

Trade Unionists in Parliament: Changing from within?

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During the past few weeks, the issue of trade unions and politics was discussed with renewed interest. First, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) as an affiliate of the SWAPO party decided on its delegation to the ruling party's electoral college, which in turn elected a list of candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections. Three of the currently serving trade union leaders are now on the list, namely the NUNW's president Alpheus Muheua, NAPWU's president Eliphias Dingara, and the NUNW's first vice president David Namalenga. While the first two found themselves on "safe places", the latter is unlikely to make it to parliament – unless SWAPO receives more than 90% of the national vote.

Once in parliament, Muheua and Dingara will join other former trade union leaders such as Petrus Ilonga, Bernard Esau, Marco Hausiku and Tjekero Tweya. The interesting question to look at is how the presence of former trade unionists has influenced government policies. Did their presence in parliament shift the debate and government policies to the left in line with workers' interests or did their presence in the National Assembly and National Council produce no tangible benefits for their former working class constituency?

Trade unionism and politics are not strange bedfellows as unions have a long history of trying to influence national and international politics in favour of their constituency. In Namibia, the NUNW and its affiliates were an integral part of the liberation struggle and thus it was no coincidence that several prominent trade unionists ended up in parliament and even in cabinet after independence. Prominent examples in this regard include the trade union veterans like the late John Pandeni, Ben Ulenga, Asser Kapere and many others. Although their names are usually associated with their past histories in the labour movement, they all entered parliament on the ticket of the SWAPO party and not on the basis of a mandate from the unions. This was clearly expressed a few years ago, when former NUNW president Ponhele ya France rose in parliament to attack the slow pace of land reform. He was promptly reminded by a senior SWAPO leader that he no longer represented the Namibian unions and thus should refrain from attacking government policies. He was cautioned not to violate party discipline.

This incidence brought into sharp focus the balance of power and the question of mandates. The formal procedures and structures through which trade unionists enter parliament are party structures and thus the party will argue that its parliamentarians are bound by its policies and programmes – even if they are not particularly worker-friendly. Trade unions on the other hand expect their former leaders to still raise workers' concerns and to influence national policies and laws accordingly. A few examples that they might cite to show that this strategy is bearing fruit is the ban on labour hire and the entrenchment of basic workers rights in the Namibian Labour Act after independence.

Overall, however, it seems that the presence of trade unionists in parliament did not significantly shape national policies. This is particularly apparent in the economic arena where investor - friendly policies such as the creation of Export Processing

Zones (EPZs) were the dominant feature. When trade unions protested against workers rights violations and exploitative practices they were warned not to threaten the “national interest”, which was defined in accordance with business interests. Likewise, the policies of privatisation (implemented in the form of “commercialisation”) found little resistance in parliament and Petrus Lilonga, the former general secretary of NAPWU, was a lone voice in warning his parliamentary colleagues against the potentially negative consequences of privatisation.

There is no doubt that the former trade unionists in parliament have to follow a party line and can no longer refer to workers’ mandates. Structurally, trade unions have no control and no mechanism of recall if their former leaders support policies that are not worker-friendly. On the other hand, trade unionists who have ambitions regarding political careers might be tempted to use union structures to propel themselves into political office. This presents a danger of union leaders abusing their positions for personal gain and thus trade unions should debate how best they can influence policies from a pro-worker and more broadly pro-poor perspective.

The experiences of the past 19 years suggest that sending individual union leaders to parliament on a party ticket may not be a very effective strategy unless trade unions can introduce a system of mandates and recall for their “delegates” to parliament. As long as the mandate comes from the party, the influence of unions will remain limited. Secondly, unions will have to examine other strategies to influence national policies and political processes. Organised mass action, for example, was highly successful in the run-up to Namibia’s independence and elected governments tend to be sensitive to pressure from below. This was shown by groups such as the veterans of the liberation struggle and shebeen owners who successfully influenced policies and laws in their favour through mass action. Trade unions on the other hand have hardly embarked on direct action in recent years - besides collective bargaining-related strikes. Unions seem to pin their hopes on the goodwill of political parties, which have long ceased to be left-leaning. Thus the Namibian labour movement will have to look at new approaches if it wants to gain a greater influence over policy issues in future.

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