

The role of trade unions in promoting quality jobs, development and democracy in Africa

The case of Namibia¹

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1. Introduction

Namibian trade unions played a prominent role in the final years of the country's liberation struggle and are still the strongest organised force among Namibia's 'civil society' organisations. However, due to the large rural population and the under-developed manufacturing sector, trade unions might seem to represent only a small minority of the population and consequently be an insignificant player in the country's economic and political life. Some economists went as far as describing Namibian workers as a privileged 'labour aristocracy' (Hansohm and Presland 1997: 11). Although it can be argued that Namibia's formal sector workers are in a better financial position than informal sector workers and subsistence farmers, they do not constitute a labour aristocracy. Mbuende (1986:177-179) has pointed out the close links between the Namibian peasantry and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system. Even today, workers' wages contribute significantly to the survival of family members in the rural areas and Namibia's industrial workers bear a substantial burden caused by widespread unemployment of about 35%. Despite the emergence of a permanent urban working class over the past decade, the vast majority of workers in formal sector employment share their income by way of remittances with members of their extended families in urban and rural areas. The labour force survey of 1997 revealed that about 45% of Namibia's national household incomes are derived from wages (Ministry of Labour 1998). Describing Namibian workers as a 'labour aristocracy' is thus a misconception, which ignores Namibia's social reality.

A brief look at the Namibian labour market reveals that 225 000 workers (41 % of the economically active population) are employed in the formal sector. This is a much higher proportion than in most other Sub-Saharan African countries and

¹ This paper is based on an article prepared by the author for the sociology reader of the University of Namibia (UNAM)

indicates that Namibia's formal sector has a much greater importance than the informal sector. Although few reliable data exist, indications are that an average of 5 – 8 dependants relies on each worker's wage for their survival. The dominant sectors in terms of employment are the public sector which accounts for about 70 000 workers, the farming sector (35 000 workers), the retail sector (19 000 workers), domestic workers' sector (18 000 workers), as well as the manufacturing and construction sectors with about 12 000 workers each. The mining industry which employed about 14 000 workers at independence, accounts for only about 7 000 workers today (Ministry of Labour 1998).

Namibian trade unions organise in all sectors including domestic and farm workers. The overall unionisation rate achieved (according to the figures supplied by trade unions) stands at about 50% - which is high by international standards. However, unionisation rates vary greatly between the well-organised public and mining sectors (60 –80% unionisation) and the difficult farming and domestic workers sectors (5-20% unionisation).

The Namibian labour movement consists of over 20 trade unions, most of which belong to one of the country's three trade union federations: the 70 000 member strong National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the 45 000 member Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU), or the Namibia People's Social Movement (NPSM) whose affiliates have a combined membership of about 14 000 (LaRRI 1999: 11).

This paper focuses mainly on the NUNW, which is not only Namibia's biggest trade union federation, but also played the most 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 played a critical role in terms of mass mobilisation during the liberation struggle. After decades of intense repression, the NUNW unions emerged from the mid-1980s onwards as key players in the economic and political arena. They linked the struggle at the workplace with the broader struggle for political independence and formed links with other social and political organisations such as the Namibia National Students Organisation (NANSO) and SWAPO. 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.

The achievement of independence in 1990 had a tremendous impact on the labour movement and required a re-definition 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 with 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, even leading SWAPO intellectuals like Kaire Mbuende had still argued that the interests of workers and peasants constituted the dominant position in SWAPO (Mbuende 1986: 199). 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 in labour relations. Trade unions were expected to define a new role within this framework and although the NUNW had previously called for radical change, it accepted the new framework with little resistance.

This paper aims to briefly sketch the history of the NUNW and to outline some of the challenges the labour movement had to face in promoting quality jobs, development and democracy after independence.

2. A brief history of the NUNW

The NUNW's history is closely linked to that of SWAPO and its origins can be traced back to SWAPO's consultative congress in Tanga, Tanzania in 1969-70, at which several new departments were established, including a department of labour. 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. Solomon Mifima was SWAPO's first secretary of labour from 1972 –76. In 1976, he was accused of being a South African spy, arrested and replaced by John ya Otto who then represented Namibian workers at international forums like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Organisation for African Trade union Unity (OATUU). The work in exile focused on education as SWAPO started to train trade unionists under the name of NUNW (Peltola 1995: 114, 132).

In 1979 the NUNW set up its headquarters in Luanda, Angola, under the leadership of ya Otto who was serving as SWAPO secretary for labour and NUNW secretary general at the same time. Ya Otto prepared an NUNW constitution for adoption by SWAPO's National Executive Committee but it was never approved. Some party leaders even responded negatively to the union initiative fearing a strong and independent labour movement after independence (Peltola 1995: 14, 133, 142).

At that time, the NUNW did not have its own social base inside the country and merely operated as the workers' wing of SWAPO. For Namibian workers inside the country, the workers' struggle was intertwined with the struggle against racial discrimination and colonial occupation. The struggle against the contract labour system that culminated in the general strike of 1971-72, for example, highlighted the link between economics and politics. It was as much a struggle against the contract labour system as it was a struggle against colonialism (Mbuende 1986: 184). Peltola noted that the class struggle waged by workers was seen as one and the same as the liberation struggle of SWAPO (1995: 93). However, as

Mbuende pointed out, “the level of political consciousness of the African working class is determined, among other things, by the type of industry in which they are employed and by the nature of the wider urban environment in which they live” (Mbuende 1986:184). Political and class consciousness thus was highest in places where workers were concentrated in hostels which extended their interdependence beyond the point of production (ibid: 185). This explains why the first and strongest unions emerged in the mining and fishing industries.

Most of Namibia’s trade unions were established inside the country since the mid-1980s. Although several attempts to form unions had been made before, they were suppressed by the colonial regime time and again. However, the earlier efforts laid the foundation for the later emergence of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) and its affiliates (see Peltola 1995: 167-197; Bauer 1997: 69). 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).

At the same time, South Africa’s National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) began to organise workers at Namibia’s CDM and Rossing mines in Oranjemund and Arandis. They linked up with the Workers Action Committee and formed the Rossing Mineworkers Union by April 1986. This union later became the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) (Bauer 1997: 70). The MUN and other NUNW affiliated unions 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.

Another factor, which contributed to the emergence of trade unions inside Namibia, was the release of Namibian political prisoners from 1984 onwards. Some returned to Windhoek and began working for the SWAPO structures again. A decision was taken to reactivate the NUNW inside Namibia and by April 1986 a Workers Steering Committee had been formed. It incorporated the Workers Action Committee and all other efforts to organise workers around the country. Fieldworkers began organising different workplaces and in September 1986, the NUNW’s first industrial union was launched: the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU), led by John Pandeni, one of the former Robben Island prisoners (Bauer 1997:70). Shortly afterwards, the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) was launched, led by another former Robben Island prisoner, Ben Ulenga. In 1987 the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MANWU) and the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) were launched, followed by the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union (NATAU) in June 1988, the

Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) in March 1989, the Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers Union (NDAWU) in April 1990 and the Namibia Farmworkers Union (NAFWU) in May 1994. In 2000, the Namibia Financial Institutions Union (NAFINU) was launched as the first NUNW union catering for white-collar workers. These unions constitute the affiliates of the NUNW today.

The exiled and internal wings of the NUNW were merged during a consolidation congress, which was 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.

3. Continued political affiliation

The NUNW maintained the links with SWAPO after independence through its 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.

The NUNW's rival trade union federations, particularly NAFTU, have repeatedly stated that they differ fundamentally from the NUNW over the question of political affiliation. They charged that the 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 the NUNW is merely a workers' wing of the ruling party, although the NUNW and its affiliates have on several occasions been the most vocal critics of government policies. They took issue with government around Namibia's huge income inequalities, the slow process of land redistribution and education reform and the self-enrichment by politicians. How can this contradiction be explained?

There are two contradictory trends at work within the NUNW. On the one hand, there is a high level of loyalty and emotional attachment to SWAPO as a liberation movement and 'mother of independence'. This applies to the union membership and leadership alike who understood the liberation struggle as primarily geared towards national liberation. Although there were attempts in the 1980s to link the struggle against colonialism to the struggle against capitalist exploitation, the predominant ideology was that of national liberation. As a result, there was a limited class-consciousness among Namibian workers and even union leaders, which allowed SWAPO to introduce a non-racial but still capitalist social order after independence with little resistance from the labour movement.

On the other hand, the NUNW and its affiliates still experience high levels of socio-economic inequality and are confronted by dissatisfaction (at shopfloor

level) with the slow pace of social change in Namibia since independence. The continued inequalities are reflected not only in the skewed salary structures favouring management in the public service, parastatals and private companies, but also in the highly uneven distribution of national resources. As a result, trade unions have demanded policies that will eradicate these inequalities such as an effective land reform policy and the introduction of minimum wages for vulnerable workers like those in the farm and domestic workers' sectors. Trade unions are thus caught in a dilemma of loyalty to the ruling party (which is common among union leaders and workers alike) and dissatisfaction with the slow process of social change. Although few of the unions' demands for redistributive measures have been met, the majority of NUNW affiliates still believe that a continued affiliation to SWAPO will be the best vehicle for influencing broader socio-economic policies in favour of workers.

The question of defining the labour movement's political role and an appropriate strategy to influence socio-economic policies will certainly be a key challenge for the years to come. There is no doubt that a progressive labour movement has to be political by nature and deal with socio-economic issues beyond the workplace. However, the NUNW will have to show how its present affiliation helps the federation to advance the interests of its constituency. The labour movement will have to develop an understanding of its particular class base and define its role in terms of serving the specific interests of that social class. The NUNW will also have to consider that trade union unity will be impossible to achieve as long as it maintains its party political affiliation.

With every election since independence, several trade unionists from the NUNW and its affiliates have entered parliament but there is little evidence that their presence has influenced policies in favour of workers. Once in parliament (or cabinet), they are accountable to the party and bound by government policy. SWAPO's overall direction has long departed from the socialist agenda it proclaimed in the late 1970s and 1980s. Few of the trade unionists who entered parliament have dared to publicly oppose government plans – one exception being the former general secretary of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU), Peter Ilonga, who recently opposed the government's privatisation initiatives in parliament. Overall, the former labour leaders had to adapt to government policies and trade unions have had little success in shaping economic policies.

4. Promoting quality jobs

A major challenge that confronted the NUNW after independence was to adapt to a new role within the framework of a tripartite dialogue as set out by Government. Once in office, the SWAPO Government moved towards a new system of 'social partnership', governed by the Labour Act which was passed in 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.

The Labour Act constituted a significant improvement compared with the previous colonial labour legislation. It extended its coverage to all workers, including domestic workers, farm workers and the public services. The new law encouraged collective bargaining, entrenched basic workers’ and trade union rights, set out the procedures for legal strikes and provided protections against unfair labour practices (Bauer 1993: 11). However, the Act fell short of some of the expectations of trade unions who felt that employers had unduly influenced the law through “behind the scenes” lobbying. The Act did not make provision for minimum wages (as SWAPO had promised in its 1989 election manifesto) and it did not guarantee paid maternity leave. Payment during maternity leave was only introduced with the Social Security Act of 1996. Other key demands of the NUNW that were not accommodated in the Labour Act were the 40 hour working week and 21 working days annual leave for all workers (Jauch 1996: 91).

Although the new act constituted a significant improvement for labour, 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. While this enabled trade unions to win improved working conditions in well-organised sectors like mining, fishing and the public service, collective bargaining remained meaningless for farm and domestic workers.

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

5. Promoting development and democracy

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

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

6. Defining a new role

Given the weakness of most Namibian civil society organisations, the labour movement will have to play a central role in defining a development strategy in favour of the poor. It will also have to play a prominent role as a watchdog over government policies and as a voice of Namibia's working class. This is particularly critical in the absence of a progressive political alternative within the parliamentary system. There seem to be very few fundamental differences between the ruling party and the current opposition parties none of which are not rooted in working class constituencies.

The government's vision of trade unions becoming a social partner within a tripartite arrangement is just one of the options open to labour. Unions could concentrate on their core functions of representing members at the workplace, of collective bargaining and of playing a role at tripartite for a like the Labour Advisory Council, the Vocational Training Board and others. However, trade

unions will have to expand their activities if they wish to influence broader policies, if they wish to promote the specific class interests of their constituency and if they wish to contribute towards building a more egalitarian society. Playing such a role will require a strengthening of unions' capacity to carry out research on socio-economic policy issues from a labour perspective. Union will also have to develop education programmes for workers, shopstewards, and union leaders at various levels about social, economic, and political issues, including the effects of globalisation and how this process can be confronted. Such programmes are essential to ensure worker participation in policy debates with a view of building labour's positions based on the interests of its members. Broadening policy debates is also critical to ensure that union leaders operate on the basis of mandates from their constituency and that union policies enjoy the full backing of the membership.

At the beginning of 1998, the labour movement set up the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) to meet this challenge. With LaRRI's assistance, trade unions have now included issues like globalisation and labour's responses into their education programmes. For the first time in Namibia, such topics were taken out of the realm of (mostly neo-liberal) 'experts' who so far have dominated Namibia's economic policy debates. Although such programmes constitute merely a starting point, they will be critical in preparing the ground for a new discourse on policy alternatives and development strategies. It will be equally important for Namibian unions to closely work with other progressive unions and NGOs in the region and beyond on the question of building alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda.

7. Conclusion

The Namibian labour movement has undergone significant changes during the first decade of Namibia's independence. The NUNW and its affiliates, in particular, had to shift from political mobilisation that dominated the unions' activities in the run-up to the independence elections in 1989, to a process of engagement with government and business under a new tripartite arrangement. In the absence of sufficient internal capacity to develop an alternative development framework that would benefit labour's working class constituency, trade unions by and large accepted to play a more confined role within tripartite arrangements. They now serve on forums like the Labour Advisory Council, the Vocational Training Board and the President's Economic Advisory Council with the aim of influencing policy decisions in favour of workers. Such participation is however, narrowly confined in terms of its scope and offers no possibility for promoting a broader agenda for fundamental change in the socio-economic decision-making process.

Although it can be argued that tripartite participation as a strategic option does not necessarily conflict with the larger goal of bringing about social transformation, collective bargaining and tripartite consultations alone are

certainly insufficient to address Namibia's huge socio-economic inequalities. In order to become the driving force for social change, trade unions will have to deepen their roots in Namibia's working class constituencies and become the genuine workers voice on issues at and beyond the workplace. Secondly, the labour movement will need to develop effective strategies for influencing policies, particularly in the economic arena which is dominated by the neo-liberal line of thought.

Despite its current weaknesses, the Namibian labour movement still has the potential to become (again) a key organisation in the quest for socio-economic justice. The labour relation survey of 1995/6 revealed 'the deeply held belief of NUNW members in the principles of rank-and-file democracy and their willingness to engage in struggle if their needs are not met' (Klerck 1997: 363). Trade unions have structures (although sometimes weak) all over the country and a significant membership base unmatched by any other organisation in Namibia. Provided that they can strengthen their internal capacity and achieve the level of rootedness in their working class constituency that they had in the late 1980s, the labour movement can become the driving force for more fundamental social change. This will also require that trade unions intensify and concretise their links with other progressive organisations that represent socially disadvantaged groups. An example of such links was the alliance formed between the NUNW, the Namibia NGO Forum (NANGOF) and the (communal) Namibia National Farmers Union (NNFU) around the slow process of land reform. The three organisations presented a joint petition to Government on May Day 1999 demanding a faster and more effective programme of land redistribution.

Namibia's trade unions face two possible scenarios today. 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 are likely to play a central role in the fight for the interests of the Namibia's disadvantaged majority. Failure to seize this opportunity might result in Namibian unions gradually losing their mass base while union leaders are being absorbed with bargaining issues, 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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