Labour at the Crossroads:
a 'make or break' situation for Namibia's trade unions

By Herbert Jauch, 29 April 2002

Over the past few months, the Namibian labour movement – particularly the country's largest trade union federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) – has been the subject of debate and media attention. Contradictory statements by union leaders, the NUNW's position on the elections in Zimbabwe and the federation's role in the privatisation of Air Namibia have raised serious questions about the vision and mission of Namibian trade unions. This article hopes to shed some light on recent developments against the background of the ongoing challenges facing the labour movement since independence.

Tripartism

Before independence, most trade unions played a prominent role as grassroots-based social movements that were an integral part of the broader liberation struggle, linking workplace grievances to the broader social, political and economic issues confronting Namibian workers. With the achievement of independence, Namibian unions had to adjust to new circumstances and redefine their role in an independent, democratic state that retained the basic features of the colonial economic structures. The Government set out a new framework for labour relations in the form of 'tripartism'. This essentially meant that government would consult its 'social partners' (business and labour) on labour-related matters while retaining decision-making powers. The Labour Advisory Council (LAC) is one of the expressions of this policy. Made up of representatives of government, employers' organisations and trade unions, this body advises the Minister of Labour who takes the final decision.

Within the tripartite framework, government expected trade unions to concentrate on workplace issues and to articulate workers' concerns through the structures created by government and through collective bargaining with employers. While representing an improvement compared to the adversarial colonial labour relations, the tripartite arrangement effectively limited labour's role in terms of pursuing an agenda for more fundamental socio-economic transformation.

The ideological onslaught

Developments after independence were shaped by two dominant ideologies. On the one hand there was (and still is) the ideology of nationalism that was embraced by SWAPO since its inception. At independence, nationalist policies were coupled (in often contradictory ways) with the global onslaught of neo-liberalism, an ideology that proclaims the universal superiority of unhindered free-market capitalism. Entangled in the national liberation paradigm and at the same time confronted with a global wave of neo-liberal policies, trade unions found it difficult to clearly identify and articulate the specific needs and aspirations of their working class base. Instead, they were drawn into

continuous compromises in the name of the 'national interest' – as defined by government.

Union investments

The ideological dilemma also became apparent in the debate around union investments and empowerment. Initially – and perhaps naively – unions considered the establishment of investment arms as a means to ensure their financial sustainability. However, the far-reaching ideological consequences and at times open contradictions created by union investments soon began to surface. As unionists started serving on company boards, they had to adjust to business perspectives of profit maximisation, restructuring and cost-cutting exercises which clashed with traditional union values of socio-economic justice, living wages, security of employment and elimination of inequality. Balancing these contradictions became an impossible task. This was shown clearly by the NUNW's initial acceptance of the Air Namibia privatisation deal, which was then overturned by a decision of the Central Executive Committee. The open contradiction between the unions' policy of opposing privatisation and the negotiations of the NUNW's investment arm on the privatisation of Air Namibia could no longer be reconciled.

Union investments have also exposed the lack of clarity around the concept of empowerment. To some extend unions fell pray to the ideology of individual empowerment instead of redefining the concept to serve Namibian workers as a social class. Empowerment within the nationalist project is essentially a process of creating a new black (petty) bourgeoisie - a concept fundamentally different from the notion of worker empowerment and worker control.

Lack of accountability

Another factor leading to the weakening of the labour movement was the erosion of accountability of union leaders towards their members. During the 1980s, many Namibian unions were characterised by a high level of inner-union democracy and accountability. Union leaders at various levels had to obtain mandates form their constituencies and had to report-back regularly. This created a sense of ownership over the unions among workers and ensured that elected leaders articulated the aspirations of their members. As was the case with so many other organisations in Namibia – including NGOs and political parties – trade unions lost some of their vibrancy after independence. As workers felt that independence was won, union structures became dormant and leaders consulted their members only sporadically. The lack of clear mandates greatly contributed to the contradictions experienced by unions in the past few years. This also contributed to conflicts of interests as the collective interests of workers were at times compromised for the personal ambitions of individual union leaders. While they certainly have the right to make individual decision to enter politics or the private sector, unions need to guard against being used as springboards for personal careers.

A divided labour movement

Namibian unions are divided largely along political lines, unable to move towards joint action even on issues where their positions are similar, for example on the question of privatisation. It was symptomatic that unions outside the NUNW publicly opposed the

NUNW's call for a national march in November last year, which was meant to express *inter alia* opposition to the privatisation of parastatals. The absence of trade union unity has resulted in strong rivalry between unions organising in the same sectors. This is evident in the public sector as well as the fishing, wholesale and retail industries. Such rivalry further erodes labour's power at the workplace as well as in the national arena where unions are unable to present joint positions.

At international level, the statements by some NUNW leaders in support of Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF constituted a departure from agreed union positions at SADC level as expressed through the Southern Africa Trade Union Co-ordination Council (SATUCC). Although the NUNW is a SATUCC affiliate, in this instance it placed national party-political loyalties above workers solidarity in the region. Such actions are likely to contribute to a weakening of labour's voice at SADC level.

All gloom and doom?

The current dilemma that the Namibian labour movement is facing was caused by a combination of factors, including organisational weaknesses, a lack of ideological clarity and the absence of a common vision and mission. Unions will have to confront these issues head-on but it must not be forgotten that unions are still among the most significant mass-based organisations in Namibia. With a combined membership of over 100 000 in all sectors of the economy – including vulnerable workers on farms and in private households – they have a national presence that few other organisations can match. Unions have structures all over the country and although they are sometimes weak, they can still be used to mobilise members and to ensure that union policies reflect workers aspirations and interests.

Back to basics

In a sense, Namibian unions have to return 'back to the basics' by reviving and strengthening their structures and by re-introducing accountability and inner-union democracy. They need to show that they are independent and accountable to their members only. Secondly, unions need to rethink their investment strategies and ensure that their investment arms do not violate and contradict union values and policies. Thirdly, unions need to understand and clearly define their role beyond the workplace. While it is essential that unions are efficient negotiators and able to assist their members in all workplace-related problems, unions also have to articulate workers interests on broader socio-economic issues. As representatives of a specific social class, they need to articulate not only the interests of formal sector workers but also those of other marginalised (and unorganised) groups such as the unemployed and casual workers.

Representing such broader interests effectively requires a vision of a different society based on equality and social justice and a strategy how this can be achieved. Labour will certainly not be alone in this endeavour and a key to success will certainly be the unions' ability to form strategic alliances with other organisations representing marginalised groups. Trade unions will have to revive their tradition of being a social movement if they want to regain the support and respect they enjoyed at the time of independence. The choices made now will determine what role unions will be able to play in the years to

come. They can become either the driving force behind a process of mobilisation for more fundamental socio-economic changes or become further marginalised with a dwindling membership base and unable to significantly influence future developments in Namibia.

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