

African round-up

Zimbabwe

The worsening human and trade union rights situation in Zimbabwe has attracted widespread international criticism. **John Musonda** highlights the harassment facing Zimbabwean unions from the Mugabe regime.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions-African Region (ICFTU-Afro), the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) and Union Network International (UNI) have all protested to Zimbabwe and called for an end to repression, harassment and victimisation of union leaders. After repeated protests, UNI formally wrote to the ILO urging it to refer to the Committee on Freedom of Association its complaint against Zimbabwe for violating of the principles of freedom of association, the right to organise and the right to collective bargaining.

UNI's complaint was in response to the dismissal and suspension in January of various trade unionists. UNI protested the dismissals describing them as 'politically motivated' and 'totally unacceptable'. The ILO, at its June conference, backed calls to the Zimbabwean government to stop arresting or detaining trade union leaders and not to interfere in the legitimate trade union activities of the national centre, ZCTU. Prior to that the ICFTU-Afro issued a statement

criticising the Zimbabwean government for harassment of union leaders and the fostering of splinter unions. The ICFTU-Afro also said the economic situation in Zimbabwe had worsened the plight of workers, whose incomes are now being eroded by inflation resulting in constant industrial actions.

The Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) has also criticised Zimbabwe for its 'brutal attacks, arbitrary arrests and general use of force to clamp down and silence the trade union movement in general and their leaders in particular'. Delegates from SATUCC-affiliated national centres in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe resolved in November last year to support the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions by opposing human rights violations in that country. SATUCC is now headed by a first female president Ms Lucia Matibenga, the vice-president of ZCTU.

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Musonda, UNI-Africa News

Zambian unions reconcile with government

ZCTU President Leonard Hikaumba says government and the labour movement have mended their strained relationship, after President Mwanawasa withdrew his earlier statement that 'trade unions can go to hell', as he did not need their support. Mwanawasa had also vowed publicly that he would crush the labour movement. During May Day celebrations Hikaumba demanded that this statement be withdrawn. Mwanawasa told thousands of workers at the same rally that he would only withdraw the statement once the labour movement also withdrew its resolve to identify an opposition political party to work with.

The government's growing insensitivity to workers led to threats in March by the Zambian labour movement to identify an opposition political party to support in the

2006 general elections, following the government's implementation of the income tax bill. The bill was passed despite countrywide demonstrations by workers against the new 40% PAYE tax and the imposition of a wage freeze for public service workers at a time when parliamentarians are to receive their tax-free midterm gratuities of about US\$40 000 each).

In 1991 when the MMD came to power under former trade unionist Frederick Chiluba, the Zambian labour movement resolved to support the new government. But ten years of privatisations and retrenchments have disillusioned labour leaders who have begun to question the alliance between the government, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and accused them of 'scheming to take food out of the workers' mouths'.

UNI-Africa Regional Secretary Jackson Shamenda, who is also president of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), says the Zambian government should not view unions as enemies of the state, but instead reconcile and work with them. But UNI finance affiliate, ZUFIAM, has ditched the MMD government and resolved to support another political party that is labour-friendly in the 2006 elections. The resolution was adopted at the union's annual conference in March. The resolution called on the union to: 'work with a progressive political party whose policies are compatible with the aspirations and concerns of workers... The pronouncements by government that the 'labour movement was irrelevant and can go to hell' were the last straw which broke the Zambian workers' backs'.

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