

David and Goliath duel?

Zimbabwe labour movement under tyranny

Zimbabwe's labour movement has been hard hit by the rapidly declining economy.

Lloyd Sachikonye provides a context and examines some of the daunting challenges that the labour movement faces.

Zimbabwe's economy is in its seventh year of continuous decline. With a hyper-inflation rate of over 3 700%, it has set a record not only in southern African but in the world. About a quarter of the population, an estimated 3 million people, has migrated from the country for economic and political reasons. There are no recent parallels of such significant migration from a country during peacetime. Repression has intensified hand in hand with the economic and social decline. A recent survey observed that about 90% of sampled Zimbabweans described the economy as 'bad' to 'very bad' with 71% predicting that it would 'worsen' in 2007. The survey added that up to 90% of adult Zimbabweans blamed the government for failing to stem inflation and narrow the gap between the rich and the poor.

How has the Zimbabwe labour movement responded to this crisis? This article provides the structural context of the decline and its implications for the working class, and then briefly considers the political implications of intensified repression in recent months.

STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

Although the economic crisis was triggered in 1997 due to fiscal imprudence, and in 1998 due to the cost of military intervention in the

DR Congo, the crisis became pronounced in 2000. The economy shrank by 40% between 2000 and 2005, and even further in 2006. This decline should be set against average growth rates of between 3 and 5% per annum in other southern African countries during this period.

In particular, manufacturing and agriculture have experienced significant declines. Many companies have closed and thousands of jobs lost over the past seven years. The main industrial organisation in manufacturing, the Confederation of Zimbabwean Industries (CZI), estimated that about 800 companies closed between 2002 and 2005.

Similarly, there has been a marked decline in agriculture with production plummeting by about 50% since 2000 with far reaching implications for food security and export earnings. The decline in agriculture has removed a major market for manufactured goods, undermining what had been a growing integration between these two sectors. More than 200 000 out of a total of 350 000 jobs were lost in agriculture between 2000 and 2003. Overall, the impact of the economic crisis on jobs has been severe. The number of jobs in the formal sector has shrunk from 1.5 million in 1999 to about 900 000 today. This partly explains the unemployment rate of about 80%.

This is the difficult structural setting in which Zimbabwean labour unions operate, a setting in which most have lost members due to de-industrialisation and poorly managed land reform. One estimate is that unionisation peaked at about 20% in 1990 before declining to 15% in 2001. It has declined further during the past five years. Union revenue has been adversely affected as the volume of subscriptions shrinks. This has affected their capacity to run programmes, and the same relates to the national centre, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU).

LABOUR'S RESPONSE

Despite these adverse macroeconomic conditions, unions continue to organise extensively as well as stage strikes. Some of the longest strikes in recent months have been by public sector workers: doctors, nurses, teachers and lecturers. Most strikes have centred on a demand for 'a living wage' as hyperinflation plays havoc with salaries and wages.

Nevertheless it is clear that labour militancy has been blunted by widespread job insecurity in a context of high unemployment. Although there were several 'stay-aways' between 2001 and 2006, there has been a noticeable decline in levels of participation in them. This decline can partly be



explained in terms of fear of loss of jobs but also of a creeping fatigue and lack of 'tangible results' in material and political terms from previous 'stay-aways.' Thus while industrial level strikes have continued to back up negotiations for improved working conditions, the number of general strikes has decreased in recent years. Generally, however, it would appear that the organisational capacity of affiliate unions and of the ZCTU itself has been weakened by a combination of structural factors and state authoritarian strategies.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Despite the adverse macroeconomic conditions and repression, the leadership of the ZCTU has been highly visible in campaigns against state authoritarianism. They have staged demonstrations and presented petitions to the government on worker rights and living conditions. They have done so at personal cost. The brutal beatings of the ZCTU leaders including Lovemore Matombo, Wellington Chibebe and Lucia Matibenga in September 2006 was a dress

rehearsal for the assaults on Morgan Tsvangirai, Grace Kwinjeh, Nelson Chamisa and Sekai Holland amongst others in March 2007. National and international outrage in both instances appears not to have made an impression on, or pricked the conscience of, the Mugabe government.

But it is worth remembering that state authoritarianism has long roots in post-independence Zimbabwe, and similarly deep ones in the colonial state that preceded it.

Labour unions have been a major target for several reasons. First, they are viewed as the main pillar of support of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). At the formation of MDC in 1999, the national presence and infrastructure (including offices) and branches of unions were an asset to the new party. However, this infrastructure and union organisers were viewed as a threat by Zanu PF and state institutions, and therefore became objects of attack.

Examples of such attacks include the murder of unionists such as Talent Chiminya in 2000, the shooting dead of protesting

steelworkers at Redcliff, arson attacks on Bulawayo union regional offices and repeated raids on ZCTU head offices in Harare. Repressive laws used against unions include the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) introduced in 2002. POSA facilitates harassment and coercion through prohibiting union meetings if police permission has not been granted. This law is directly aimed at restricting freedom of assembly, and this has made mobilisation more difficult than before. However, repression has failed to cow unions and so the state has sought other strategies.

One strategy by the Zimbabwean state has been consciously to create and fuel divisions within the labour movement. This has been done primarily through the support of another labour centre, the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU), the fomenting of splinter unions and the stocking of dissension within the ZCTU itself.

State institutions, including the Ministry of Labour and Public Service, have actively promoted the divisive role of the ZFTU which is led by Alfred Makwarimba and

Joseph Chinotimba, the latter an active Zanu PF organiser, during the post-2000 period. Although the ZFTU has negligible affiliate membership, it has largely depended on state material and political support for its visibility. The state facilitates its access to wide publicity in the public media. On May Day, the state financed transport to stadiums and it sponsors football matches and musicians to draw crowds to ZFTU events. In spite of this considerable investment by the state, the affiliate unions of ZFTU have a small membership of only a few thousand while the national centre is kept going by a state subsidy. On the whole, the ZFTU has little credibility but it has a 'nuisance value' by causing confusion amongst less informed workers.

Another motive behind state repression is to weaken the key role of the ZCTU as a focal point of civil society mobilisation against the Mugabe government. The ZCTU has been central in the formation of the constitutional reform movement, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), and in the activities of the human rights movement, women and student groups. Labour's participation in democratisation campaigns is viewed as a threat by the government.

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Clearly, a structural stalemate exists in Zimbabwe. Neither the 2005 election outcome could resolve it; nor does the forthcoming 2008 election promise to break it. There are competing factions in Zanu PF over the succession and MDC has been internally fragmented. International isolation has not been healthy for an economic recovery. This is why the SADC Initiative which centres on President Mbeki's mediation between the key players in Zimbabwe assumes central importance.

The labour movement needs to grapple with a number of challenges so as to contribute to the breaking of the stalemate. The first relates to how to cope with a deepening economic crisis that clearly has been devastating in terms of contraction of the economy, and losses of jobs. The significant growth of the informal sector has not compensated for the erosion of formal sector unions. The priority for labour, as of the wider population, has revolved around *sheer survival*. Paradoxically, one outcome of authoritarianism and economic contraction has been a spread of *individualism* as against *collective responses* in community mobilisation.

On its own, the labour movement cannot provide an alternative economic policy let alone an economic programme. However, nothing should stop it from developing a framework for an economic blueprint that contains ingredients of a future economic policy. There has been a precedent in the form of the ZCTU's widely disseminated *Beyond Esap* document of 1996. The document would need to be updated and contextualised to conditions of this decade and wider global developments.

The second challenge relates to the polarising political crisis that does not show any signs of abating. State authoritarianism is one response to the crisis as well as contributing to the deepening of the crisis. The legitimacy crisis of the state remains unresolved. The difficult question is whether labour should align itself with any of the political parties. While this would not be a major issue in democratic and stable societies, it becomes a sensitive one in a deeply polarised society such as Zimbabwe. Against the background of the rift in the MDC, the labour movement will find it difficult to stay aloof from

contending factions. To its credit, it has so far avoided identifying itself with either faction.

Another challenge relates to the extent to which the labour movement should be involved in drawing up a *social contract* with organised business and the state. The issue has been on the table since the signing of the *Kadoma Declaration* by the three parties in 2001. Authoritarian policies and repression have worked against the implementation of principles of the Declaration and a formal adoption of a social contract. Yet the state, and its institutions such as the Reserve Bank, sees certain potential advantages that would flow from such a contract, not least industrial peace. Significantly, several protocols of the contract were signed by the three parties at the beginning of June 2007. The labour movement should however not be naïve about the intentions of the state; it should engage with it carefully given the latter's propensity towards manipulation and unilateralism.

Finally, the labour movement broadly, and its leadership specifically, should continue to pay special attention to building a broad alliance with other civil society groups that are committed to democratic transformation. By virtue of its history, membership reach, and skills, the Zimbabwean labour movement has the potential to be a pivotal force in the struggle against authoritarianism. It therefore deserves the solidarity that it receives from the international labour movement such as Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) at critical junctures. LB

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