

Between a rock and a hard place: Challenges facing Namibia's trade unions

By Herbert Jauch, written for Observer Connect May/June 2019

As in many other countries, the relevance of trade unions as effective tools to defend and promote workers' rights and interests has been repeatedly questioned in Namibia over the years. Unlike in the dying days of the colonial era, when Namibian unions were widely admired for being able to mobilise tens of thousands of workers to confront powerful companies and to challenge the colonial administration, trade unions today are under pressure to justify their relevance. Many unions no longer seem to appeal to a younger generation of workers and the recent data from the Namibian Labour Force Survey suggest that as few as 11% of the country's working population are members of trade unions.

Although these figures are significantly lower than those of the trade unions' own membership records, there is little doubt that most trade unions today struggle to attract new members and to portray themselves as capable organisations to represent workers' interests. There are structural reasons which contribute to this dilemma such as widespread unemployment and the increasing informalisation of employment. The absence of job security and the constant fear of retrenchments undermine unionisation and many employers still regard trade unions as unwanted trouble makers. Also, the practice of keeping workers on fixed-term contracts which is widespread in industries like construction keeps workers in vulnerable positions and many are reluctant to join unions for fear of their contracts not being renewed.

Worker control?

Besides such structural economic and labour market conditions, there are also several internal trade union challenges which contribute to the weakening of the labour movement. One of them is the question of workers' control and the unions' accountability to members. By their very nature, trade unions are membership-based organisations which represent the interests of a specific section of society, i.e. the employed working class. Trade unions ought to operate on the basis of mandates and express their members' collective interests. Thus trade unions should not operate on the basis of very hierarchical structures but rather on the basis of participatory structures which advance workers' control. This is no longer happening as most trade unions have become hierarchical in their operations and outlook with individual leaders determining the unions' agenda – rather than members. Also, trade unions hardly participate in broader social movements any longer and their voices on burning socio-economic issues like inequality, unemployment, poverty and the housing crisis have often been muted. Unions are no longer seen as agents for change on these broader issues. Instead, they have increasingly focused narrowly on "bread and butter" issues such as wages and benefits for their members.

Conflicts of interest

A second aspect that undermines the strength of trade unions is the emergence of blatant conflicts of interest. Starting in the late 1990s and based on the advice of

sister unions in South Africa, several Namibian trade unions established “business arms” to broaden the unions’ financial base. Thus trade union investment companies were established and became shareholders in various companies, sometimes “partnering” with established financial institutions like banks. This has paved the way for individual union leaders to enter the boards of directors of various companies and to gain huge personal financial benefits in the process. As a result, there is a social and ideological rift within unions as sections of the leadership enjoy the sweet fruits of corporate profits while the membership continued to struggle to make ends meet on often very meagre wages. The majority of Namibian workers still earn below N\$ 5000 per month today while some union leaders earn far more than that through board fees alone. Thus a class contradiction has emerged between union members and aspiring union leaders who want to enter company boards for personal gain. As a result, workers increasingly question if such leaders can still represent their collective interests and they notice how some union leaders act (and dress) like business owners. By and large, workers are not informed about their unions’ business deals and feel increasingly alienated.

Unions and party politics

Another controversial issue is the trade unions’ engagement with party politics. This applies particularly to the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) which is closely aligned to the ruling SWAPO party. There is no doubt that during the liberation struggle the formation of a broad popular front of the party, unions, churches, community organisations and guerrilla fighters of the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) was critical to achieve independence. Since then, conditions have changed and trade unions had to redefine their role after independence.

The Namibian government accepted a “mixed economy” as the way forward and thus the private ownership within the framework of a capitalist free market economy was maintained. Notions of socialism and workers’ control over economic resources were dispensed with quickly and trade unions were allocated the task of playing the role of a “social partner” within a tripartite setting. In essence, they were consulted alongside employers on labour issues while broader socio-economic policy issues were decided by government alone. The NUNW has repeatedly argued that a way to influence government policies was to ensure that union leaders enter parliament via the party list and also take up cabinet positions. This, they argued, would ensure that workers’ concerns would be noted and considered.

Since independence, many trade union leaders have joined the political structures at various levels and some are serving as cabinet members until today. This, however, did not result in a significant shift towards pro-workers policies or systematic redistribution in favour of the poor. Instead, the former union leaders were absorbed by existing political structures, party directives and policy positions. Many workers thus question if the political link between trade unions and political parties can advance workers’ interests under the current conditions or if other strategies need to be followed to advance a working class agenda?

What next?

These are just some of the critical issues confronting Namibia's trade unions today. Unless trade unions are able to resolve them, they face further marginalisation and increasing questions about their relevance. It is up to them to prove that they can drive a working class agenda and effectively represent workers' interests not only at the workplace but also in the economic and political arena.