

Labour in Namibia

Important lessons for South Africa

The Namibian labour movement is confronted by a host of organisational and political challenges. The country's largest trade union federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) has remained affiliated to the ruling party Swapo despite the increasingly conservative economic policies implemented by the Namibian government.

The NUNW has maintained its links with Swapo since independence. This link has led to heated debates both within and outside the federation. The majority of NUNW affiliates argue that a continued affiliation would help the federation to influence policies. Critics have pointed out that the affiliation will undermine the independence of the labour movement and will wipe out prospects for trade union unity in Namibia.

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NUNW's rival trade union federations, particularly the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU), have repeatedly stated that they differ fundamentally from the NUNW over the question of political affiliation. They claim that the NUNW

Herbert Jauch of LaRRI explores the environment in which the Namibian labour movement has to operate, 12 years after independence.

could not act independently and play the role of a watchdog over government as long as it was linked to the ruling party. There is also a growing public perception that the NUNW is merely a workers' wing of the ruling party, although the NUNW and its affiliates have on several occasions been the most vocal critics of government policies.

They took issue with government around Namibia's huge income inequalities, the slow process of land redistribution, education reform and the self-enrichment by politicians. How can this contradiction be explained? Are there two contradictory trends at work within the NUNW?

On the one hand, there is a high level of loyalty and emotional attachment to Swapo as a liberation movement and 'mother of independence'. This applies to the union membership and leadership alike who understood the liberation struggle as primarily geared towards national liberation. Although there were attempts in the 1980s of linking the

struggle against colonialism to the struggle against capitalist exploitation, the predominant ideology was that of national liberation. As a result, there was a limited class-consciousness among Namibian workers and even union leaders. This allowed Swapo to introduce a non-racial but still capitalist social order after independence, with little resistance from the labour movement.

On the other hand, the NUNW and its affiliates still experience high levels of socioeconomic inequality and are confronted by dissatisfaction (at shopfloor level) with the slow pace of social change in Namibia since independence.

The continued inequalities are reflected not only in the skewed salary structures favouring management in the public service, parastatals and private companies, but also in the highly uneven distribution of national resources. As a result, trade unions have demanded policies that will eradicate these inequalities such as an effective land reform policy and the introduction of minimum wages for vulnerable workers like those in the farm and domestic workers' sectors.

Trade unions are thus caught in a dilemma of loyalty to the ruling party (which is common among union leaders and workers alike) and dissatisfaction with the slow process of social change. Although few of the unions' demands for redistributive measures have been met, the majority of NUNW affiliates still believe that a continued affiliation to Swapo will be the best vehicle for influencing broader socioeconomic policies in favour of workers.

The question of defining the labour movement's political role and an appropriate strategy to influence socioeconomic policies will be discussed within the next few months. Delegates at the recent NUNW national congress resolved to hold an economic conference

to review its economic policy. The federation will evaluate whether it is still appropriate to call for a socialist programme in view of the developments both within the global economy and in Namibia since independence. The establishment of union investment companies has also created certain inconsistencies.

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The NUNW congress held from 17 to 19 January 2002 did not devote a lot of time to the key challenges facing unions such as privatisation, Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and the rise in the use of outsourcing and casual labour. Instead an inordinate amount of time was spent on the re-election of union office bearers. The congress failed to emerge with a new strategic vision for the federation.

There is no doubt that a progressive labour movement has to be political by nature and deal with socioeconomic issues beyond the workplace. However, the NUNW will have to show how its present affiliation to Swapo helps the federation to advance the interests of its constituency. The NUNW will have to clarify its understanding of its particular class base and define its role in terms of serving the specific interests of that social class. Otherwise, the federation is likely to be coerced into compromises in the name of the 'national interest' as defined by government and corporate agendas. (This article draws extensively on the study carried out by Andrew Murray for LaRRI.)

The following section focuses on some of the key challenges facing labour, namely EPZs, use of labour brokers and privatisation.

EPZs

A Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) study looks at EPZs and how the labour movement has compromised itself over this programme because of the involvement of some of their union investment companies in companies now classified as being part of EPZs.

The study found that EPZs in Namibia have fallen far short of the government's expectations of creating 25 000 jobs and facilitating skills and technology transfer needed to kick-start manufacturing. At the end of 1999, the EPZs had created very few jobs (estimated to be in the region of 400) although millions of dollars had been spent on promoting the policy and developing infrastructure, with public funds.

In response, government argued that it was too early to measure the success and failures of the programme as EPZs would only show results in the long term. Citing Mauritius as the example to follow, it was argued that the island had to wait 20 years to see positive results.

Namibian unions were particularly opposed to the clause in the EPZ Act, which made strikes and lockouts illegal for a period of five years. The unions demanded that this clause should be amended to grant the right to strike to all workers, including those in the EPZs. The NUNW tabled LaRRI's report for discussion in the tripartite Labour Advisory Council (LAC). Following input from government the council concluded that: 'The EPZ did not fulfil their aims and objectives with regards to creating 25 000 jobs within the first five years, increasing

the amount of manufactured goods produced, expanding industrial development and assisting in the transfer of skills and technology in the zones.'

The council agreed to recommend to the Minister of Labour to advise parliament not to re-enact the clause in the EPZ Act which prohibits strikes and lockouts in the zones. The council also resolved to establish a tripartite taskforce to evaluate the general impact of EPZ operations in Namibia and advise the council accordingly.

Amid mounting scepticism about the EPZ programme, the Ministry of Trade and Industry was unwilling to review its policy and claimed that the EPZs had attracted investments of nearly R300 million and created up to 1 000 jobs. The minister further lashed out at critics stating that 'attempts to paint the [EPZ] regime in a bad light, while laughable, must be seen as a danger to our national interest' (*The Namibian*, 26 April 2000).

To show some success of the EPZ programme, the ministry granted EPZ status to a range of other operations including a poultry plant in Karibib (western Namibia) and mining companies like Ongopolo (copper mine in Tsumeb, northern Namibia), the Skorpion Zinc Mine and refinery in southern Namibia which is currently being developed by the Anglo American Corporation. Production at the Skorpion Mine is expected to start in December 2002 and attract investments of US\$454 million (R4,2 billion). The Skorpion project is expected to employ over 500 people and contribute about US\$118 million (R1,1 billion) annually to Namibia's gross domestic product (GDP)