

Ulenga: SWAPO, unions - one struggle

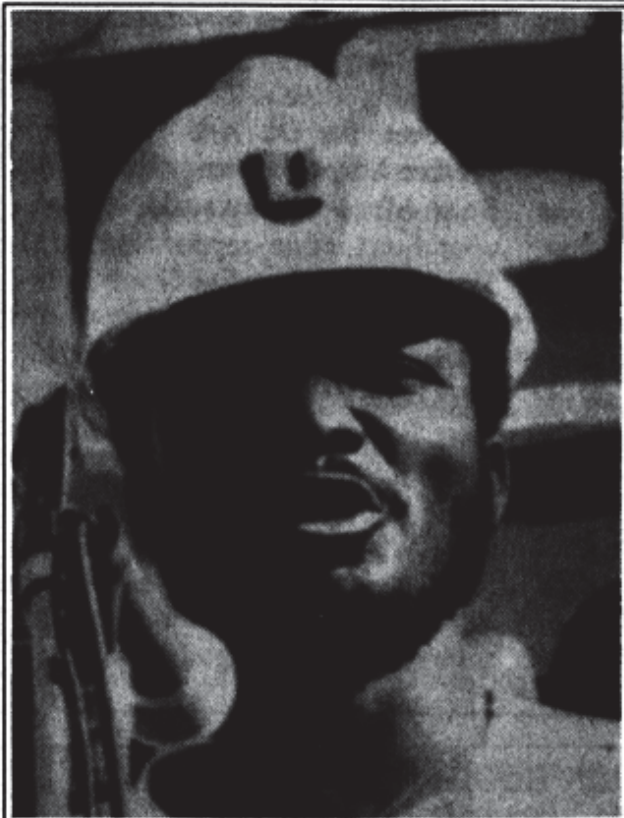
Ben Ulenga is well-placed to speak about both NUNW and SWAPO. In 1974, at the age of 21, he left Namibia to become a SWAPO cadre. After an eventful odyssey through Angola, Zaire and Zambia, he spent a year receiving military training in the Soviet Union. He was captured in 1976, after being seriously wounded in an encounter with security forces inside Namibia. Charged with "terrorism", he was sentenced to 15 years on Robben Island. However, in 1985, after just under 10 years in prison, he was released along with a number of other Namibian prisoners as part of a movement by South Africa toward negotiation. He is now the general secretary of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN). DIANNE HUBBARD put some questions to Ben Ulenga. This interview was first published in *Cross Times*.*

Dianne Hubbard: *Did SWAPO play a role in the formation of NUNW?*

Ben Ulenga: Toward the end of 1969 there was a SWAPO conference at Tanga, in Tanzania. At this conference it was decided to expand the activities of SWAPO. Quite a few

new departments were opened, such as the SWAPO Youth League and the SWAPO Women's Council. There was also a decision to create a Secretariat for Labour in SWAPO. The tasks for that department were, among other things, to organise workers politically - to go in among the workers and preach the SWAPO gospel - and also

* October/November 1989



to assist workers in forming their own independent organisations.

But I think it was clear within SWAPO even then that the formation of a trade union movement can only take place among workers. The initiative of assisting workers came from SWAPO, but the NUNW was really formed only seven or eight years later when workers here inside the country actively took up the idea of forming trade unions.

It was the first organisation of that kind in Namibia, and people didn't work out properly what sort of organisation they were forming. They organised mainly on a national basis rather than on an industrial basis. Instead of forming a federation, as SWAPO was proposing, people here at home were actually organising a general workers' union.

This continued up until 1980 when the crackdown from the police came.

Some of the organisers were arrested, including Jason Angula, for example, who was at that time the SWAPO labour secretary here at home, and also very active in organising workers. Some others involved left the country after this clampdown.

That was more or less the beginning of the NUNW at home. It was established, but it was repressed before it could develop into a proper body.

Dianne Hubbard: *What factors led to the revival of NUNW in 1986?*

Ben Ulenga: There were many things involved. Among other things, in 1985/86 the masses here were determined to push very hard again, to bring something to the fore after all the years of repression. Before 1985/86 SWAPO was technically banned. All political activities of an opposition nature were banned, and meetings were broken up by the police.

When we came from prison in 1985, one of the things that we discussed among ourselves - especially the young people in that group that came from Robben Island - was what role we could play. We looked into the possibility of resurrecting what was happening in NUNW in 1979/80, and we emphasised the necessity of organising along industrial lines.

But I don't mean to say that this was entirely the initiative of people who came from Robben Island, because the Windhoek branch of the SWAPO Youth League was very ac-

tive in proposing the organisation of workers, and ultimately, when a steering committee was set up, it was at the initiative of the SWAPO Youth League.

We took up contact again with the SWAPO leadership abroad, and of course they liked the idea very much. There was quite a lot of assistance from SWAPO - including financial assistance - just to get the trade unions firmly established.

At a meeting which included people from the SWAPO branch structures and also from the old NUNW of 1979/80, we decided to set up a committee that would link up with workers in the various places, find out what their problems were, and assist in whatever the workers thought could happen.

To our surprise, when we went to the various workplaces we found that some workers already had their own committees. Others were prepared to form workers' committees to deal with their problems. We decided then to co-ordinate these committees as they formed.

In July or August 1986 we had a meeting of various workers' committees, mostly from the food industry, and the proposal that these committees should form a union was agreed on. So, in September, NAFU (Namibian Food and Allied Union) was established.

It was the first genuine industrial union in Namibia because it was the first that was formed out of a democratic decision taken by workers themselves.

Dianne Hubbard: *Several of the current leaders of the trade union movement have, like yourself, been actively involved with SWAPO. Has this given the trade unions a particularly political character?*

Ben Ulenga: I think so, but it was bound to be like that. You couldn't have a trade union movement in Namibia at this moment which would not be political. And I don't think you can have a politically influenced trade union movement that would be very far from SWAPO, because SWAPO has over the years played the leading role in the politics of the country. The problems that the workers are faced with are exactly the problems that SWAPO has always talked about.

Dianne Hubbard: *How would you describe the current relationship between SWAPO and the trade unions? Is NUNW an affiliate of SWAPO?*

Ben Ulenga: Here you have the problem of definition. What is clear is that the trade union movement and SWAPO have a very close relationship. Most of the people in the trade union leadership are SWAPO members, and the struggle we are waging is actually the struggle that SWAPO has come to lead. This is our understanding, not an instruction that comes from SWAPO.

When you look at the SWAPO Constitution of 1983, it talks about the affiliation of NUNW to SWAPO. What we have been saying here at home is that when you have a trade

union movement it should be controlled by the workers. Decisions are taken at worker forums, like the congress of the unions or of the federation. I don't know whether the affiliation that's mentioned in the SWAPO Constitution was suggested by the SWAPO Department of Labour or by whom, but there hasn't been a body of workers abroad who could hold a congress and decide on this. There can be an official affiliation only if workers come together and decide on it. As I understand it, this has not yet happened.

But this doesn't harm our relationship with SWAPO a bit; it doesn't mean that we are further from each other than we would be if there were an official affiliation. The relation is quite close and very good.

Dianne Hubbard: *What do you see as the role of the unions in the election campaign?*

Ben Ulenga: There is quite a big role for us to play. Right now, for example, during the registration period, each industrial union is trying to encourage workers to register. We are also taking up some issues with management. In MUN for example, we have written letters to all the companies asking them to give leave to workers to go and register if registration doesn't take place at the workplace.



We have taken a decision, first within the various trade unions and later at the federation congress, that we will play a mobilising role among the workers, explaining why voting SWAPO is one of the preconditions for a successful workers'

struggle in this country. There is no way that we can get anywhere with a DTA government.

Dianne Hubbard: *Will the role of the trade unions change after independence? Will it be difficult to move from wholehearted support for SWAPO to a situation where there may be conflicts of interest between the new government and the trade unions?*

Ben Ulenga: I wouldn't really say change. You see, right now the support we give to SWAPO is support on issues that we are faced with right now. Workers have always supported the struggle for independence, and this is why we are supporting SWAPO now.

When independence comes, with SWAPO in the government, there will be specific policies, and we shall react to these policies. We shall of course have our own understandings and our own policies, and the question of whether we shall go along with the government depends on how these two sets of policies are related to each other. ☆