Straight Talk (8), October 2011:

Namibia's Strike Wave

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

During the past few months, Namibia's media reported a host of strikes, mostly in the mining and fishing industries. Various role players from the labour movement, employers organisations and government expressed concerns and offered explanations ranging from "workers have had enough" to "trade unions are becoming unreasonable" and "workers are copying their South African counterparts". There is no doubt that not all strikes follow the same pattern and that the root causes may differ from case to case, but there are some common trends which contribute to strikes. I will try to explore some of them in this column

The recent strikes have to be placed in context as the vast majority of wage negotiation in the country resulted in agreements without any industrial action being taken. When the new Labour Act was passed in 2007, it was meant to pave the way for the speedy and cost-effective resolution of industrial disputes. Instead of resorting to strikes, lock-outs or court cases, employers and workers were expected to solve their differences through negotiations and (in case of deadlocks) through conciliation and arbitration. The latter is co-ordinated by the Office of the Labour Commissioner but no national assessment was yet carried out how successful Namibia's conciliators are in performing their task. It is thus difficult to judge if and how they contribute to the resolution of industrial conflicts.

What then are the contributing factors that lead to strikes? In some instances they seem to be caused by hard-line attitudes during negotiations or a breakdown of trust in management. The recent NAMDEB strike seems to be a case in point when a relatively small disagreement over housing benefits for workers who were transferred from one mine to another, led to a drawn-out strike which lasted for about a month. During the strike, workers repeatedly raised their dissatisfaction with a particular manager and this conflict seem to have prolonged the strike. The NAMDEB strike also points to deep-rooted tensions between the company management and its workforce and thus a relatively small dispute escalated into a drawn-out strike causing financial losses to workers and the company alike. The poor state of labour relations was also shown by the fact that political intervention that had to be used to settle the strike.

In other cases, companies refuse to provide trade unions with essential information that is required for collective bargaining. When companies refuse to share financial statements, claiming that such information is confidential, they set the stage for confrontational negotiations. How do they expect workers to be satisfied with modest wage increases when they are not even supplied with information about the financial position of the company? Refusal to share financial information creates suspicion that the company is hiding its profits and that it does want to grant workers their fair share. The spirit of Namibia's labour relations framework is that all relevant information should be made available to the negotiating parties. Financial statements (preferably verified by an auditor) certainly fall into that category.

Perhaps the most important factor leading to strikes is the enormous level of inequality which workers experience at the workplace and in society in general. Inequalities characterise virtually all spheres of our lives in Namibia and manifest themselves along the lines of colour ("race"), class and gender. At national level, workers are currently fairly powerless to redress inequality and thus the only area of concrete struggle is often the workplace. One needs to keep in mind that what some managers take home in a month, takes workers several years to earn. Wage gaps like top management earning N$ 140 000 a month while general workers have to make do with N$ 2 000 are a reality in Namibia. Thus wages are not only seen in absolute terms but also in relation to what others earn.

Such inequalities have to be seen as socially unjust and seem to have been a key factor in the recent strike at Rossing Uranium. Workers did not complain about their production bonuses per se, but about the company's practices of rewarding management with unfairly high bonuses. Workers thus raised the issue of fairness and justice in rewarding bonuses and it is likely that Namibia will experience more such cases in the years to come. After all, the workplace is the stage where workers can express their demands directly and back them up by action.

Solving industrial disputes in Namibia might thus require not only an effective dispute resolution mechanism, skilled conciliators and a willingness to share essential information, but also a willingness to address inequalities by reducing the enormous wage gaps. On their part, trade unions will have to realise that across-the board increases always benefits the higher paid staff members while lower paid workers lose out. Thus collective bargaining could become one instrument to be used to redress social injustices and inequality. Unless this happens, tensions are likely to continue to surface during wage negotiations in Namibia.

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