

Serving workers or serving the party? Trade unions and politics in Namibia

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Introduction

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 have lost much of their popularity and political influence in recent years. 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), there are close links between the Namibian peasantry and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system, the legacy of which 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, about 37 per cent nationwide (Ministry of Labour 2006: 3). 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 of 1997, 2000 and 2004 revealed that almost half of Namibia's national household incomes are derived from wages and salaries (Ministry of Labour 200, 2002, 2006).

Despite its small population of less than 2 million people, Namibia has about 30 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 South West Africa People's Organisation (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).

This chapter examines the Namibian labour movement 19 years after independence, with particular emphasis on the NUNW and its role in Namibian politics. The chapter investigates

the relationship between the NUNW and the ruling party and the labour federation's role in promoting a working-class approach to politics. It is argued that while Namibia's trade unions still engage in occasionally radical rhetoric, they have accepted global capitalism as a given framework in which to operate without challenging its ideological and material base.

The historic link between the NUNW and SWAPO

The NUNW's history is closely linked to that of SWAPO as a result of the 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), which 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 demands for 'political, social and economic emancipation of the people' reflected the needs of the workers in the compounds. Its message 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; Moleah 1983; Peltola 1995).

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). Its function was primarily to represent Namibian workers at international fora such as the International Labour Organisation (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).

In 1978 the SWAPO Central Executive Committee decided to affiliate the NUNW to the World Federation of Trade Unions, 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, 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). These early tensions between a potential working-class orientation of SWAPO versus a nationalist ideology were already decided in favour of the latter in the run-up to Namibia's independence.

NUNW as part of the liberation struggle

For Namibian workers inside the country the class struggle was intertwined with the struggle against racial discrimination and white minority domination. The class struggle waged by workers was seen as one and the same as the liberation struggle waged by SWAPO (Peltola 1995). Thus class differences were blurred and trade unions (membership and leadership alike) regarded themselves less as representing a particular class 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 per cent 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 brutally harassed 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 surged in response to the crises 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. 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).

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).

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 the 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's 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 (Jauch 2007). 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 1998) attributed this to three 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 would benefit workers and trade unions.

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. This issue was hotly debated during the NUNW's congresses in 1993 and 1998, and both congresses confirmed the federation's political affiliation.

An affiliation accord between the NUNW and SWAPO was signed in 1997. This accord states that the affiliation shall be based on the independence and decision-making autonomy of both organisations. It also states that consultations will guide the relationship and that both organisations are mandated to work in the interests of their members – subject to the broader principles enshrined in the SWAPO constitution. The accord stipulates that the NUNW recognises SWAPO as the senior partner in the relationship and agrees to work jointly for economic reconstruction and social development in Namibia. Both parties commit themselves

to the principles of popular mandates from their structures whenever any joint action is taken. In addition, ‘The rank and file members of the affiliated industrial unions will be encouraged to participate in the party structures based on the principle of freedom of association. However, their participation in party structures, at all levels, will be subject to the provisions of the SWAPO party Constitution’(NUNW and SWAPO Party 1997: 2)

The NUNW defends the affiliation as a useful tool for influencing decision-making within SWAPO. The NUNW believes it was successful in influencing the drafting of the National Development Plan and amendments to the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Act (No. 9 of 1995), as well as in the setting up of the Labour Advisory Council. The case of Namibia’s EPZ Act was a particularly interesting one. When the Namibian Parliament passed this Act in 1995, it stated that the Labour Act of 1992 would not apply in the country’s EPZs. Instead, the EPZ Act empowered the Minister of Trade and Industry, in consultation with the Minister of Labour, to make regulations regarding basic conditions of employment, termination of employment and disciplinary actions, as well as health, safety and welfare conditions. The Namibian government argued that both local and foreign investment in the first five years of independence had been disappointing and that EPZs were the only solution to high unemployment. President Sam Nujoma described the exclusion of the Labour Act as necessary to allay investors’ fears of possible industrial unrest. He promised that regulations on conditions of employment would be put in place to address the fears of workers. In the meantime, however, he declared that ‘the non-application of Namibia’s Code in the EPZ Regime is a delicate compromise which is necessary to achieve the larger goal of job creation’ (*The Namibian* 30 October 1995).

The NUNW, on the other hand, opposed the exclusion of the EPZ from the Labour Act as a violation of both the ILO Convention and Namibia’s Constitution. The union federation instructed its lawyers to challenge the constitutionality of the EPZ Act in court. However, during a high-level meeting between the government, SWAPO and the NUNW, on 21 August 1995 a compromise was reached. It stipulated that the Labour Act would apply in the EPZs, but that strikes and lockouts would be outlawed for a period of five years (*The Namibian* 24 March 1995, 23 August 1995). Although this compromise was greeted with mixed responses from Namibian unionists, it was formally endorsed during a special meeting between the NUNW and its affiliates in September 1995 (Endresen & Jauch 2000).

Supporters of the affiliation among the leaders of the NUNW and its affiliates believe that the affiliation assisted the federation to influence policies in favour of workers. The general secretary of an affiliate remarked: ‘The affiliation helps the NUNW to influence certain policies because it is easier for the unions to go to the president if they are affiliated to SWAPO (Jauch 1999).

On the other hand, trade union leaders generally believe that a trade union’s independence in decision-making and carrying out activities has to be protected , and that neither the government nor the ruling party should be allowed to influence union decisions. Some NUNW affiliates admitted that both SWAPO and the government may try to influence union decisions indirectly: ‘Maybe it can be done indirectly by influencing influential individuals. For example, associate members can play an important part in influencing decisions.’¹ Others pointed out that the NUNW’s political affiliation hampered their work: ‘The NUNW should disaffiliate from the ruling party. You don’t need to be affiliated to a political party to be recognised or to be powerful. Our union is suffering because of this’ (Jauch 1999: 34).

Namibian trade unionists are aware that the question of the NUNW’s political affiliation to SWAPO lies at the heart of the current divisions within the Namibian labour movement. The dilemma of splitting workers along party political lines rather than uniting all workers under one umbrella is not unique to Namibia. Other southern African trade unions experienced a similar challenge. During a meeting of the Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council in November 1998, for example, Zambian and Zimbabwean unionists pointed out that at some stage they had also maintained a close relationship with their respective ruling parties, but came to recognise the need to be independent in order to defend their members’ interests, which often ran contrary to government policies (Jauch 1999).

Trade unions outside the NUNW have repeatedly stated that they differ fundamentally from the NUNW over the question of political affiliation. They charge that the NUNW cannot act independently and play the role of a watchdog over government as long as it is 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 vocal critics of government policies (Jauch 2007).

Historically, SWAPO has 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). 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).

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, 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' (*The Namibian* 21 November 1989). 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 was replaced by the 'pragmatism' of accepting a non-racial capitalist order, enshrined later on as 'mixed economy' in the Constitution of independent Namibia. What did this mean for Namibia's trade unions?

Defining a new role

The achievement of independence in 1990 required a redefinition of the role that trade unions wanted (and were able) to play. 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 too, 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 Kaire Mbuende had still argued that the interests of workers and peasants constituted the dominant position in SWAPO (Mbuende 1986). 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 have failed to mount a coherent challenge to the ideology of neo-liberalism and have failed to alter the '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). 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 students' 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, they arranged

themselves with the interests of both local and international capital and 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.

A clear demonstration of the failure of labour to assert its interests 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 to a large extent demobilising its own membership.

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 [IMF] 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' (Klerck 1997: 364).

IMF and World Bank advisors have become regular visitors to Namibia and have 'assisted' with the country's public expenditure review, with educational reforms 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 Southern African Development Community countries. The Namibian government's increasing slide towards neo-liberal policies manifested itself, for example, in the introduction of EPZs and privatisation programmes. Opposition to such policies by the labour movement was frequently countered with 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).

The events around the controversial Ramatex investment in Namibia exemplify this point. Ramatex is a Malaysian clothing and textile company that started operating in Namibia in

2002 as an EPZ company, with the promise of creating close to 10 000 jobs. Besides receiving all the usual EPZ benefits – such as tax holidays, and duty-free imports and exports – the Namibian government went as far as building infrastructure for the company, spending more than N\$100 million (about US\$10 million)² in the process. Furthermore, Ramatex received water and electricity at subsidised rates. The company's operations were controversial from the start as it polluted the groundwater with its industrial waste and embarked on some of the most ruthless and exploitative labour practices seen in Namibia after independence. Trade union efforts to recruit workers and to negotiate for better employment conditions were met with fierce resistance by the company management. The Namibian government shielded the company against criticism and went as far as accusing critics of being a threat to the national interest. Trade unions were warned to moderate their demands and not to scare away investors.

By 2004, Ramatex employed about 7 000 workers, including about 1 500 migrant workers from China, Bangladesh and the Philippines. In 2005, following the end of the global textile quotas, about 1 500 workers were retrenched and it became apparent that the company was planning to shift its production to Asia. Further retrenchments occurred throughout 2006 and 2007. After working for four years for meagre salaries of N\$3 (US\$0.3) per hour without any benefits, the Namibian Ramatex workers finally went on strike in October 2006, achieving significant improvements in their conditions of employment. The company had threatened that any strike would lead to the closure of the factory and the Namibian government, in collaboration with some trade union leaders, tried to intervene to prevent the strike. Thus it was essentially the workers' own determination, rather than a militant union strategy, that forced the company to meet several of the workers' demands (see Jauch 2008; Jauch & Shindondola 2003).

In March 2008, Ramatex closed down the factory without giving any notice. Workers found themselves locked out and management tried to skip the country. Machinery and equipment had been shipped out during the preceding months and it took government intervention to force the company to negotiate with the recognised union and to pay at least the legally prescribed retrenchment packages. Over 3 000 workers were left stranded and unemployed while the city of Windhoek had to spend millions of Namibian dollars to deal with the environmental damage caused by the company (*The Namibian* 5 December 2008).

Namibia today provides an example of what Gramsci termed ‘bourgeois hegemony’, where business interests are portrayed as constituting the ‘national interest’ and are 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 Karamata 2006; Karuuombe 2002; LaRRI 2003, 2007; Mwilima 2006), trade unions failed to build a counter-hegemony through the political and ideological struggle for a 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?

Once in office, the SWAPO government embarked on 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).

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). Namibia’s version of social partnership, however, was essentially a reward from the SWAPO government to its working-class base, which had played a decisive role in ensuring the 1989 election victory. 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 (Klerck & Sycholt 1997) social partnership in Namibia never took the form of a joint decision-making process.

Although the 1992 Labour Act 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). 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. For instance, 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, No. 34 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).

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 only with conditions of employment (Klerck et al. 1997). Trade unions' main function was thus narrowed to being the representative of workers in a tripartite arrangement. Thus Bergene's (2005) observation that the class compromise in post-war Europe led to 'the embourgeoisement' [sic] and de-radicalisation of workers, and the de-politicisation of trade unions' 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 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 respectively, workers remained exposed to highly exploitative practices (Jauch 2007).

The post-independence period brought about a layer of trade union bureaucrats whose material standards of living are significantly higher than those of the average trade union member and who have entered company boards as directors, the latter as part of an ill-defined

trade union investment strategy. This contributed to the creation of a trade union bureaucracy that had a material interest in limiting the class struggle to reforms within capitalism (see Luxemburg [1906] and Callinicos [1995], in Bergene [2005]). These union officials regard the interests of labour and capital as reconcilable and thus increasingly spend their time on bargaining, so isolating themselves from the workers they represent. Thus negotiations, compromise and reconciliation are the strategies employed at the expense of more militant action.

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 in 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.

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 even found 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 to their own members who were determined to act.

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. Capital is not under pressure 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 illusory and based on a lack of a proper understanding of the current power relations (cited in Bergene 2005).

Divisions and the crisis of representation

Like trade unions elsewhere, the Namibian labour movement was confronted with the 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 & 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, in labour hire companies and in the informal economy.

Namibia’s labour market today essentially consists of four distinct layers:

- a small elite enjoying a standard of living comparable to that in so-called First World countries;
- a significant group of formal sector workers with permanent jobs and low to middle incomes;
- 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
- unemployed workers who turned to the informal economy, to sex work or to crime as a last resort (Jauch 2007).

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 and the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions merged in 2002 to form the TUCNA, which has 14 affiliates with a combined membership of about 45 000. 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 in the years following 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 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 the congress in April 2006 (*New Era* 4, 10, 11, 20, 26, 28 April 2006; *Republikein* 31 March 2006). During the congress, 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. As the 'Nujoma group' among the NUNW congress delegates gained the upper hand during the congress deliberations, an unprecedented step was taken to cancel individual elections for each leadership position. Instead, congress endorsed the list of candidates that the 'Nujoma group' had proposed (Jauch 2007).

In the aftermath of the NUNW congress, the political divisions lingered on and were visible among affiliated unions such as the Namibia National Teachers Union, whose 2006 congress was also shaped by rivalries between the Nujoma and Hamutenya camps (*New Era* 4 April, 10 April, 11 April, 20 April, 26 April, 28 April, 18 May, 24 May, 26 May 2006).

Conclusion

After 19 years of independence, Namibia's labour movement finds itself in deep crisis.

Workers and their trade unions have 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 around how to play a meaningful role in the process of social change. Deep political divisions, not only between the NUNW and its rival federation TUCNA, but also within the NUNW itself, worsen this dilemma. These divisions may serve individual political interests but they 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.

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 have revealed deep-seated ideological contradictions. Sentiments of radical nationalism and liberation, for example on the land issue, have been combined 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.

Those unions that 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 arenas. Linking short-term demands with the long-term goal of social transformation could be a strategy for building solidarity between workers and other sections of the dispossessed.

Confronting the current crisis is thus a mammoth task. Trade unions on their own might not be able to chart a revolutionary course that challenges the existing relations of production. Instead, they might be preoccupied with short-term achievements around bread and butter issues. However, Namibian unions have a long experience of struggle and a significant potential for organisation and action. Trade unions have structures (although sometimes weak) all over the country and a still significant membership base. Thus they still have the potential to become – at the very least – an effective pressure group for more fundamental socio-economic change, so playing an important role in the ‘war of position’ that Gramsci suggests is central in contesting hegemony. This will require trade unions to strengthen their internal capacity to engage in economic, political and ideological struggles; to free themselves from the influence of conservative and reformist political parties; and to form alliances with progressive organisations that represent the interests of socially disadvantaged groups, with a view to building a new hegemonic social bloc to advance working-class interests.

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 may once again become influential social actors. Failure to seize this opportunity will result in Namibian unions continuously losing 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.

Notes

- 1 The NUNW introduced ‘associate membership’ after its 1998 congress in an attempt to forge a closer link between the federation and former trade unionists now employed by

the government or in the private sector. As a result, government ministers and managers of parastatals are serving on the NUNW's Central Executive Committee.

- 2 In December 2008, the exchange rate between the N\$ and the US\$ was about 10:1.

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