

Between revolutionary rhetoric and class compromise: Reflections on the Namibian labour movement

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Abstract

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”. A few years before independence, leading SWAPO intellectuals like Kaire Mbuende had argued that the interests of workers and peasants constituted the dominant position in SWAPO. 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.

This paper argues that 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. The paper further argues that trade unions 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.

18 years after independence, Namibia’s labour movement is in deep crisis: trade unions do not represent Namibia’s working class as a whole; they have accepted globalisation/capitalism as the framework within which to operate;

they have abandoned the notion of working class politics and social movement unionism; their leadership is increasingly middle-class (both in orientation and in personal material standing) and inner-union democracy is diminishing.

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 seem to 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: 177–9), there are close links between the Namibian peasantry and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system, 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, about 37% nationwide (Ministry of Labour 2005:3). 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 2001, 2002 and 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 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)

This paper examines the Namibian labour movement 18 years after independence, with particular emphasis on the NUNW and its role played in Namibian politics. The paper investigates the relationship between the NUNW and the ruling party and the labour federations' 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 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 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 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. 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 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 Kaire Mbuende 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 Karuuombe 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'etre 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 and 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 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 during the past 3 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'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 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: 61).

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 (NANTU) whose 2006 congress was also shaped by rivalries between the Nujoma and Hamutenya camps (loc cit.; New Era, 18, 24 and 26 May 2006).

Conclusion

After 18 years of independence, Namibia’s labour movement finds itself in deep crisis. 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. 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 a 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, thus playing an important role in the "war of position". 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 of building a new hegemonic social bloc advancing 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.

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