

Botswana unions find their voice

Tensions over political affiliation to Botswana's ruling party led to a split within the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU) in 1988. The BFTU's two largest affiliates – the National Amalgamated Local and Central Government and Parastatal Manual Workers Union (BMWU) and the Commercial and General Workers Union of Botswana (CGWU) – broke away because they wanted the independence to decide which political party to support. Eleven years down the line the parties have been able to reconcile their differences. The parties have agreed that affiliates can support a political party of their own choice.

Labour and politics

Restoring unity within the labour movement has signalled a change in the relationship with the government. The concessions gained by the BMWU and the CGWU with respect to political affiliation reflect a victory for elements in the labour movement that have called for labour to play a more assertive and proactive role in politics. This coming out of the shell will strengthen the characteristically weak civil society in Botswana and rid BFTU of the stigma that it is an instrument of a 'paternalistic' state. At its 10th Triennial Congress in November 2001, a new executive committee was elected, including delegates from both the BMWU

Armstrong Dlamini explores the relationship between the trade unions and government in Botswana.

and CGWU. This move has been viewed as a positive development for strengthening the trade union movement in Botswana and ensuring that it challenges government.

The BFTU was formed with the assistance of the Botswana government in 1972. As the BFTU matured it began to play a less overt political role.

Split

In 1988, the BMWU (which is a founder member of the BFTU and the largest trade union in Botswana) and the CGWU broke away. This dealt a severe blow to the BFTU whose membership was reduced by more than half due to the split. The main reasons for the breakaway were disagreements on whether BFTU affiliates should be aligned to political parties or should they be neutral and only have political affiliation on an individual basis.

These affiliates wanted to be able to decide which political party to support, whether it was the ruling party or the official opposition. The issue was never resolved and led to serious political

differences within BFTU.

Another bone of contention was that BFTU had too many affiliates (23), which made it very difficult to achieve consensus and a unified voice. As a result, the BMWU opted to disaffiliate and it formed an independent trade unions alliance with the CGWU.

The formation of an independent alliance between the BMWU and CGWU raised fears that they would set up a rival federation to the BFTU. However, the alliance did not draw its swords against the BFTU, but rather concentrated on strengthening its membership and fundraising to achieve self-sufficiency.

Moves towards reunification

During this period, BFTU continued its efforts to bring the two unions back to the fold. This culminated in the 2001 agreement, whereby the BFTU made two key concessions to the alliance. The first being that BFTU affiliates would be allowed to affiliate to a political party of their choice. Secondly, the BFTU would streamline its affiliates from 23 to nine trade unions. The amalgamation process will facilitate the merger of allied trade unions within the same sector in order for them to have one voice and to be able to bargain by sector.

Challenges facing labour

The new executive now has the challenging task of speeding up the amalgamation process and addressing the pressing social issues confronting the labour movement in Botswana. According to BFTU executive secretary Khang O. Khang, the new executive has recognised privatisation and HIV/AIDS as key issues confronting its constituency and these issues will be central to the BFTU vision statement for the next three years.

The BFTU is also going to have to deal

with a number of constitutional and legal issues pending with the government.

BFTU has lobbied for amendments to freedom of association and right to strike legislation. This includes extending the right to strike and freedom of association to civil servants by extending the definition of employee to include public servants.

Currently, the Employment Act of 1992 excludes civil servants from the definition of employee and further curtails their right to join mainstream trade unions. Although they form the largest sector of employees, civil servants above the level of a manual worker are not allowed to unionise. The civil servants are regulated through the Societies Act in clear disregard for International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 87 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organise, which Botswana did ratify.

Industrial Relations Act

The new executive will also follow up on BFTU calls for amendments and the possible repeal of the 1992 Trade Disputes Act (whose provisions are skewed in favour of government) in favour of a more balanced Industrial Relations Act. In Botswana it is technically impossible to go on strike due to nebulous procedures in the Trade Disputes Act, which also facilitates extensive government intervention in industrial relations disputes. The attitude of the government of Botswana is to promote and attract foreign investment at all costs. Therefore the new executive will also be seeking amendments to the collective agreement between BFTU and the government to gain more concessions for workers.

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