

BOTSWANA

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NAMIBIA

Building a house on sand

*The impact of the AGOA on the region and the corresponding efforts to strengthen the labour movements has been covered extensively in the Bulletin. **Tim Gibbs** argues that the efforts of Northern labour rights campaigners to aid embattled southern African trade unions have been invaluable, but their support does not always build firm foundations. He traces the meteoric rise and implosion of the LECAWU.*

SOUTH AFRICA

LESOTHO

In January 2003 LECAWU looked good. Talks convened by the US ambassador to Lesotho secured an agreement in which the Lesotho Textiles Exporters Association (LTEA) agreed that their member companies would, at last, abide by national trade union law. Only six months before union activists faced harassment in many factories while only 18 months previously, the LTEA had refused to recognise LECAWU during wage negotiations. None of these advances could have been achieved without Northern labour groups whose media campaigns in the US – it imports 97% of Lesotho's garments – had forced action from the US and Lesotho government.

Then in March 2003 a violent internal conflict broke out within LECAWU, splitting the union from top-down. This continued throughout June and July with union membership falling fivefold. The leader of the break-away faction registered a competing Factory and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), and in

November he led a wages march that came under fire from the police. Two FAWU members died and around 100 were hospitalised. Across town LECAWU were in wage negotiations with the LTEA.

Origins of union division

The Northern labour groups, who had once trumpeted LECAWU's cause, now fell silent or expressed dismay at the personal acrimony that brought the split. But the bitter conflict had been partly caused by the souring effect of their money and influence. However, there were already tensions within LECAWU before the Northern campaigners arrived – the union was divided between senior male officials; younger male union organisers and female rank and file: A patriarchal concentration of power in an industry where at least 80% of the workforce and the union are young women.

Union officials formed an uncontested cadre of leadership by

virtue of their experience gained in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) during the 1980s. In LECAWU's early years, they had led a beleaguered organisation through inspirational example: receiving little pay, working long hours, and occasionally facing arrest.

A more insidious difficulty was the repressive situation faced by unionists. Harassed, shut out of negotiations, unable to build a firm base of paid-up membership, LECAWU was forced to make a mark on the industry through militant action. This tension pulled two ways. LECAWU's leadership, lacking power, were often overtaken by events, caught out by the actions of their members.

Lessons from past strikes

The fine line between success and disorganised disaster is seen in the two largest strikes in the industry. In February 1998, LECAWU members held a wildcat strike at Basotho Jeans

factory and locked fellow workers inside the gates overnight. Union leaders were left helpless as armed police shot dead workers when sent to clear out the factory the next morning, leading to riots and violent picketing throughout the industry. A week later the factories reopened only for the workforce to be informed they had all been dismissed.

LECAWU next made headlines when they marched through Maseru for higher wages in 2001. At dawn they had shut down the industry for the day by forcibly preventing strike-breaking workers from entering factories. Police were called and for a number of hours it seemed the march would descend into mob violence as fights broke out. By enormous effort, LECAWU leadership managed to regain control of the situation and were able to hand a petition to the Minister of Labour.

Days later the US ambassador – fearful that further demonstrations might not end so peacefully and that images of Basotho workers being beaten up when marching for fair wages might be picked up by the US media – urged that wage negotiations be convened. By the end of the month, the LTEA had conceded a pay increase to LECAWU even if the union was not officially acknowledged.

Role of outsiders

When Northern labour first made a serious impact on Lesotho union politics in 2001, it seemed their media campaigns could short circuit the risky political environment in which LECAWU operated. Media campaigns playing to an American public sensitive to abuses in 'sweatshop factories' would shame the industry into playing within the rule of law.

In a globalised world, America can play an immense role in Lesotho trade

union politics because bilateral trade treaties such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has relocated the global garment industry to countries like Lesotho.

This political influence was vividly seen in early 2002 when protests erupted in a Lesotho factory owned by, Nien Hsing.

Frustrated shop stewards held a wildcat demonstration, a manager confronted them and a scuffle occurred and a unionist was stabbed in the neck. This incensed other workers who smashed sewing machines and hurled them at security guards.

Factory management stubbornly continued to decline serious talks with LECAWU leadership until the American Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) started a media campaign that highlighted the stabbing. UNITE targeted a famous US retailer which buys from Lesotho, The GAP, as being responsible for such brutal incidents.

Suddenly American journalists flew to Lesotho to meet the injured worker, the Lesotho Minister of Trade threatened LECAWU with a libel action and The GAP urged Nien Hsing factories to sign Recognition Agreements with LECAWU.

Nien Hsing signed and within a month, union membership within the factory had climbed from 50 to 1 900. By the end of the year, the Lesotho Labour Commissioner had stepped up the rate of factory inspections.

Impact of interventions

Yet in the longer term these media campaigns might well have been the steroids that quickly built the public profile of LECAWU, but did not necessarily increase the organisational muscle. LECAWU was struggling to organise its rapidly burgeoning

membership. In 2003 LECAWU claimed a membership of 19 000 – almost half of the industry. Official government figures, however, estimated only 10% of the workforce were fully registered and paid-up members of the union.

Northern labour groups then faced a second dilemma as they attempted to consolidate LECAWU's foundations. Their money provided a much needed full-time financial administrator, a second hand car, a computer and a photocopier. They also funded modest hospitality for the steady stream of foreign visitors, involved in media campaigns, who came to visit LECAWU. But these gifts, directed towards union leadership, strained further the hierarchic tensions between senior officials, union organisers, and shop stewards.

Hence LECAWU's abrupt fall from grace in the 11 months between January and November 2003. Events were sparked by the suspension of one of the top organisers of the union who was accused of insubordination. A dissident faction was quickly able to draw upon the support of workers who told a local reporter, 'we want to deal with these silly LECAWU officials who don't seem to be respecting our time and money anymore.'

Senior officials did see trouble looming. They realised LECAWU lacked the educational and training support that had been so vital for their own development when they were young shop stewards in NUM during the 1980s. But the foreign coffers that were open to South African social democratic movements in the 1980s at the grass roots level are now largely directed elsewhere.

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