A tale of four unions:

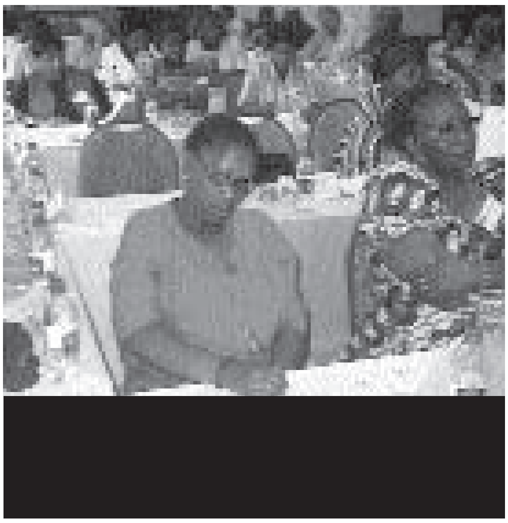
the state of clothing unions in four African countries

At the lowest end of the global supply chain in the garment industry are workers and the organisations that attempt to represent them. Many of these workers face similar working conditions, similar abuses and work for similar CMT operations for similar markets and retail chains such as Wal-Mart in the US and Mr Price and other retailers in SA. ***Michael Koen*** *looks at the state of unions organising these workers in Lesotho, Swaziland, Malawi and Kenya.*

Out of a population of about 180m people in the SADC region, less than 1 out of 10 has a job in the formal sector. The rest are unemployed or struggle to find means of survival in the informal sector or in subsistence farming. On average about 75% of workers in the garment sector are women with the notable exception being Malawi. Despite similarities in terms of membership, the unions operating in the sector across the four countries have had mixed successes and failures. They have been in existence for a number of years and as such date back to a period when the garment industries in these countries were more focused on supplying domestic and regional demand often as a result of import substitution strategies that predated the neoliberal onslaught on labour standards.

Commonly the textile and garment industries in the four countries experienced a period of decline through the 1990s with the arrival of cheaper imports and second-hand clothing. This led to a decline of local ownership and a rise in foreign, largely Taiwanese ownership, attracted by Export processing Zones (EPZs), tax holidays, cheap labour, incentives or to bypass quota access to US markets imposed on their home countries through AGOA (see p39).

Growth in the sector (partly as a result of AGOA) has obvious organisational opportunities for unions



in terms of increased membership, revenue, greater worker solidarity and increased organisational stability. At the same time this rapid growth associated as it is with highly mobile capital and competitive international labour market conditions brings its own problems as is evident in the relative successes and failures of the four unions. Prior to sector growth, unions suffered a chronic lack of resources, poor to non-existent administrative processes, leadership crises while the application of labour laws was problematic to all these unions.

Whilst all the unions have ultimately come to draw on the social capital of international solidarity efforts to improve some of the most severe resource restrictions the extent to which international solidarity has been used to directly pressure employers for change has rather depended on the union model adopted in the different countries.

In the more militant model of engagement adopted in Lesotho and Swaziland by the Lesotho Clothing and Allied Workers Union (LECAWU) and the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU) respectively their has been substantial international support and solidarity efforts in direct action campaigns against employers and government conduct. Whilst these actions were limited to factories producing for European and American markets at first, 2003 saw the first direct calls on South African retailer Mr Price to take greater responsibility for the labour conditions under which their garments are sourced.

The Textile Garment, Leather and Security Workers Union of Malawi and the Kenyan Tailors and Textile workers Union (KTTWU) have not been as confrontational in their approach although it seems that workers in Kenya, inspired by the expectation of political change, have begun to push a more militant agenda although this is not without its own complications.

Lesotho

LECAWU was formed in 1994 as a breakaway from the Lesotho Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. At the same time the Congress of Lesotho Trade Unions (COLETU) was formed by LECAWU and two other unions. This marked the onset of militant engagement around both workplace and political issues resembling a form of social unionism. The union tended to focus on an organising model with shop stewards playing an active role in shopfloor struggles. The union organises manufacturing workers generally but the bulk of the membership is located in the garment sector.

Despite militant action there was little progress in securing recognition, particularly in Asian-owned companies. By 1999 LECAWU had organised only about 4 000 of the 18 000 workers in the sector. However, in an attempt to organise workers at China Garment Manufacturers a number of workers were shot, three of whom died and approximately 3 000 workers were dismissed. Large scale protests ensued and the union's general secretary Billy Macafe was arrested. Workers rallied behind him securing his release. These events were then used as a basis for mobilising international support through the Global Union federation the International Textile Garment and Feather Workers Federation (TGLWF) which had recently set up a regional office under Jabu Ngcobo previously the general secretary of the South African Clothing Textile Workers Union (Sactwu). By producing a document on the strike and shootings and distributing this at an ILO gathering as well as an international effort led by the Clean Clothes Campaign, the government of Lesotho was sufficiently exposed and was forced to begin to pressure investors to enter into dialogue with the union. The ITGLWF played a major role in brokering a deal that eventually saw LECAWU officials entering the employer's premises and actively recruiting members. The issue of the dismissed workers was pursued in court for a number of years before settlement was reached. A similar process was used in forcing C&Y Garments to the table. Membership swelled to 13 000 in a fairly short space of time. In the meantime riding this popular wave Billy Macafe got himself elected to parliament using union funds for which accounting discrepancies still exist. The union however, continued on its path of organising and made major inroads including gaining recognition from a number of companies. Gaining recognition meant that some of the worst abuses were improved to some extent. The union continued to try to establish a central bargaining forum with employers to set minimum wages and much support was offered by international organisations both on the ground in terms of recruitment drives and assistance with developing proposals for central forums and recognition agreements. In short a lot of time and resources were pumped into LECAWU from outside.

Problems however, emerge when Billy Macafe returned to shopfloor politics but was not welcomed back as the leader of LECAWU. He in turn set up his own union with some key LECAWU officials. LECAWU membership dropped to a few hundred as workers left to join the rival union and employers used the opportunity to roll back gains. In an action reminiscent of the 1999 incident, Macafe's union led a protest resulting in his arrest, the death of two workers and international condemnation.

Reports from Lesotho indicate recent confusion and reluctance of many workers to participate in any union. LECAWU is attempting to rebuild with international assistance from ITGLWF and the Solidarity Center who have deployed a South African unionist in the office in an attempt to assist with organising and administrative efforts. Membership in LECAWU is currently 1 500 with an additional 5 000 stop orders about to be processed. Workers wages have not increased significantly over the last four years although some of the harsher conditions have been tempered substantially.

Swaziland

In 1999 SMAWU reported between 5 000 and 6 000 workers in the garment sector of whom approximately 3 500 workers were organised. With the advent of AGOA the garment sector expanded to nearly 20 000 workers whilst union membership has made only modest gains hitting the 7 000 mark in 2004. This is partly the function of a number of factory closures resulting in a loss of membership as well as the intransigence of larger employers to recognise the union despite various organising efforts and campaigns. There are however, indications that with the involvement of the ITGLWF, SMAWU is entering into recognition with various employers. It seems that after a protracted struggle the employers are waking up to the fact that the union could be very helpful in petitioning the US to extend the LDC provision of AGOA due to expire later this year. Much like in Lesotho, when employers begin to see expedience in dealing with a union, they shifted from being intransigent.

SMAWU has also enjoyed considerable international support initially in the form of ITGLWF Africa and SID of Denmark and more recently the Solidarity Center. Whilst there were some leadership rumblings in the late 90s the union has stabilised itself organisationally.

The leadership crisis emerged after the union's general secretary left to join the employers and then began to target the union. This is slightly different to what occurred in Lesotho with the leader starting a rival union, which clearly destroyed worker solidarity and served only to compound the plight of workers.

Kenya

The Kenyan garment and textile sector is old and although at one stage the second largest employer outside of the public sector, it was hardest hit than most sectors in the 1990s by liberalisation. Union representation was well established with various models of industrial co-operation. Whilst Kenya has a well-established tradition of industrial unionism the organisational models have shifted with changes in economic and social policies within the country.

The emergence of EPZs led to the adoption of a tough stance by employers. The KTTWU battled to make the transition in dealing with such employers, as a result they remained largely unorganised. The union still failed to make inroads following the boost in the sector with the advent of AGOA. However soon after the new government came to power workers' expectations in these EPZ's boiled over into frustration resulting in massive and spontaneous work stoppages in January 2003. These workers were not union members and the new government along with KTTWU and COTU urged workers to join unions and use structures to deal with their grievances. The employer's response was rapid and thousands of workers were dismissed. The government, fearing further instability, ordered EPZ employers to recognise unions and engage in structured collective bargaining. Employers at first refused and international solidarity calls were sent out. With new legitimacy the union rapidly recruited an additional 16 000 members and set about attempting to gain recognition and get workers reinstated. Conflicts emerged however, where NGOs who had for some time been operating in traditional union preserves often as a result of union inability to do so continued to encourage worker action. Eventually unions gained recognition. However, before adequate organisational structures could be formed, entered into substantive collective bargaining and signed a two-year agreement which effectively removes the right of workers to voluntary overtime and ensures employer flexibility through the leveraging of unrealistic targets.

The wisdom of a two-year agreement first time out suggests a predisposition towards an integrative approach to bargaining which may not deliver the necessary conditions to workers who have so recently joined the union in such large numbers. The next two years may see the workers leaving the union again as well as internal contestation. Perhaps a story of too much too soon.

Malawi

The Textile Garment, Leather and Security Workers Union is distinctly different from the other unions reviewed so far. Perhaps this is a story of just too little. TGLSWU has been in existence for some time and used to organise predominantly in David Whitehead the then parastatal textile producer. The closure of David Whitehead meant the union continued to exist in name only with a tiny office one desk no facilities and a general secretary.

The Banda regime and the subsequent unions that emerged from the democratisation process had in many ways influenced the approach to unionism. The approach of union organisers in the garment sector was very akin to service unionism without much hope of delivering the service given court backlogs and hostility from the labour department. At the time of the research conducted in Malawi the union had no recognition at all only having 300 members out of a potential of 11 000 workers in the sector. The paradigm that seemed to be espoused in terms of collective bargaining with the employers was to approach them and appeal to their better moral sense whilst encouraging workers to produce more and as such act almost as an industrial broker. Having found employers paying as little as $US16 per month the research team was sceptical about the effectiveness of moral appeals. It was apparent that the union staff and members had a particular notion of unionism that tried as hard as possible to avoid conflict.

This is not to say that workers in Malawi are simply docile. It would not take much effort to increase union membership. Workers were ready in much the same way as they were ready in Kenya. ITGLWF Africa, assisted by funding from the Solidarity Center, has begun a regeneration project in Malawi. Since the beginning of this process membership has increased.

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Lessons for the region

The case studies of the four unions reveal the following:

- The need to ensure responsible strategic leadership that carries workers' best interests at heart.
- Basic union management practices are often absent and serve as an impediment to effective organising.
- There are issues around the 'politics of the predium'. In a poor country a job is a job even if it is in a union. There is no real exit path for senior union leadership which means departure is normally excessively disruptive or long overdue. At this point the purpose of the organisation is shifted and it will become ineffectual.
- In small labour markets it is not easy for unions to be self-sustaining, this increases the danger of dependency.
- The extent to which unions as organisations are prepared to extend power to the shopfloor may be constrained by a lack of capacity but is often due to a lack of political will to do so.
- Conditions in factories organised by these unions are extremely exploitative largely because of the ever-increasing pressure from those on top of the supply chain, the retailers, and their agents to squeeze the profit margins and delivery times of suppliers.
- Regional solidarity is a precursor to improvement in standards for all in sub-Saharan Africa. Sactwu, for example, has played an important role in supporting and building capacity of regional unions. When Cosatu and Sactwu target Mr Price for not buying South African this has direct implications for workers elsewhere in Africa including two immediate neighbouring states.
- Recognising differences between countries and industries is imperative. Given the level of investment in Lesotho for example, allows for more robust forms of engagement than what would be possible in Malawi given the precarious nature of the industry there.
- Gender is not taken seriously enough. Imagine a genuinely democratic organisation that reflected the membership profile and interests from bottom to top. It would probably look quite different to what we have become used to.

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