

Building a regional labour movement

The Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council's (SATUCC) 4th Regional Labour Symposium had as its theme Regional Integration in Southern Africa. The political dynamics facing labour. This symposium addressed a number of important issues that are reported on in this paper, namely.

- globalisation and the alternatives;
- union influences in the region,
- conflicts within SADC;
- an evaluation of SATUCC and recommendations for a way forward for the organisation.

Developing alternatives

Southern African governments are following the logic of globalisation although experiences in many parts of the world show that leaving development to market forces does not benefit ordinary people.

This was the opinion presented by ZCTU (Zimbabwe) economist, Godfrey Kanyenze at SATUCC's symposium. He went on to demonstrate how the WTO, IMF and World Bank are driving globalisation which is a process that best serves the interests of rich countries and particularly transnational corporations (TNCs). He explained how the opening up of the Zimbabwean economy under structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) led to the emergence of three powerful oligopolies who now control 80% of

Herbert Jauch reports on key debates arising out of SATUCC's 4th Regional Labour Symposium.

Zimbabwean products. He also spoke of how the food poverty line stands at Z\$2 500 while most workers earn around Z\$1 500 per month.

Kanyenze urged the unions to come up with alternative policies to globalisation that would address the problems experienced by working people. Unions need to be pro-active. For too long civil society in southern Africa tended to see their governments as liberators and failed to play a significant, pro-active role, Kanyenze concluded.

Union regional influence

FAFO director Liv Torres presented an analysis of the extent of union influence in the region. This influence has been demonstrated by some union federations that have:

- actively participated in formulating proposals regarding economic policy (for example ZCTU (Zimbabwe), COLETU (Lesotho), and COSATU);
- used advanced media strategies to make their viewpoints heard,
- built up research departments to strengthen their capacity to influence policies in favour of the disadvantaged

majority (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa)

Obstacles to free trade union activity still remain in the region though. In Botswana, for example, the law does not allow union officials to be employed on a full-time basis, strike actions are restricted and new unions are difficult to get registered. In Lesotho, public servants are not allowed to join unions and workers in Namibia's EPZs are not allowed to strike.

Despite this, and even with massive retrenchments in industry, the average union density in the formal sector of southern Africa stands at about 42% – higher than the unionisation rates in the UK, Italy, Germany, France, Japan and the USA. Considering that several unions are still quite young, like Malawi, while others are just emerging from civil wars, like Mozambique, these figures indicate a substantial organisational power of unions in the region.

Is it about numbers?

Employment data in southern Africa indicate that less than 25% of the region's labour force is in formal employment. However, Torres showed that the power and influence of trade unions in southern Africa cannot be measured by membership figures alone. Union power is based on the labour movement's political power, trade union unity, union density and its internal organisational strength.

In many countries of the region, trade unions are the most articulate and best organised organs of civil society. Overall, trade unions in southern Africa today are more powerful than what they were ten years ago. Even some of the unions that are still close to their governments have achieved significant wage gains and have embarked on militant action to back their demands.

Torres identified several political

challenges for the unions in the region, including:

- developing pro-active national policies;
- building media profiles and strategies;
- building regional labour strategies;
- building a strong regional leadership.

Self-evaluation

Union leaders identified the lack of concrete regional actions as one of the weaknesses of the labour movement. Sometimes regional issues do not feature at all and there is a lack of regular communication between southern African unions.

Participants identified the following additional weakness:

- few women are represented on the SATUCC executive council, and a regional gender strategy is lacking (although gender policies are debated through SATUCC's women's committee);
- financial constraints and no full-time SATUCC personnel to carry out programmes;
- the absence of an HIV/AIDS code of conduct for the region.

Political tensions

Political tensions in SADC and the effects that this has had on regional union unity were of special concern.

The conflicts in the DRC and Lesotho were particularly highlighted. The symposium agreed that the regional labour movement must avoid being divided along the lines of rivalries between SADC governments. Unions responded to the events on the basis of their national positions without a clear political strategy. While the Zimbabwean ZCTU opposed the military involvement in the DRC, Namibia's NUNW supported its government. The two federations thus took opposing positions. A Namibian unionist pointed out that this could have

been avoided if the unions had developed a joint regional position through SATUCC. The meeting agreed that while strategic alliances with political parties or governments on specific issues can help to advance workers' interests, unions must defend their independence.

Solving problems

Several proposals were made about how to overcome the current weaknesses of the regional labour movement, especially SATUCC.

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- National federations should establish international/regional desks as a matter of urgency to place greater emphasis on regional perspectives and action
- Affiliates must explore new funding sources and present a realistic assessment of their ability to contribute financially to SATUCC.
- SATUCC should develop into a strong co-ordinating body with sufficient full-time staff. Regional forums for union organisers and educators should be set up.

Deepening democracy

- SATUCC should co-ordinate regional campaigns that will contribute to the deepening of democracy in the region. The symposium identified three main aspects of these campaigns, namely, solidarity action with union leaders fighting for democracy, support for national campaigns of SATUCC affiliates, and democracy campaigns in the region in co-operation with other organisations of civil society.

Bargaining issues

The symposium suggested that bargaining with TNCs should be left to the

International Trade Secretariats (ITSS) as they are in a better position to deal with companies in their sectors. SATUCC's activities should complement the work of the ITSS as both have a role to play in strengthening the regional labour movement.

Conclusion

Southern African unions are beginning to realise the need for a regional and pro-active policy intervention to fight the cause of the marginalised majority. Establishing more regular and more practical contacts between union activists at all levels is a pre-condition for the establishment of a truly regional labour movement.

Trade unions and other organs of civil society, will have to make their voices heard if they want to influence the development path of southern Africa. With SADC being divided along political lines, trade unions have achieved a higher degree of unity than their governments. It will be essential for the labour movement to now influence the process of regional integration. This requires a move away from merely reacting to developments. Instead, unions will have to set the agenda pro-actively. Otherwise, the integration process will be shaped by the interests of business, assisted by the competing national governments of southern Africa. ★

References

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