

Tough Choices

Trade Unions and Swapo

BY HERBERT JAUCH

Herbert Jauch is with the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI).

At first sight, Namibia seems to be a rather insignificant player in the SADC region. It has a small population of about 1.8 million people and its economy is linked to and dependent on its former colonial power, South Africa. Due to the large rural population and the under-developed manufacturing sector, trade unions might seem to represent only a small minority of the population and, consequently, be an insignificant player in the country's economic and political life. Neo-liberal economists in Namibia went as far as describing Namibian workers as a privileged 'labour aristocracy'. Such views not only ignore Namibia's social realities but also fail to recognize the role of the labour movement as a key player among Namibia's civil society organizations. In particular, those unions affiliated to the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) understood their role as that of a social movement in the final years of the liberation struggle. However, the achievement of independence had a tremendous impact on the labour movement and required a re-definition of the role that trade unions wanted (and were able) to play. This article sketches some of the challenges for the Namibian labour movement and, particularly, NUNW.

The context

According to the 1997 Labour Force Survey, 225,000 workers (41% of the economically active population) are employed in the formal sector, and their wages make up 45% of national household incomes. Although few reliable data exist, indications are that an average of 5 to 8 dependants rely on each worker's wage for their survival. The dominant sectors in terms of employment are the public sector with about 70,000 workers, the farming sector (35,000 workers), the retail sector (19,000 workers), domestic workers' sector (18,000 workers), as well as the manufacturing and construction sectors with about 12,000 workers each. The mining industry which employed about 14,000 workers at independence, accounts for only about 7,000 workers today.

Namibian trade unions organize in all sectors including domestic and farm workers. The overall unionization rate achieved (according to the figures supplied by trade unions) stands at 58% - which is high by international standards. However, unionization rates vary greatly between the well-organized public and mining sectors (60 to 80% unionization) and the difficult farming and domestic workers sectors (5 to 20% unionization). The Namibian labour movement is fragmented into almost 30 trade unions, most of which belong to one of the country's three trade union federations: the 70,000 member strong National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the 45,000 member Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU), and the Namibia People's Social Movement

(NPSM) whose affiliates have about 14,000 members.

The NUNW is not only the biggest federation, but has also played the most prominent role in the public arena. Its history is in many ways similar to that of COSATU, as both played a critical role during the liberation struggle. After decades of intense repression, the NUNW unions emerged from the mid-1980s onwards as key players in the economic and political arena. They linked the struggle at the workplace with the broader struggle for freedom and independence and formed links with other social and political organizations. The NUNW understood its role as that of a social movement which could not address workers issues separately from those affecting the broader community. Exploitation at the workplace was thus linked to the broader questions of apartheid and political oppression.

The NUNW maintained its link with SWAPO after independence through its affiliation to the ruling party. This link has led to heated debates both within and outside the federation. While the majority of NUNW affiliates argue that a continued affiliation helps the federation to influence policies, critics have pointed out that the affiliation undermines the independence of the labour movement and that it wipes out prospects for trade union unity in Namibia.

The rival trade union federations, NAFTU and NPSM, have repeatedly stated that they differ fundamentally from the NUNW over

the question of political affiliation. They charge that the NUNW cannot act independently and play the role of a watchdog over government as long as it is linked to the ruling party. However, neither NAFTU nor NPSM have thus far been able to articulate radical and fundamentally different positions on socio-economic and political issues. Compared with the NUNW, they have played a less prominent role in the public policy debates and concentrated on workplace issues with occasional criticism of government policies and practices.

As there is a growing public perception that the NUNW is merely a workers' wing of the ruling party, the NUNW will have to evaluate the costs and benefits of a continued party-political affiliation. There is no doubt that a progressive labour movement has to be political by nature and deal with socio-economic issues beyond the workplace. But, does its present affiliation help the NUNW to advance the interests of workers? Does it help the federation to influence national policies or does it help SWAPO to force the federation to adhere to party discipline? These are critical questions, particularly in the light of the SWAPO government's conservative economic policies – similar to those pursued under the GEAR programme in South Africa.

Promoting workers' interests?

With every election since independence, several trade unionists from the NUNW and its affiliates have entered parliament, but there is little evidence that their presence has influenced policies in favour of workers. Once in parliament (or cabinet), they are accountable to the party and bound by government policy. Few have dared to publicly oppose government plans – one exception being the former general secretary of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU), Peter Ilonga, who recently opposed the government's privatization initiatives in parliament.

On the other hand, the NUNW and its affiliates have often been the most vocal critics of government policies, criticising the huge income inequalities, the slow process of land redistribution and education reform, and the self-enrichment by politicians. The NUNW also opposed the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in 1995 which initially were designed to 'free' investors from the provisions of the Labour Act. The NUNW saw this as a violation of both the ILO convention and Namibia's constitution and instructed its lawyers to challenge the constitutionality of the EPZ Act in court. However, during a high level meeting between the government, SWAPO and the NUNW, in August 1995, a compromise was reached. It stipulates that the Labour Act will apply in the EPZs, but that strikes and lockouts would be outlawed for a period of five years. Although this compromise was greeted with mixed responses from Namibian unionists, it was formally endorsed by the NUNW and its affiliates.

Five years later, the no-strike clause is now being reviewed. The NUNW still insists that EPZ workers must have the right to strike but did not challenge the broader negative implications of the EPZ policy. A study carried out by the unions' own research institute – the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) – found that the EPZ programme has fallen far short of the government's expectations and that the programme's costs by far outweigh its benefits. This study received significant public and media attention but neither the NUNW nor the other trade union federations have taken up the issue and challenged the policy as a whole. They confined themselves narrowly to the debate over the right to strike. Even worse, the new Ongopolo Mining Company – which took over from the TCL mines and in which the NUNW and the Mineworkers Union

of Namibia (MUN) both own 10% of the shares – has recently acquired EPZ status for its processing operations. This might partly explain why the unions are no longer willing to oppose the EPZ programme as a whole.

New challenges

Such conflicts of interest coupled with the question of political affiliation have a direct impact on the militancy and effectiveness of the workers' movement in Namibia. However, there are also other challenges that the labour movement is facing today. Firstly, Namibia is facing the onslaught of neo-liberal ideology, which is usually portrayed as the only practical policy option for the country. IMF and World Bank advisors are regular visitors to Namibia. They have 'assisted' with the country's public expenditure review and with the 'training' of high ranking staff members of economic government institutions. Local economists, by and large, seem to be trapped in the neo-liberal dogma and continue promoting the very policies (e.g. structural adjustment programmes) that have caused severe social hardships in other SADC countries. The Namibian government increasingly slides towards neo-liberal policies as manifested, for example, by the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and privatization policies. Labour opposition to such policies is often countered by accusations that trade unions are still living in the (ideological) past and that they are obstacles to economic growth and job creation. As a result, the labour movement was forced on the defensive on several occasions and some unionists now wonder if they will be able to oppose neo-liberal policies or if they have to be content with just fighting their worst consequences. Before independence, the NUNW rallied workers under the slogan 'socialism means freedom' but today the labour movement seems unclear how to respond to the neo-liberal onslaught.

Secondly, after independence the labour movement had to come to terms with the concept of social partnership that was actively promoted by the SWAPO government. The Labour Act of 1992 was drafted in that spirit and tried to create an enabling environment for collective bargaining. Although the new act was a huge improvement compared to colonial labour legislation, it also served to reduce worker militancy by shifting the emphasis away from workplace struggles to negotiations between union leaders and management. Bargaining issues were (and still are) narrowly defined and usually deal with conditions of employment only. The trade unions' main function was thus narrowed to being the representative of workers in a corporatist social partnership arrangement. While trade unions could win improved working conditions in well-organized sectors like mining, fishing and the public service, collective bargaining never affected farm and domestic workers.

Thirdly, the labour movement has experienced a loss of capacity as key leaders left for greener pastures in government and the private sector. This has been a continuous process since independence. Both the government and the private sector have identified and targeted the talents of prominent trade unionists. Their departure left a vacuum that the unions were not always able to fill. In addition, unions experienced a decline in membership participation following independence. Many workers saw union meetings and rallies as less important after the achievement of independence. May Day rallies never managed to attract the huge crowds they had drawn in the late 1980s.

All gloom and doom?

Despite these enormous challenges, the NUNW (and the Namibian labour movement generally) still has the potential to become a key force in the struggle for socio-economic

justice in the years ahead. Trade unions have structures (although sometimes weak) all over the country and a significant membership base. Many unionists are aware that they cannot narrowly pursue the interests of organized labour alone, but that they also have to address the broader socio-economic issues. This requires substantial organizational capacity which trade unions are presently trying to build. Many have intensified their education programmes to train their shop stewards, organizers and leaders on organizational and policy issues. Such



training is also critical for grooming new leadership cadres to take over when others leave.

At the beginning of 1998, the labour movement set up the Labour Resource and Research Institute to service trade unions with policy research and advice as well as to develop education programmes and materials. With LaRRI's assistance, trade unions have now included issues like globalization (and possible responses to it) in their education programmes. For the first time in Namibia, such topics are taken out of the realm of (neoliberal) 'experts' who so far have dominated economic policy debates. Although such programmes are only a beginning, they are critical in preparing the ground for a new

discourse on policy alternatives and development strategies. It will be equally important for Namibian unions to work closely with other progressive unions and NGOs in the region (and beyond) on the question of building alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda.

Furthermore, the labour movement will have to re-dedicate itself to reviving its structures and turn them into fora for debate and active membership participation. As the 1988 NUNW calendar stated: 'Worker control grows out of many, many meetings!' Finally, trade unions need to intensify and concretize their links with other progressive organizations that represent disadvantaged groups. An encouraging step was the alliance formed between the NUNW, the Namibia NGO Forum (NANGOF) and the (communal) Namibia National Farmers Union (NNFU) around the slow process of land reform. The three organizations presented a joint petition to Government on May Day 1999 demanding a faster and more effective programme of land redistribution.

Such initiatives indicate that trade unions have not surrendered to the difficulties they are facing. Provided that they can strengthen their organizational capacity and re-define their role as 'struggle organizations' with a specific class base, they are likely to play a central role in the fight for the interests of the disadvantaged majority. Failure to seize this opportunity might result in Namibian unions gradually losing their mass base through being absorbed with bargaining issues, union investments and corporate participation and not addressing (and challenging) the fundamental socio-economic structures that uphold the continued skewed distribution of wealth and income. At the dawn of the second decade of independence, there are some tough choices to be made by Namibia's trade unions.

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