistics not meant to reflect what is on the ground? The second problem with this definition of employment is that it may not really distinguish between doing a job and being employed. Is there a difference between job-creation and employment-creation? If you ask a plumber to come to your home to fix a toilet, you have given him a job but not employment. People who sell on the streets are regarded as employed but the question is what kind of work are they doing? Thus according to the definition of employment utilized by the NSA (2012) most young people that we see in the street of Windhoek looking for work are employed. This is because they are on the street so that they can be engaged by whoever has a specific job to do. Many do get such engagements from time to time and that is the reason they appear on the street day after day. They may get to do some specific task for one hour or so in exchange for payment in kind or money. This fits the definition of working “for pay, profit, or family gain for at least one hour during the reference period of seven days preceding the interview”. Yes, the NSA (2012) is in line with the criteria of the International Labour Organization (ILO). As the NSA argues it is for good reasons of international comparability that they follow the ILO definition of employment. The only problem is that most of these people sitting on the streets do not regard themselves as working. Neither are they regarded by other Namibians as having employment. For many Namibians one hour of a work for remuneration does not mean employment, it is just a short-lived job. This kind of work becomes employment if it spans a more extended period of time. After all, most work is not about self-realization but about providing dependable livelihood to a household or family by means of selling or using one’s labour force. As long as such a dependable livelihood is not ensured, work remains just work.

Measuring and defining unemployment:

In Namibia a person is regarded as unemployed if he/she meets the three criteria of:

- a. Being without work,
- b. Being available for work and
- c. Seeking work.

This is in accordance with the international statistical standards.

The *broad* measure of unemployment regards all those without jobs, who are available for work and looked or did not look for work. It is inclusive of all unemployed, whether they made attempts to look for work or not. The *strict* measure of unemployment considers those without jobs, who are available for work and are actively looking for work. It is in accordance with the international statistical standards (NSA 2012, p vi).

The data to assess the unemployment rate and a great deal of other labour force information is contained in the various NLFS. The 2008 NLFS indicated that unemployment rose from 21.9% to 37.6% since 2004 (using the strict definition) and from 36.7% to 51.2% (using the broad definition). This high rise in unemployment produced great controversy with government contesting the figures. From the controversies over the report presented to the Minister of labour in September 2008 and only released in the first quarter of 2009 it seems the survey has been changed and redesigned. But why change? This was done in order to:

- Revamp the questionnaire to reflect labour market behaviour better than it had in the past. It seems that the NSA was responding to new advances in methods of questionnaire design thereby tailoring questions more closely to respondents' and to survey designers' concepts.
- To incorporate advances in data collection i.e. changes in data collection technology necessitates the changes and the NSA was responding to this. According to NSA (2012) the goals for the redesign were to clarify the labour force concepts used in the survey and to make a few small changes in definition.

As a result of these improvements the NSA (2012) says that the sampling errors are relatively small, because of improved methods of data collection using a combination of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) for identification of true boundaries of Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) and households selected for the survey, as well as efficient geo-coding of the questionnaires during data capturing and processing. These steps have ensured greater data integrity and reliability than any previous statistical survey in the country (NSA, 2012: 21). The sample size was increased from 5 975 to 9 108 households. The number of Primary Sampling Units also was raised from 239 to 506. This resulted in a better coverage so that the representation of different characteristics was improved (NSA, 2012: 28).

There are two questions that the NSA failed to provide illumination as to the effected changes:

- Did the labour market radically change from 2008 to 2012 (or indeed since independence), so as to justify the statistical increase of employed persons of more than 90 per cent?

- Had Namibia's industry been restructured, for example did women, especially mothers of small children, or any other group unexpectedly become major participants in the labour force?

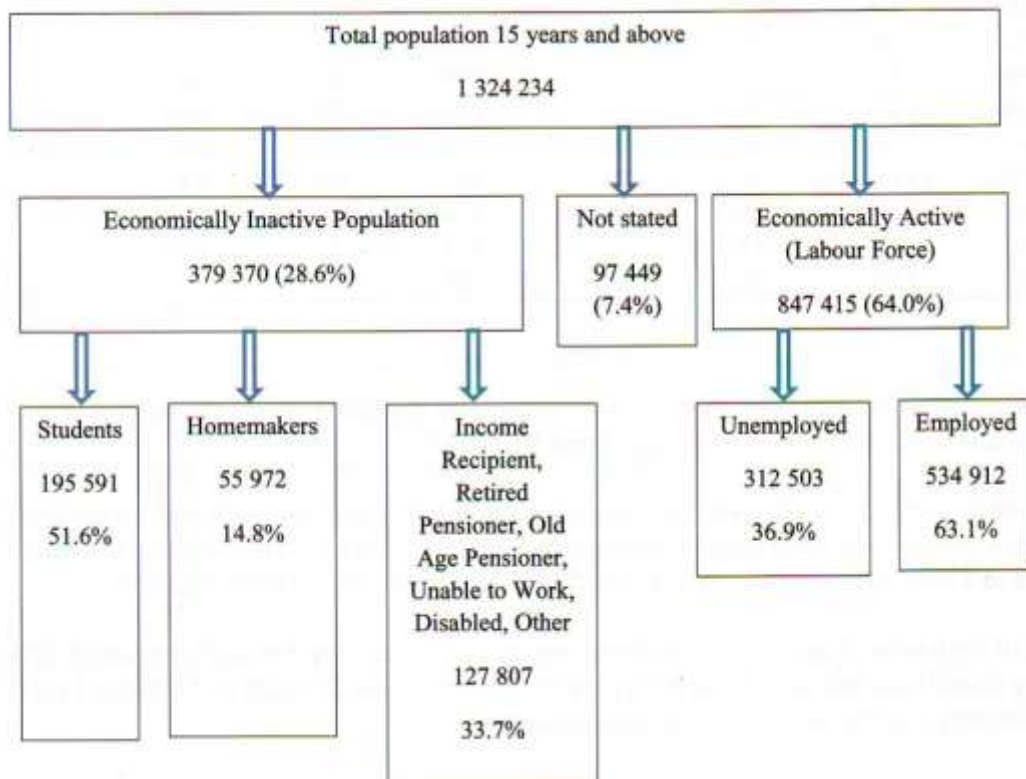
Our suspicion is that this was not the case. This makes NSA employment and unemployment statistics open to questioning.

For the purposes of defining employed and unemployed people the NSA (2012) classifies Namibians into economically active and inactive people. The economically inactive population are neither considered to be employed or unemployed, i.e. they are out of the labour force. According to NSA (2012a) economically inactive people are students, homemakers and income recipients. On the other hand the economically active are the ones that can be employed or are unemployed. The NSA (2012a) represents these people diagrammatically as in Figure 1.

The changes to the Labour Force Survey mentioned above have mainly affected the activity status of the Namibian population. The changes have had the effect of reclassifying communal/subsistence farmers. After the controversies surrounding the 2008 NLFS, Schade and Amunkete (2011: 6) argued that the Ministry of Labour (the Agency responsible for NLFS before the NSA)

“needed to review the definition used for classifying subsistence farmers, since they are apparently classified as economically inactive persons, such as pensioners and homemakers, or not covered by the survey at all”.

Figure 1: Activity status of 15 plus years (Namibia)



Source NSA (2012a: 56)

Actually, Schade and Amunkete were wrong because NSA (and the Namibian Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS] before it) had classified subsistence farmers as economically active and in the labour force. They seem to have confused the 2004 NFLS with the 2008 NFLS. The 2004 NFLS, contrary to internationally accepted norms and standards advocated by the ILO removed categories of subsistence farmers and family farm workers (Oherein, 2013). On the other hand the 2008 NFLS had reintroduced these categories (Oherein, 2013). According to Oherein (2013) the 2008 NFLS “treated them (subsistence farmers and family farm workers) as unemployed”. The 2008 NLFS clearly specified the *economically active* population as consisting of the *employed* and *unemployed*, i.e. labour force. It is important to note that *subsistence farmers* are not classified as economically inactive in the 2008 NLFS. The *inactive population* i.e. those outside the labour force were specified in the NLFS 2008 to include students, homemakers, old age, and income recipients, retired and severely disabled (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2008, p.38). Despite this the questionnaire designed for the NLFS (2008) left subsistence farmers out of employment. The 2008 survey did not count most of them as employed. The 2008 NLFS listed *subsistence farmers with employees* (4,541) and *subsistence farmers without employees* (6,824). Thus the 2008 NLFS found a total of 11,365 subsistence farmers in Namibia. This resulted in a decrease of employment by 53,880 people between 2004 and 2008 (and of 100,397 people between 2000 and 2008).

The 2012 NLFS treats subsistence farmers differently. Thus for 2012 subsistence farmers are not only classified as economically active but can also be classified as either employed or unemployed. The 2012 NLF survey reveals that 58 996 (19.6%) females are subsistence farmers while 40 473 (12.3%) males are subsistence farmers. Overall 99 469 (15.8%) of Namibians are classified as subsistence farmers (NLFS 2012: 9). This is different from the 2008 NLFS that indicated that 22.4% i.e. 87587 people out of 391 016) reported subsistence farming (crop and animal) as their main source of income. Statistically they were not classified as employed. This administrative change may be the major reason why unemployment is down in the 2012 NLFS as compared to the 2008 NLFS. In 2008 subsistence farmers equalled 11 365, while in 2012 they equalled 99 469. The additional 88 104 employed subsistence farmers are actually created by the 2012 questionnaire used by the NLFS interviewers. There are several new questions in the 2012 NLFS that accomplish this feat.

One question asks: In the last seven days did the respondent:

- do any work for his /her own or household farm/plot/garden/cattle post or Kraal or help in growing farm produce, looking after animals for the household or own consumption, for at least one hour?
- fetch water or collect wood/dung for household sale for at least one hour?

Another question asks: In the last seven days did the respondent:

- produce any other goods for household use for at least one hour?
- do any work for his /her own or household farm/plot/garden/cattle post or Kraal or help in growing farm produce?

- do any construction or major repair work on his/ her own home, plot, cattle post or business or those of the household for at least one hour?
- catch any fish, prawns, shells, wild animals or other food for household consumption, for at least one hour?

If respondents answered “YES” to any of these questions then they are *classified as employed*. This administrative change may be the major reason for the reduced unemployment figures.

In my view the usefulness of the definition of unemployment is placed under pressure when subsistence farmers are classified as employed. Though not unemployed in terms of the definitions used by the NFLS, many subsistence farmers are likely to suffer from similar problems as the unemployed such as insufficient income and loss of self-esteem. Jahoda (1982) proposed that employment provides both manifest (e.g. income) and latent (e.g. time structure, social contact, sharing of common goals, status, and activity) benefits to the individual. Do subsistence farmers differ from the unemployed on these measures in Namibia? Probably not. If not, our measures of unemployment and employment are not useful because they do not show behavioural differences between employed and unemployed. I believe that in their own perception, subsistence farmers classify themselves as unemployed and this is the reason so many of them leave their homestead and move to the urban centres of Namibia in search of employment.

Moreover, for logical consistency of statistics, if subsistence farmers are included in employment statistics must they not also be classified as contributing to Namibia’s gross domestic product (GDP)? How should their contribution be calculated into the GDP, as it is not market-related?

Another point of contention concerns the classification of “homemakers”. The NSA (2008 p. 3) classifies homemakers (14.9%) as an inactive population and defines them as:

“persons, male and female, who during the reference period were wholly engaged in household duties and were neither engaged in any form of paid or self-employment nor worked for family gain, and who were also not available for work” (NSA, p. 95).

These persons are in politically incorrect terms referred to as housewives. I personally do not know of any such person that has not worked for “family gain”.

Question D6 in the 2012 NFLS asks:

In the last seven days, did (Name) produce any other goods for household use for at least one hour/ [D7 - do any construction or major repair work on his/her own home, plot, cattle post or business or those of the household for at least one hour]/ [D4 - do any work for his/her own or household farm / plot /garden/cattle post or Kraal or help in growing farm produce, looking after animals for the household or own consumption, for at least one hour]?

If they did these things then they presumably are employed? I don’t know how many home makers doing these things would agree that they are employed.

There are two dimensions to unemployment (Guimarães, 2005):

- On the one hand its institutional and normative framework; strictly speaking in objective terms – being unemployed means being *institutionally* recognized, being counted and considered as unemployed.
- On the other, its subjective meaning, built up through experience in the labour market and re-signified by the subjective interpretation of individual histories. In this sense *subjectively* defining and considering oneself as such.

One problem with the NSA's definition and measurement of employment and unemployment is that many people defined as employed do not recognize themselves as employed. How many cattle and mahangu tillers consider themselves employed in Namibia? These definitions seem to lack *face validity*.

The criteria we use to define unemployment in terms of seeking employment come from the ILO. At first sight that seems unobjectionable. How can anybody be unemployed if they are not looking for employment? One feature of this definition however, is that it puts the onus of getting employment upon the individual. If individuals are unemployed, it is implied, it is their own fault. One recognized problem is that the definition does not deal with the so-called "discouraged workers" who are not looking for employment because they do not believe that suitable jobs are available (see Hussmans, et al 1990 pp. 107-8). ILO criteria condition us to think that getting work is predominantly an individual rather than an organizational responsibility (Thomas, 2005: 5). This is alright in some countries of Western Europe and North America where unemployment is not a generalized problem (i.e. less than 10%). But in Namibia (and Africa in general) where every third person above 15 might be unemployed, the issue is not about individuals but the collectivity and NSA is silent on this.

Yet another issue is that the line between being unemployed and out of the labour force is arbitrary. Thus Clark and Summers (1979) reported that "many of those classified as not in the labour force are functionally indistinguishable from the unemployed". "The distinction between unemployment and out of the labour force was behaviourally meaningless". Are 'unemployment' and 'out-of-labour-force' behaviourally distinct states? The results of studies that test these propositions (comparing the unemployed and the out of labour force) seem mixed but in general not much difference is found. In other words we are not separating oranges from apples with our measures of unemployment.

Interrogating the issue of those outside the labour force further - what does "not available for work" mean? This is an important question since it defines the economically inactive. *Economically inactive population*: All persons below the age of 15 years of age. In addition, all persons over 15 years of age who are *not available for work* since they are full-time learners or students, homemakers (people involved only in unpaid household duties), ill, disabled or on early retirement. Question I7 - *Since you were not working for pay, profit or family gain, nor ready to work, what were you doing during the last 7 days? 1 = Retired 2 = Old age 3 = Illness/Disabled 4 = Homemaker 5 = Student 6 = Income Recipient 7 = Other, Specify...*

What else does "not available for work" mean?

- Not searching in the belief that there are no jobs (market related)

- Not searching because of not wanting or unable to work (Retired 2 = Old age 3 = Illness/Disabled)
- Not searching because doing other things (Homemaker 5 = Student 6 = Income Recipient)
- Not searching in the belief that there are no suitable jobs (personal reasons)

What about the “ready to work” but not searching? I think most unemployed in Namibia are not searching in the belief that there are no jobs (market related) given the generalized nature of unemployment. I know many UNAM students that are not available for work BUT show them work and they are ready.

Conclusions

The NSA has redesigned the NLFS and this redesign has incorporated state-of-the-art techniques in a survey data collection technology. The NSA has responded to new advances in methods of questionnaire design thereby tailoring questions more closely to respondents' and to survey designers' concepts. According to NSA (2012) the goals for the redesign were to clarify the labor force concepts used in the survey and to make a few small changes in definition. The questionnaire is said to now better reflect labor market behaviour better than it had in the past. This is of enormous significance to policy makers and those seeking to understand Namibia's social and economic conditions.

Few people can doubt the political sensitivity of the Labour Force Survey in Namibia. Fewer can doubt the political sensitivity of changing major economic indicators such as employment and unemployment. The NSA decided that they needed to take risks otherwise the NLFS could lose relevance in a world where change is constant. In a world of change in the behaviour of the labour force, change in the meaning of words like employment and unemployment, and change in the ways in which citizens think and respond to questions that are asked of them things had to likewise change. In this context the redesign of the NLFS questionnaire is an undertaking to be praised. The NSA has taken that risk of improving its questionnaire and the assessment of this risk is not easy.

However these changes must reflect reality of changes in labour force behaviour, otherwise citizens might lose confidence in the statistics produced by the NSA. This paper takes issue with the treatment of subsistence (communal) farmers and home makers in the 2012 NLFS. Through changed methodology:

The structure of employment has reversed from being largely rural to being largely urban as most communal farmers that were previously recorded as unemployed became part of the employed (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2013: 4).

“The substantial increase in the number of employed and the large decrease in the unemployment rate is in large part due to an improved methodology that resulted in better capture of categories of employed people other than paid employees” (NSA, 2012: 1).

Unfortunately reality does not change that easily.

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Does the law support or undermine labour rights? The challenge of dispute resolution in Namibia

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and

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This paper is an improved version of a joint presentation on '*Labour law and labour unrest: juridification of procedures vs. spontaneous action*' delivered by the authors as part of the August Public Lecture Series 2013 of the Department of Sociology of the University of Namibia. In the interest of accessibility, and considering the penultimate target audience of this series, the authors took a deliberate decision to present the given topic in plain language and to avoid legal jargons.

This paper evaluates the extent to which the law, institutions and processes converge to safeguard labour rights in Namibia. In this regard, it critically assesses issues which may give rise to spontaneous labour unrest as often experienced in the country. We essentially argue that the law, instead of expanding the labour-related rights guaranteed in the Namibian Constitution, is sometimes used, wittingly or unwittingly, to water down some of these rights. In this regard, the restrictive application of the Labour Act, the liberal interpretation of essential services, the overly cumbersome pre-strike procedures are given as examples in substantiation of the argument. Sadly, the ineffectiveness of trade unions cannot be overlooked in this debate.

Namibia has a brutal history of extreme labour exploitation akin to slavery and concentration camp labour. Three decades ago many Namibians were still subjected to the harsh contract labour system and arbitrary dismissals, irrespective of their conduct and years of good service. The law, institutions, procedures, organs of state and non-state actors should thus all work together to give full effect to the spirit and purport of the Constitution as it relates to labour rights instead of diminishing the essential content of these rights, especially the right to collective bargaining and others rights flowing from there.

The Namibian Constitution and labour rights

Namibia has a progressive Constitution. The Constitution contains a Bill of Rights, Chapter Three, enshrining a number of labour related rights. The following are some of the labour rights enshrined in the Constitution:

- ✓ the prohibition of slavery and forced labour (article 9);
 - ✓ equality and non-discrimination (article 10);
 - ✓ the prohibition of child labour (article 15);
 - ✓ freedom of speech and expression (article 21(a));
 - ✓ freedom of association, including the right to form and join trade unions (article 21(e));
- and

- ✓ the right to withhold your labour/strike (article 21(f)).

These rights, like all those contained in Chapter Three, are not mere abstract slogans. They impose obligations on all organs of state and even to natural and juristic/legal persons, where applicable. Article 5 of the Constitution is instructive in this regard. This article imposes a positive obligation on the Executive (President and his/her Cabinet), the Legislature (the National Assembly and National Council), Judiciary (the courts) and all organs of the Government and its agencies (including parastatals, regional councils, and local authorities) to respect and uphold all the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Such rights and freedoms, for purposes of this paper undoubtedly include all the labour-related guaranteed therein. This obligation to respect and uphold these rights, as noted earlier, is also extended to non-state actors such as natural and legal persons where applicable. Importantly, Article 25 of the Constitution provides a right to remedy to everyone who suffered a violation or threat of his/her rights or freedoms.

In addition to the enforceable labour related rights and freedom enshrined in Chapter Three, the Constitution also contains a number of directive “principles of State policy” in terms of which the State is to design policies, enact legislation and take measures aimed at promoting the welfare of the people. In the context of labour relations, article 95 obliges the State:

- ✓ to pass laws to ensure that unemployed persons, the incapacitated, the indigent/poor and the disadvantaged are provided with social benefits and amenities within its (the State’s) available resource;
- ✓ to enact legislation to ensure that the health and strength of the workers, men and women are abuse;
- ✓ to take measures to ensure the implementation of the principle of non-discrimination in remuneration of men and women;
- ✓ to provide maternity and related benefits for women;
- ✓ to actively encourage the formation of independent trade unions to protect workers' rights and interests;
- ✓ to promote sound labour relations and fair employment practices; and
- ✓ to become a member State of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and to adherence and act in accordance with its (ILO’s) Conventions and Recommendations as far as possible.

Consistent with these policy directives Namibia became a member State of the ILO and ratified a number of its Conventions. In facts, the spirit and tenor of most of these Conventions are reflected in the Labour Act (No. 11 of 2007) and other social legislation.

We will show how the law is used, wittingly or otherwise, as an instrument to water-down and/or diminish labour rights in Namibia.

Legislative handicaps

The right to collective bargaining is a fundamental right endorsed by the ILO. Namibia, as a member of the ILO, recognises the existence of this right in its Labour Act. The Labour Act entitles a trade union representing the majority of workers in a given bargaining unit to seek exclusive bargaining agency status with their employer for purposes of collective bargaining. The Namibian labour law adheres to the principle of ‘free collective bargaining’. The social partners engage in collective bargaining without active state interference. The role of the law, thus, under the Namibian legal system, is merely to set the framework within collective bargaining is to take place. The process is essentially free and voluntary between the employer and /or employers’ organisation on the one hand and the trade union unions on other hand. The role of the State, through legislation and proper labour administration, is thus restricted to creating a conducive environment in which employees, through their trade unions, and employers could engage in collective bargaining to resolve differences and disputes in an orderly manner. All indications are that the principle of “free collective bargaining” is generally adhered to in Namibia. However, the law has also been used to restrict the full enjoyment of the spectra of rights i.e. collective bargaining, in the labour market for certain groups and employees. The following section will briefly sheds light on this aspect.

Application of the Labour Act

Section 2 of the Labour Act sets the scope for the application of this Act. The Act essentially applies to all employers and employees except to those expressly excluded. One such exclusion relates to independent contractors. The independent contractor or the employee deemed to be an independent contractor might find him/herself in a more precarious situation, as s/he is expressly excluded from the protective ambit of the Labour Act. The definitional clause of an employee in the Act expressly excludes independent contractors from the meaning of an employee. The Human Rights Baseline Study Report of the Office of the Ombudsman asserts that many workers ignorantly enter into contracts whereby they would provide work as ‘independent contractors’.²⁸ A 2010 study conducted by the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) showed that this is particularly the case within the charcoal industry. The charcoal industry is a labour-intensive industry and mainly attracts indigent and unskilled labourers. Charcoal workers/ burners/ cutters, in terms of the prevailing practice in this industry, are regarded as subcontractors. These labourers are regarded as independent contractors and are, as such, not covered by the Labour Act and accordingly fall outside the protection of the labour and health and safety laws. The said study chronicles some of horrific exploitative practices reportedly perpetrated in this unregulated industry.²⁹ The current situation as depicted in the said study raises some serious human rights issues. It specifically brings into focus the State’s failure to comply with its obligation to protect. The obligation to protect requires States to prevent violations of rights by third parties. Thus, the failure to regulate the charcoal industry to ensure compliance with basic labour standards amounts to a violation of the right to work or the right to just and favourable conditions of work on the side of the Government. Needless to say, the situation of charcoal workers/ burners/ cutters in Namibia, needs urgent remedying. Innovative ways will have to be devised to extend

²⁸The Chapter on ‘The Right to Work and Rights at Work’. In the ‘Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia’, Office of the Ombudsman: Namibia, Windhoek, 2013, p.203.

²⁹Dieckmann. U et al, Namibia’s Black Gold?-Charcoal Production, Practices and Implications, Land, Environment and Development Project, LAC, 2010, Executive Summary V. Available at <http://www.lac.org.na/projects/lead/Pdf/charcoal.pdf>

the minimum floor rights to these labourers through legislation and by strengthening their collective bargaining abilities.

Still related to the application of the Act is the position of members of the Namibian Defence Force, members of the Namibian Police and a municipal police service, members of the Namibian Central Intelligence Service, and members of the Prison Service. All these employees expressly are excluded from the application of the Act. Section 5 of the Act is the only section which also applies to these groups of employees. The exclusion of, especially prison service staff from the provisions of the Labour Act of 2007, is open to questioning. In this regard it is worth highlighting that the ILO body, responsible for examining the application of ratified Conventions, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), consistently reminded the Namibian Government that “*all public service workers, with the sole possible exception of the armed forces, the police, and public servants directly engaged in the administration of the State, should enjoy the rights enshrined in Convention 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining), including the right to collective bargaining.*”³⁰ Further to this, the Committee specifically called for the necessary legislative amendments to guarantee, to the prisons service, the rights provided under the Convention and requested the Namibian Government to indicate progress in this regard. These concerns were first expressed in 2008, before the Act was implemented on 1 November 2008 and were repeated in 2009 and 2010 during the examination of Namibia’s State’ report by the CEACR. Locally, trade unions on both side of the “divide”(NUNW and TUCNA) are on record for having expressed their strong objections and concerns about this specific exclusion. Six years into the operation of the Act have seen no tangible progress in this area.

Discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation

The repealed Labour Act (No. 6 of 1992) listed sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds in employment decisions. The 2007 Act, in a move that can at best be described as retrogressive, omitted sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination in the workplace. Human rights violations, according to the Maastricht Guidelines on Violations of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, can occur through the direct action of States or other entities insufficiently regulated by States. Examples of such violations include the adoption of any deliberately retrogressive measure that reduces the extent to which any right is guaranteed. There is a strong argument to be made that the said omission undoubtedly constitutes an example of a retrogressive step under international human rights law which is inconsistent with Namibia’s obligation to respect the human rights of persons. In fact, the ILO Committee of Experts in 2010 expressed regret about this retrogressive step.³¹ This step is all the more regrettable considering that it may be misconstrued by unscrupulous and homophobic employers. Indeed, a LGBTI³² Needs Assessment carried out by the Rainbow Project (TRP) in 2009 in Windhoek found that

³⁰ Observation (CEACR) - adopted 2008, published 98th ILC session (2009). Available at http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID:2301071

³¹ ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Individual Observation concerning ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), 2010, Geneva, doc. No. (ILOLEX) 062010NAM111, paragraph 1.

³² Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex.

employers discriminate against homosexuals.³³ Such claims, regrettably, cannot be independently verified since the organisation working amongst the LGBTI community did not keep a dossier of such incidents.

Essential services

The Labour Act makes provision for the designation of essential services. Section 77 of the Act provides that all or part of a service may be designated as an essential service. The Act defines an “essential service” as a service, the interruption of which would endanger the life, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the population of Namibia and which was accordingly so designated. Once a service has been designated no strike may be called to resolve a dispute of interest in such a designated essential service. A number of countries accept that the certain services and/or activities constitute essential services. Namibia is therefore no exception in this regard. It goes without saying that only ‘genuine’ essential services ought to be designated as such. This is underscored by the elaborate procedural requirements that must be followed by the Essential Services Committee, the Labour Advisory Council, and the Minister (responsible for Labour) in terms of section 77 before a service or part thereof may be designated as an essential service. Whether this is the similar understanding attached to such services by those in positions of authority is questionable if one considers what have been said by the Minister of Information Minister, Mr. Joel Kaapanda, in reaction to the prolonged strike action staged by employees at the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 2012. The Minister reportedly declared Government’s intention to employ “*whatever means possible*” to have the NBC designated as an essential service (The Namibian, 24 August 2012). According to Kaapanda this is necessary because: “*should a coup d’état have taken place, there would have been no means of conveying messages to the public*” (ibid). Minister Kaapanda’s announcement has caused confusion and alarm in some quarters because it was mainly seen as moves aimed at restricting or banning strikes in certain sectors. Such motives, if proven, could be regarded and challenged for being the pursuit of ulterior purposes. The principles of legality dictates that powers should not be used for unauthorised purposes or purposes not contemplated when at the time when such powers were conferred. It was indeed welcoming to note that the NBC was missing from the list of essential services designated by the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare published in the Government Gazette on December 31, 2012. In terms of this notice some services in the hospitals and local authorities sectors were designated as essential services. It is worth noting that some of the services so designated in terms of this notice are highly questionable. Why, for instance, hospital laundry services should be designated as essential services is baffling, to say the least.

Pre-strike procedures

The right to strike is a universally accepted principle. The right to strike is enshrined in the Namibian constitution and given content in the Labour Act. This right to strike, like any other right, may be limited as long as such a limitation is reasonable and justifiable as provided for in article 22 of the Constitution. Firstly, the right to strike is confined to a dispute of interest only. Also, the designation of essential services, referred to earlier, constitutes a further example of a reasonable and justifiable limitation of the right to strike. However, whether the same can be said

³³ See the chapter on ‘Sexual Minorities’ in the “Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia” , Office of the Ombudsman, 2013, p.99.

about the pre-strike procedures as required in terms of the Act and the relevant Code of Good Practice is a different story altogether. For instance, some of the pre-strike procedures which are:

- The dispute must have been referred to the Labour Commissioner for conciliation;
- A compulsory 30 days of conciliation from the date of referral;
- A 48 hours notice of intention to strike before the commencement of a strike in the event the disputes remains unresolved after conciliation ; and
- The strike must be conducted in accordance with agreed rules regulating the conduct of the strike/ lockout or any rules determined by the Conciliator.

Non-compliance with any of these procedural requirements renders the strike action unlawful and bears adverse consequences. For instance, the Labour Court may interdict an unlawful strike on application. Workers participating in an unlawful strike may also be charged with misconduct and/or be sued for damages by their employer.

A closer scrutiny reveals that the pre-strike procedures as required by the Labour Act are overly cumbersome. It is not far-fetched to assert that these pre-strike procedures and the length of time needed to comply with them have a negative effect on the right to strike. This may possibly explains the high incidents of so-called “wild-cat” strikes in the country.

Something worth stressing is the provision in the Code of Good Practice on Industrial Action and Picketing which requires that an absolute majority of union members in an undertaking must vote in favour of a strike action. This provision is undoubtedly against the principles of the ILO and unfairly limiting the right tin question.

Can it be that these and other legislative provisions may be the linked to some of the spontaneous industrial action occasionally experienced in Namibia?

Spontaneous labour unrest

Over the past two years Namibia was rocked by protracted labour unrest in most sectors of the economy. In 2012 the nation witness a prolonged teachers strike that forced the closure of most public schools and developed into a national crisis. The government obtained a Labour Court interdict against the striking teachers and the court declared the strike unlawful. It should be taken into account that the teachers’ strike occurred while their trade union, the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) and the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) were engaged in negotiations with the government regarding salary increased and benefits adjustments. This shows a significant level of mistrust into the union leadership.

Various other companies and institutions were affected by strike action during 2012 / 2013, including the following:

- Polytechnic (non-academic staff)
- Agribank
- Ministry of Education (Teachers)

- Public Sector employees (GIPF)
- Air Namibia (Pilots)
- NAMDEB
- Navachab Mine
- Namibia Broadcasting Corporation
- Nampower
- Namibia Fisheries Observers
- Namibia Beverages (Coca-Cola)
- Namibia Diaries
- Epopaleko Cleaners (Oranjemund)

Strikes at the following companies and institutions were diverted at the last minute by outside intervention:

- Transnamib
- Novanam
- First National Bank
- Ministry of Justice (Magistrates)
- Namibia Airports Company
- Ministry of Health (Nurses)

If the Constitution and the Labour Act encourage, promote, administer and enforce orderly collective bargaining, why do we still have so many spontaneous or unprocedural industrial action in Namibia? From the media reports, the following issues emerged as causes for spontaneous and unprocedural industrial action:

- Dissatisfaction with wages / working conditions
- Unilateral Change in conditions of employment (shifts)
- Failure to comply with Labour Act
- Perceived injustice and unfair treatment
- Poor negotiation skills
- Lack of trust
- “Apartheid legacies”

- Wage gaps
- Disunity within labour movement and failure to obtain
- Poor dispute solution skills
- Performance by conciliators/arbitrators
- Unrealistic expectations / demands
- Unresolved past disputes

Labour unrest - quo vadis?

Despite the above mentioned industrial action, many disputes are resolved through proper collective bargaining by the Office of the Labour Commissioner and the intervention of politicians. We should however acknowledge that too many disputes are not properly resolved. A small economy like Namibia cannot afford protracted industrial action. Parties become more aggressive and militant the longer a dispute is prolonged, it affects productivity and economic growth and it could create an image of Namibia as an unstable investment environment. So what are the solutions?

Some of the issues that parties should do and keep in mind when engaged in collective bargaining include the following:

- Acknowledge differences and common interests
- Commitment to negotiate in good faith
- Commitment to provide relevant information
- Mutual respect
- Consensus around new dispute resolution mechanisms
- Positive approach to negotiations, i.e. willingness to reach agreement
- Commitment to a living wage and reduction of income discrepancies
- Continuous relationship-building processes
- Invest in education and training on labour law and industrial relations

Conclusion

Collective bargaining is a tried and tested method of resolving industrial disputes and maintaining a long-term positive relationship. What is currently lacking in Namibia is an understanding of the collective bargaining and dispute resolution processes, knowledge of the labour laws and industrial relations and dispute resolution skills. However, cumbersome procedural requirements must not be erected to undermine workers' right to strike as this is the only ultimate weapon that workers have at their disposal when dealing with intransigent employers.

Namibia has a Constitutional obligation to promote and protect the rights of employees and at the same time maintain industrial peace and economic stability. More public resources should be invested in the administration of labour and the capacity building of employers and employees to avert unnecessary and unprocedural industrial action. The solution does not lay in using the law to unfairly limits universally guaranteed rights.

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Conclusion

The UNAM-FES lecture series and the papers contained in this publication pointed to a host of challenges but also to opportunities for Namibia's trade unions. Hardly surprising, the question of the role of trade unions beyond the workplace, particularly their relationship with politics featured prominently. Historical differences as well as different understandings of the role of trade unions are apparent between the unions affiliated to the NUNW and those affiliated to TUCNA. As pointed out by Mazibuko Jara, political differences can even be pronounced sharply within a trade union federation as is the case with COSATU where some unions pledge allegiance to the ANC while others pursue a more radical redistributive agenda. At the workplace, however, almost all unions seem to play a similar role, focusing on improving wages and conditions of employment and defending their members in disciplinary cases.

The differences between unions are most pronounced when it comes to the broader role in society and in relation to unions' understanding as class-based organisations. This publication as well as the discussions during the series have highlighted the reasons why some unions are affiliated to political parties while others declare themselves independent. As shown by the NUMSA example from South Africa, this question can and should be interrogated further: how can unions decisively influence policies in favour of their working class constituency? What should unions do if the party they were fighting alongside during the liberation struggle is no longer pursuing an agenda that benefits workers? Which kind of alliances should unions form to push for a more radical and transformative socio-economic agenda? These questions must be confronted by any progressive labour movement not only in Southern Africa but on the continent and even globally.

A key factor that currently undermines the potential strength of Namibia's labour movement are the ongoing internal divisions between and within unions. During the lecture series, the audience repeatedly asked the union leaders: "We are told that we are fighting poverty, but it seems that before fighting poverty we start fighting each other...How can we fight collectively instead of fighting each other?" The audience also questioned how unions influence national documents like Vision 2030 and the National Development Plans. In South Africa, trade unions have been very critical of the country's development plan and rejected it as a neoliberal, pro-business document. Despite forming the economic backbone, workers seem to have little or no influence on the content of development plans and similar guiding documents. During the discussions it was also noted that Namibian unions are resorting less to mass mobilization regarding employment and other social and political issues. Instead they are merely lobbying or negotiating on wages at the workplace. "Are unions still interested in broader national issues such as the economy?" was one of the questions asked.

Another critical aspect is the question of whom Namibian trade unions represent today. Given the fragmentation of the labour market (into formal and informal, casual and permanent, rural and urban jobs, unemployed workers etc.) unions seem to be unable to recruit beyond the confines of permanent workers in the formal economy. Although they are aware of this challenge, very few unions have practically tackled the task of recruiting marginalised workers on a significant scale. This raises the question if unions are representing the working class or just a section thereof.

One issue on which several unions showed initial commitment was the question of the introduction of Basic Income Grant (BIG). The NUNW joined the BIG coalition, supported the pilot project in Otjivero and called for the national introduction of such a grant as one way of fighting poverty. However, after the former Prime Minister Nahas Angula and President Pohamba expressed some skepticism about the BIG, the NUNW leadership changed their stance. During the discussion, a participant thus asked if this change came about as a result of instructions “from above”? Workers seem to support the idea as shown during the NUNW Congress in 2010 and their mandate should guide the union leadership if the principles of worker control and accountability are still regarded as binding.

Namibia’s unions have not yet addressed the country’s enormous levels of inequality in a visible and meaningful way. As pointed out during the lecture series, 23 years after independence, 10% of the population controls 65% of the cash income while 90% of the population have to share the remaining third of the cash income. Thus Namibia has not managed to change the structures of apartheid as income structures were largely maintained. Even the unions’ approach to salary negotiations often reinforces this trend as pointed out by a contribution from the audience: “When trade unions are negotiating for wages, normally they bargain for 8 or 10% across-the-board increases, which means that if you negotiate a salary increase for a security guard that earns N\$1,000, he will get N\$1,100. However, a highly qualified employee who earns N\$20,000 now earns N\$22,000. That in the long run just perpetuates and expands the income gap. So my practical proposal is that unions, when you’re negotiating wages, negotiate for fixed increases. For example, if there is N\$ 1 million for wage increases, then you divide this million equally amongst all workers so that every person gets the same increase. Demand fixed amounts not percentages... In the long run, this will close the income gap”.

Currently the opposite is happening in Namibia. Poverty and inequality is continuously produced by society and existing policies and economic structures contribute to that process. A concrete example was mentioned during the discussion: “The Council of Architects has established minimum fees for architects and these are enforced by the same government that sets the minimum wage for a construction worker, which is N\$11,11. The architect, by government decree, has to charge N\$1,060 per hour. Of course architects don’t call it a minimum wage, but it is a minimum standard and it’s a hundred times the amount set for workers”. Such arrangements point to entrenched class interests and the need for trade unions to engage in class struggle.

These examples point to the theme of the lecture series which is how unions are navigating the class divide, how they deal with poverty, inequality and the clash of interests in a capitalist society. Such clashes of interests even occur within unions as shown recently when the former general secretary of the NUNW was awarded compensation of N\$ 700 000 to make up for lost income for 2 years as a result of an unfair dismissal. Thus he had an income of around N\$ 30 000 a month which is far more than ordinary workers earn. This points to class divisions even within trade unions. A union leader earning N\$ 20 000 or 30 000 a month does not have the same life style nor does he/she face the same challenges as workers who struggle to make ends meet. The issue of class divisions permeates the whole Namibian society and it includes even the trade unions. One of the fundamental questions thus is if the working class is represented by trade unions in Namibia today? Have trade unions have become a class in itself, or a class for itself?

The lecture series raised these and many other questions and stimulated at times heated debates. Unions need to discuss these issues further in their own structures involving their entire membership if they are to live up to the ideals of worker control and internal democracy. There is no doubt that unions need to be working class organizations to protect and advance the interest of their members. In South Africa, NUMSA decided at its recent congress in December 2013 that it cannot defend the interest of its members and that it cannot pursue a radical working class agenda if the union has to subject itself to the policies of the ruling ANC. After intense discussions within its structures throughout the country, NUMSA resolved that the working class and the trade unions were betrayed by the ANC and SACP politicians and that it was time to build a political alternative to fight for working class interests and transformation.

Similar developments have occurred in other African countries after the attainment of political independence and it will be interesting to see which route Namibia's trade unions will take in the years to come. They need to take stock of what they fought for since independence, what they have achieved and what the current constraints are in terms of moving forward. Unions also need to debate what kind of society they envisage, and how they can meaningfully contribute towards building it. Namibia's labour movement is certainly "work in progress" and the slogan of the Mozambican revolutionaries "a luta continua..." (the struggle continues) is still relevant today.