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Labour studies

Soc 309

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**Examine the utility of conflict ideology in unpacking labour unrest in any Southern African country**

Conflict is inevitable due to differences created by a capitalist society between the employers and the workers (Flint, 2002). The main objective of the capitalists who are the employers, is to improve productivity through the exploitation of workers by paying a minimum wage. Accordingly, therefore the labour-capital conflict, according to the Marxist approach, cannot be solved by bargaining, participation and cooperation. Marxists see trade unions as a natural response of workers to exploitation thus is a weapon to coerce employers by methods such as strikes to effect change. Conflict is inherent in employee relationship because of a number of reasons. These include conflict of interest between employers and employees, nature of employment relationship leads to conflict (subordination of employees is a source of conflict) and nature of one's work is source of conflict. The conflict ideology is therefore useful in unpacking labour relations in Southern Africa. However, as much as it is useful it has also some limitations. Both sides are going to be revealed in the essay below.

The conflict ideology is useful in unpacking labour unrest in Zimbabwe. There has been massive retrenchments in the construction industry and this seemed to have worsened the industrial relations in the industry. A study by Uzhenyu (2015) showed that a number of companies just applied the 3 months’ notice to terminate one’s employment without any discussion based on the infamous ruling by the Supreme Court on 17 July 2015. Most employers seemed to have been not aware of the amendments thereafter, when the New Labour amendment Act became law on 26 August 2015 (Uzhenyu, 2015). As one can note this can strain relationship between employer and employee leading to conflict of interests between both parties.

The utility of conflict ideology in unpacking labour unrest in Southern Africa is seen in the conflict between government and trade unions. The Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) saw a fundamental restructuring of the Zimbabwean state, economy and society, with the welfarist economic policies of the 1980s swiftly replaced by a neoliberal package of trade liberalisation, deregulation and public sector restructuring, including large cuts to the health and education budgets (McCandless 2011). Neoliberalism within the state, led to below-par growth, high unemployment and soaring poverty rates. The keenly felt impacts of ESAP upon workers and their families led the 1990s to become ‘a decade of unprecedented industrial and social action’ (Bond and Saunders 2005, 45; Matombo and Sachikonye 2010). The labour movement became increasingly bold in its opposition to ESAP, arguing it led to permanent joblessness, hopelessness and economic insecurity. An early protest was organized in 1992 (Alexander 2001). However, most workers did not properly understand union functions or the achievements that could be made through collective bargaining (Raftopoulos 2000). Furthermore, the Labour Relations Act of 1992 had deregulated labour relations whilst also attempting to constrain union power on the shop floor and in collective bargaining processes (Raftopoulos 2000). This further increased the tension between trade unions of workers and the government. It is therefore evident that the conflict ideology is useful in unpacking labour unrest in Zimbabwe.

The Marxist ideology says that the state works in cahoots with the capitalists in thwarting the efforts and exploiting the workers. With the economic situation in Zimbabwe conflict between the workers and government was inevitable. Tensions increased in November 1997 the Zimbabwean dollar depreciated in value by 74 per cent in four hours (Bond 2010), reflecting a deepening economic crisis and growing unrest in Zimbabwe. ZCTU organised numerous strikes throughout 1997, attended by approximately 1,073,000 workers, culminating in a two-day general strike starting on December 9th, 1997 (Gwisai 2009). It was the largest mass action seen in Zimbabwe, and the threat it posed to the regime was underscored by police brutality in Harare. The mass actions throughout 1997 included not just the workers but also war veterans demanding their pensions, agricultural workers who themselves hadn’t taken industrial action since 1948 and rural peasants who initiated land acquisitions on white-owned, commercial farms alongside attending demonstrations in Harare (Gwisai 2009). Mobilisation continued into 1998, when riots against high food prices initiated by Harare housewives gained strong support across the grassroots of urban civil society (Raftopoulos 2009). In this light one can note the utility of the conflict ideology in unpacking labour relations in Southern Africa.

Furthermore the government passed repressive laws in order to thwart the activism of the trade unions. The mass activism by the workers was seen as becoming increasingly problematic hence the Political Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in 2002 were put into law. These laws were used to prohibit labour forums and meetings, restrict access to and presentation of politically volatile information and legitimise the arrest, detention and torture of numerous opposition activists (Matombo and Sachikonye 2010; McCandless 2011). These laws were obviously favouring the capitalist and the government undermining the rights of the workers. As Karl Marx famously said, the history of the world is a history of class struggle, hence the working class had to rise against the capitalist in order to end exploitation. Therefore it can be argued that the conflict ideology is useful in unpacking labour relations in Southern Africa.

The cumulative impact of liberalisation and economic crisis has led to serious poverty and hardship for the majority of the Zimbabwean population, connected to the in-formalisation of the economy. Lindell’s (2010a) research showed evidence of organised, collective action amongst informal workers across Africa. Furthermore, working in the *kukiya-kiya* (informal) economy has become not only common but a widely accepted reality in Zimbabwe (Mpofu 2011). In the streets of Harare there is a constant cat and mouse relationship between the informal workers (vendors) and the municipality police. The conflict emanates from the fact that due to the bad economy and unemployment in the country people turn to the streets to make a living but the council has rendered this illegal as the city is no place for vending. The utility of the Marxist ideology is therefore visible in this way as we see a constant conflict between the two parties.

The Marxist ideology of conflict is usable in unpacking labour relations in Southern Africa. Former Zuva Petroleum (Pvt) Ltd managers, took their former employer to court contesting termination of their employment contracts on notice. The court headed by Chief Justice Godfrey Chidyausiku said the Labour Court’s decision confirming the dismissal of Don Nyamande and Kingston Donga by Zuva Petroleum, was in accordance with Section 12B of the Labour Act. The government then went on to amend the act stating that the employer did not have to give a notice to the employee for termination of contract. Thus this ACT takes away the job security and the rights of workers as the employer has the power to fire the employee at any time. The state apparatus can then be used to oppress workers and also pacify the actions of the capitalists and/or employers.

There is a plethora of problems that contributed to labour disputes such as retarded welfare of workers as evidenced by lack of provision of decent housing and infrastructure development, medical assistance and pension. Low remuneration was cited as evidenced by low salaries/wages and benefits. In Zimbabwe Harare City council workers went for several months without getting their salaries and wages. In South Africa, South African police opened fire on a large crowd of men who had walked out on strike from a platinum mine at Marikana, about 80 miles north of Johannesburg. They shot down 112 of them, killing 34 (eNCA.com). The Marikana massacre started as a wildcat strike at a mine owned by Lonmin in the Marikana area, close to Rustenburg, South Africa in 2012. They were striking for better wages and better working and living conditions. The strike became violent and in a bid to suppress the protestors the police opened fire killing and injuring many workers.

Moreover the utility of the conflict ideology in unpacking labour relations can also be seen through the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. These attacks can be seen as being caused by labour relations between South Africans and other foreign Africans. The South Africans were unhappy that the foreigners were taking their jobs leaving them jobless. In this light they attacked these foreigners sending them back to their home countries. This clash only proves that labour relation are characterised by conflict.

The conflict ideology is applicable in unpacking labour relations in Zimbabwe. In November 2016, Zimbabweans took to the streets to protest against the then president Mugabe and his government following a military take over. Zimbabweans from all works of life gathered to show their support for the protest. The economy crumbled under President Mugabe’s rule, unemployment had risen and there was and/is cash crisis. In terms of labour relations we saw workers demonstrating and teachers came from all over the country. The military which is part of the civil service also rose against the President. Therefore the discontent of the people economically, socially and politically led to this ouster. It can therefore be argued that labour relations escalated and turned into national politics thus the unemployed laymen, and also the civil service participated in this march to remove the President from office hoping things would get better. Thus according to the conflict perspective the masses will eventually rise against the ruling class and this is evidenced in the November uprising.

The utility of the conflict ideology in unpacking labour relations is visible in the security industry. A security guard should work four days a week with three consecutive days as rest days. Mariwo (2008) showed that However , they worked five days a week and are often asked to extend their shifts when replacements fail to turn up, due to the problem of high transport costs. Workers receive exploitative and starvation wages that which do not cover daily expenses, and are well below the poverty datum line which stood at more than Z$2596773.60 in April 2007 (Mariwo, 2008). It can be noted that this is done to exploit the workers for the benefit of the employer or capitalist.

However, the conflict ideology is not useful in explaining labour relations in Zimbabwe because it does not explain sexual harassment. Sexual harassment was declared an unfair labour practice under the Principal Act, and an offence warranting automatic dismissal under the Code of Conduct (Mariwo,2008). Sexual harassment is defined in the Labour Act as unwelcome sexually-determined behaviour towards any employee, whether verbal or otherwise, such as making physical contact or advances, sexually-coloured remarks or displaying pornographic materials in the workplace. The offence can take place between persons of the same sex or of the opposite sex and infringes on the victim’s right to bodily and personal integrity. A study by Mariwo (2008) showed that sexual harassment of women was very rife in the private security industry in Zimbabwe. The results showed that, three of the women interviewed indicated that cases of sexual harassment by their male workmates, particularly supervisors, are prevalent.

In addition the conflict ideology fails to explain or give reasons for criminal behaviour in work places. The most common criminal cases at workplace are theft and or fraud. This may involve embezzlement or fraudulent activities. Theft and fraud are very common in Zimbabwean companies and/or organizations. In October 2015, the then minister of Water, Environment and Climate minister Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri allegedly cashed in US$46 000 in shady circumstances after selling a residential stand situated at Harare’s Borrowdale Estate to the debt-ridden Premier Service Medical Aid Society. More so, a top official was suspendered for allegedly cheating, the institution of nearly US$300 000 in a space of four months (The Independent Newspaper, October 23 2015).

Further the conflict ideology has some limitations in explaining labour relations in Zimbabwe as it does not account for nepotism. Due to the unstable economic conditions people tend to give job to their close relatives or friends not taking into account weather they are skilled or not over skilled and qualified people. Sometimes it is done to enlarge a dynasty. THE Air Zimbabwe board appointed, Mr Simba Chikore as the new chief operations officer, making him the second in command at the company. This was a very controversial appointment because he was the son in-law of the then president Robert Mugabe. Many people felt that this appointment was due to his status as the son in-law to the president.

In conclusion, the conflict ideology is applicable in unpacking labour relations in Southern Africa. From the above discussion it can be noted that conflict is inevitable in work places. Marx said that the history of the world is a history of class struggle thus workers and capitalist, state and workers are always in conflict. More so, the state can work in favour of the capitalist and/ employers to serve their own interests thus infringing the rights and exploiting the workers to their own benefits. However, it was also noted that the conflict ideology has its limitations in unpacking labour relations as it fails to explain phenomena such as sexual harassment and also crimes in work places.

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