

UNAM strike reveals deep union crisis

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The recent strike at the University of Namibia (UNAM) and its highly controversial outcome has once again exposed the deep-seated crisis that characterises many of Namibia's trade unions. It has also shown an inherent anti-worker bias in the legal provisions regarding strikes. This article focuses on the crisis within unions while a follow-up article will deal with the legal provisions that effectively encourage workers to become "free riders" and to break the strikes of their colleagues.

The agreement signed between the UNAM management and the leadership of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) and the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) has to be placed in context. The two unions represent a bargaining unit that covers not only lecturers and administrative staff but also general workers and farm workers employed by UNAM. The unions had initially proposed an increase of 12% but were willing to accept a 6% increase for 2018 which would have been about 1% above the inflation rate which now stands at 5.1%. Prior to the strike, the UNAM management had insisted on no increase at all and refused to compromise which constitutes negotiation in bad faith and resulted in industrial action. The strike lasted for 11 working days and ended when the unions' leadership signed an agreement which provides for a 5% increase for 7 months. This translates into an increase of just below 3% for 2018 as a whole. In other words, this deal means that UNAM staff's real earnings decline by more than 2% in 2018.

The situation for the striking workers is even worse. The agreement states that they will lose a mix of wages and paid leave days for the 11 days they went on strike. Considering their total income for 2018, striking workers will lose about 4% of their annual basic salaries - which is more than the increases agreed to by UNAM and the union leaders! Although the current economic and financial crisis in Namibia makes wage negotiations - especially in the public sector - very difficult, a very fundamental question needs to be asked: How can union leaders sign a collective agreement that disadvantages their members and punishes those who went on a protected strike? How can leaders agree to a deal that was rejected by their own members?

Perhaps it is worth going back to basics first and to recall that trade unions are meant to be workers' organisations which are controlled and directed by members. Thus "workers' control" is not a mere slogan but has to be a fundamental principle of any democratic and progressive workers organisation. Workers – not union leaders – are the "owners" of trade unions and their elected leaders have to operate on the basis of mandates and accountability.

Over the years, this fundamental trade union principle has been eroded in many unions as they became more hierarchical and bureaucratic and lost the characteristics of social movements that fight for economic and social justice. This shift within trade unions is clearly exemplified by union leaders who behave like CEOs of private companies. They became part of the economic and political elite networks and no longer share the material or ideological interests of the very working class base they are meant to serve.

A layer of trade union bureaucrats has emerged 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. For them, trade unionism has become a career option and a springboard to "greener pastures" in government or the private sector. Notions of worker democracy, worker control and social transformation are alien concepts to such union bureaucrats who have comfortably accepted the practice of "across the board increases" (same percentage increase for all employees) although such increases widen existing income gaps and benefit those in higher income brackets more than those in lower ones.

In the UNAM case, striking workers have complained that the agreement signed was outside the mandate that union members gave their leaders. Workers also experienced a lack of support for more militant action and witnessed how UNAM was allowed to use scab labour to do the work of striking staff in blatant violation of the provisions of the Labour Act. When unions are unable to even ensure adherence to legal provisions, it is perhaps not surprising that today only about 1 in 5 Namibian workers belong to a trade union. Events like the UNAM strike will undermine the popularity of unions further. Unless they can revive workers' control and become a progressive working class movement that is capable of challenging socio-economic inequality, they will face increasing questions about their own relevance and whose interests they actually serve.

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