

Strikes for wages and democracy in Zimbabwe

Caswuz experience

The Communication and Allied Services Workers Union of Zimbabwe (Caswuz) has had a long history of fighting for improved working conditions and for democracy in Zimbabwe.

Taurai Mereki traces its history.



Caswuz shop stewards at collective bargaining meeting.

BACKGROUND

In the colonial state of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) black workers were considered not equal to their white counterparts and so they did not enjoy the right to strike. In contrast, the post-colonial state recognised these rights but with restrictions. As the state was involved in forming the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) it expected the federation to support and act in its interests.

This also extended to public sector unions where the state exercised greater influence and control under the guise that these unions organised in sectors that provided essential services which should not be disrupted.

The state therefore, had the privilege to pass the minimum wages announced during May Day celebrations. In line with the new dispensation the black-led government also passed seemingly

pro-labour policies like the one-industry one-union decree which lasted for a decade.

In the 1990s the state introduced the economic structural adjustment programme (Esap) which liberalised the economy as the market determined prices of goods and services. Wages were also subject to the market and this prompted the Zimbabwe Posts and Telecommunications Workers Union (ZPTWU) now Caswuz to challenge

the state in their demands for a living wage. Therefore, strikes were prompted not only by wages but by poor government policies such as Esap.

The character of Caswuz fell into the kind of unionism that linked production to wider political issues by engaging factory-based production politics as well as community and state politics. Rob Lambert and Eddie Webster in *The Re-emergence of political unionism in contemporary South Africa* define this unionism as political and social movement unionism (SMU). SMU refers to struggles by the workers that go beyond the workplace and involves other civil society groups. This analysis helps to determine Caswuz's unionism between 1994 and 2004.

PRE-1994 SITUATION

Munyaradzi Gwisai, in *Revolutionaries, Resistance, and Crisis in Zimbabwe*, argues that before independence trade unions posed only erratic challenges to the status quo, such as in the General Strikes of 1948 when workers demanded not only economic improvements but also social and political reforms. Other strikes followed in 1964 and 1979 which exhibited more or less the same characteristics.

During 1980 and 1981, the country experienced a wave of wild-cat strikes which were a response to the attainment of independence in 1980. However, this did not last as the new government, which scholars such as Gwisai and Leo Zeilig have defined as socialist, announced laws that sought simultaneously to weaken as well as strengthen the labour movement.

Lloyd Sachikonye in *State, Capital and Trade Unions* argues that the government had a personal interest in stable industrial relations when it formed the ZCTU. Despite the fact that five trade unions had merged to form the African Trade Union

Congress (ATUC), the Zanu (PF)-led government went ahead to give a directive for the formation of the ZCTU since the ATUC was opposed to it. This state of affairs also applied to sector unions such as ZPTWU which saw two unions merging into one.

However, the amalgamation strengthened the union movement given that government followed up in 1985 with the pro-worker Labour Relations Act. The most prominent feature was the principle of one-industry one-union retained from the 1934 Industrial Conciliation Act which worked in favour of strong trade unions. It may be argued that strong trade union rights were also a way of thanking workers for their support of the liberation struggle.

However, the introduction of Esap in 1991 wiped away these labour rights as the labour market was deregulated. One-industry one-union was against International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98. According to lawyer Lovemore Madhuku it also infringed on section 21 of the national constitution which guarantees the right of freedom of association.

There were no general strikes from 1982 to 1995. The country only witnessed a strike in 1992 embarked on by the Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (PTC) workers. The workers protested against a government directive to slash an agreed collective bargaining percentage.

Although unsuccessful, this strike was an early sign of unhappiness that led to the 1994 strike. There was growing discontent within the working class and society because of government's embrace of neo-liberal policies in 1991.

Strikes did not happen in the first decade for two major reasons. Firstly, the working class was embedded in the state because it implemented pro-poor and pro-worker policies soon after independence. Secondly, the state had managed to staff the ZCTU with

its sympathisers hence they never opposed unpopular government policies such as lack of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

The situation only changed when a new ZCTU administration that came into office towards the end of the decade asserted its autonomy. Its affiliates followed suit.

PTC STRIKE

Following up on their unsuccessful strike of 1992, the PTC workers led by ZPTWU embarked on a three-week strike, the first of its kind since independence. The strike was driven by management's refusal to award a wage increase.

'This strike was so effective that management in a bid to stop the industrial action told the union executive that they were opposing the state,' said Caswuz assistant general secretary Christopher Chizura.

However, the leadership and the workers did not heed the management's call but rather mounted more pressure. Moses Jeranyama a provincial secretary for Caswuz Eastern Province said: 'When management finally gave in the results did not only elevate the PTC workers but gave confidence to other public sector workers that repressive labour laws could be defied.'

More strikes in the public sector came as public sector workers continued to play a leading role in the renewing and politicisation of the workplace.

According to Chizura, 'the 1994 strike was purely a bread and butter issue as PTC management was negotiating in bad faith, offering wages below the poverty line.' But the strike was more than that as most public sector strikes were inherently political as they were directed at the state. This is so because participation in politics by public workers is not tolerated by the state.

Said Learnmore Chivizhe, Caswuz provincial chairman for

the Southern Province: 'Former provincial governor for Masvingo Province Willard Chiwewe, said if a civil servant supports the ruling party then he is apolitical but if he supports the opposition he is being political and deserves to be dealt with.'

STRIKE INFLUENCE ON UNION CHARACTER

The 1994 strike was a learning curve for ZPTWU as it laid the groundwork for future strikes. Other public sector workers also learnt from the success of this strike.

Gwisai observed that there was a wave of strikes that started in 1996 representing a gradual increase in opposition to state policies and economic conditions. This was a turning point as over 150,000 public sector employees embarked on a three-week nationwide general strike. This was followed by the health sector strike in which some nurses were dismissed.

This prompted the ZCTU to call for a solidarity General Strike from 12 to 14 November 1996. Although the strike flopped it strengthened the federation as the nurses were not affiliated to it at the time. Interviews with some of the participants in these strikes reveal that the 1994 ZPTWU strike had shaped the character, not only of public sector workers but also of the ZCTU as it developed the guts to call for strikes.

The ZCTU embarked on further strikes in 1997 as it challenged the introduction of a war veteran's levy of 5% on all wages in addition to a 2.5% sales tax and petrol increases that had recently been announced hence it called for a national stay-away on 9 December 1997. Again ZPTWU played a leading role as it introduced the concept of staying away, which it had first used in its 1994 strike. According to Lovemore Matombo, Caswuz president, the idea was adopted in order to limit 'massive injury of workers by the

police hence the workers were supposed to stay at their homes'.

The wave of strikes continued into 1998 as prices continued to rise. As a result the country experienced food riots that year. The food riots forced the government to call for a consultative meeting with the ZCTU which it declined and instead went on to call for a national stay away on 3 and 4 March.

As a pioneer of effective strikes, ZPTWU kept reviewing and refining its tactics. Said Chivizhe: 'We were asked to go home, and not report for work until the leadership told us to do so. We devised the *spider's web* by which we got information about the strike through telephones or by word of mouth from our leaders.'

The ZCTU partnered and started calling strikes on the same dates with ZPTWU sector strikes. James Gondo, Caswuz education officer pointed out that 'since the ZCTU wanted its strikes to be successful, they took place during the same days as our own strikes, and we welcomed it because we were fighting a common enemy - the government.'

MDC FORMATION

In *Beyond ESAP* the ZCTU points out that it started agitating for a political party as early as 1996 after realising that government was not listening to its demands.

Despite Caswuz's involvement in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), it never entered into a coalition with the party. The MDC was formed on 11 September 1999 as a coalition of about 40 civil society groups with labour playing a leading role, as Morgan Tsvangirai, then ZCTU general secretary, became its first president. Unionists from the public sector unions included Gibson Sibanda from the railways union and Gift Chimanihire from the communication union.

Caswuz-led strikes were a blessing in disguise for the MDC as they not only exposed the deteriorating economic mismanagement by Zanu (PF) but won it electoral support as well.

Shop steward Innocent Gomba said: 'The Caswuz involvement in non-bread and butter strikes compromised its negotiating position as the employer now deemed it part of the opposition MDC.'

Participating in strikes fashionably was a product of political consciousness as the union regularly held workshops on trade unionism for its entire membership. According to Matombo, such consciousness took Caswuz to a level where the workers 'demanded for a new national constitution, which was supposed to limit the president's term of office to 10 years and review labour rights within the constitution among other reforms.'

2004 STRIKE AND ITS IMPACT

According to Caswuz senior officials, the union called for strikes more than three times in 2004 alone before the fateful strike of 6 October of the same year in which more than 3,000 workers, representing over 50% of the Caswuz membership, were dismissed. The strikes were again caused by PTC management's refusal to implement an arbitration award that was in favour of the workers.

However, Chivizhe believes that by not changing their strategy, the leaders sold out. 'The leaders saw soldiers being trained in Harare at PTC's TelOne centre for learning and knew that soldiers had been brought to take positions of those who had gone on strike earlier that year.'

'When the strike was in full swing, the soldiers came and took the positions of those who were on strike. We saw soldiers working in those positions until 2007. I think

some positions are still occupied by the soldiers up to now.' Chivizhe's argument confirms allegations that most state companies are heavily militarised. This is a strategy that the state has used to reduce the militancy of the public sector workers.

The 2004 PTC strike dismissals marked the last chapter in the history of effective strikes in Zimbabwe as the strikers became political victims since they were labelled MDC sympathisers by the ruling Zanu PF. Moreover as Chivizhe pointed out, the union leaders failed to change tactics and fell prey to government counter attacks. Had they shifted tactics, the story could be different today.

The state responses also show the politicisation of the strike as soldiers were deployed unconstitutionally to work in state companies. This politicisation and militarisation of the workplace has continued to this day.

The union has made several unsuccessful attempts to have a political settlement with the responsible ministers in the government of national unity (GNU). Caswuz president also implored GNU prime minister Morgan Tsvangirai to intervene as the workers were sacked for allegedly supporting his party, but this has not yielded results.

CONCLUSION

Caswuz lived up to its billing with regards striking for wages and democracy as reflected by the reasons it engaged on strike action. During the period 1994 to 1999, Caswuz embarked on bread and butter issues strikes although unknowingly during 1996 to 1998 they participated in strikes tackling issues beyond the workplace such as the war veterans' levy (which was supposed to be deducted from wages), the food riots, and the fuel hikes among other issues.

It is during this period that they gradually shifted their tactics as a leading union within the ZCTU affiliates to directly engage other social movements such as the National Constitutional Assembly, the International Socialist Organisation and later the MDC. After the 1999 era, they aligned with several other civil society groups to challenge the commoditisation of social services and increasing economic mismanagement by the state. Genuine bread and butter strikes were therefore misconstrued to be political hence they placed their membership at high risk as they were accused of opposing the state. ^{LB}

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Caswuz members with Taurai Mereki (third from left) during May Day celebrations 2012.