No shortage of challenges for Namibia's labour movement

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As Namibia celebrates 25 years of independence, the occasion provides an opportunity for Namibia's labour movement to reflect on some the achievements and challenges over this period. Colonial labour relations had been characterised by open hostilities and conflicts as both local and foreign companies usually saw workers and their trade unions as a threat and did everything in their power to keep them at bay. Frequently the police was called in to break up strikes and trade union activists found themselves in and out of jail or had to flee into exile. During this period, the Namibian labour movement was highly politicised and linked the struggle at the workplace to the broader struggle for liberation and independence. This made unions very popular as especially the various industrial unions that were formed under the umbrella of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) in the second half of the 1980s spearheaded in often spectacular forms of workers' resistance against exploitation and oppression.

Workers' expectations at independence

With the achievement of independence in 1990, Namibian workers expected that the SWAPO-led government would introduce a new Labour Act to replace the oppressive colonial legislation and practices. Following lengthy consultative processes, a new Labour Act was passed in November 1992 which aimed to balance the rights and interests of workers and employers. The role of unions also began to change significantly as they focused less on broader social and political issues and instead shifted their focus increasingly on collective bargaining and ensuring workers' rights at the workplace. Thus the emerging trend was for unions to move away from mass action towards more bureaucratic and hierarchal forms of organising.

As a result, trade union militancy gradually declined after independence but the 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, security guards and construction workers, many workers remained exposed to highly exploitative practices.

The threat of unemployment

High levels of unemployment have remained a structural challenge. With overall unemployment rates of officially around 30% and much higher levels amongst women and young people, Namibia still has what can be termed a large “reserve army” of labour in desperate circumstances who are not unionised and are likely to accept any kind of job under almost any conditions. This results in a downward pressure on wages and undermines the struggle for a living wage that would allow workers to ensure that the basic needs of workers and their families are met. Instead, exploitative working conditions have remained widespread 25 years after independence.

Divisions

Besides these external factors, Namibia’s labour movement was also confronted by internal organisational challenges. One was the shift away from the movement-type activism that characterised many unions in the 1980s towards more hierarchical forms of decision-making which in some cases undermined workers control and grassroots democracy in unions. Furthermore, the labour movement became increasingly fragmented, partly due to historical or political differences between unions, but often due to personal power struggles and self-interests.

At independence, the labour movement’s aim was captured by the slogan “one country-one federation” and “one industry-one union”. However, Namibia today has almost 40 registered trade unions and 3 union federations. While the divisions between the NUNW and the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA) have largely historical roots and centre around the question if unions should be independent of political parties, the reasons for the formation of the Namibia National Labour Organisation (NANLO) in 2014 can be traced back to internal division within the NUNW and the dismissal of its former general secretary.

The question of ideology

Many trade unions are characterised by a lack of ideological clarity and sometimes even deep-seated ideological contradictions. Sentiments of radical nationalism and liberation, for example on the land issue, are mixed with an acceptance of neo-liberalism as the ideology of the "free market.” This became worse as trade union leaders entered company boards as part of a poorly defined union investment strategy. Consequently, their views (and interests) increasingly converged with those of 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. There is thus a need to clarify working class interests which need to guide trade unions at all times.

The question of the link between unions and political parties has remained a contested one. Those in favour of such a link are hard pressed to provide evidence of concrete benefits for workers while those who oppose such a link do not base their position on a more radical left ideology but merely claim allegiance to a ”non-political” trade union ”independence”. The labour movement should broaden this debate and examine ways how it can successfully challenge the prevailing free market ideology and practice through economic and political struggles. After all, Namibia’s huge levels of socio-

economic inequalities cannot be addressed without tackling the broader socio-economic, political and ideological framework that underpins and maintains them.

Signs of hope

Despite these challenges, there are also some encouraging signs. In recent years some unions have shown a willingness to critically look at themselves and to improve their practices. Some have started to focus on the recruitment and empowerment of women and young workers who had only played a marginal role in many unions before. Some unions started to build the capacity of their shop stewards, recognising that workers self-organisation and workers' control lies at the heart of union power. Some unions have even started organising vulnerable workers like those on contracts and in other precarious forms of employment. Other unions have taken steps to engage in broader policy issues beyond the workplace. These are encouraging signs that renewal is possible and some unions might experience significant membership growth and levels of support in the years to come.

Way forward

Besides addressing the organisational challenges and reaffirming a commitment to workers control and at least some level of trade union unity, the labour movement will have to move beyond the narrow constraints of tripartite consultations. Unions need to build a dedicated cadre of activists and worker leaders who can develop effective strategies to counter the business-driven development agenda that now influences virtually all spheres of our lives. Linking short-term demands with the long-term goal of social transformation could be a strategy for building solidarity between workers and other groups who are still marginalised. Thus unions have to reinvent themselves as effective "struggle organisations" in the workplace and beyond. Otherwise, they may lose 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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