

# Trade Unions in Zambia

In 1991, when the Mass Democratic Movement (MMD) was elected into power, people hoped there would be an improvement in the working and living conditions of the majority of the population. However, these hopes were dashed when the government intensified the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). For the large part of the 1990s, the economy has been declining and shedding jobs.

Presently, less than a quarter of the labour force is in formal sector employment. The labour movement in Zambia is currently facing major challenges in terms of advancing and protecting their members' interests in a declining economy, unable to create employment.

## **Economic indicators**

When the MMD took power in 1991, it inherited an economy in crisis, with huge debt, a high and unstable rate of inflation, balance of payment's difficulties, declining real Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In an attempt to improve the economic situation the MMD embraced SAPs as prescribed by the World Bank. Government implemented deregulation, which included financial liberalisation, trade liberalisation, removing subsidies, reducing public expenditure, cuts in the public sector and privatisating state assets.

---

## *Malehoko Tsboamedi reports on the labour movement in Zambia.*

However, the economic results have not been impressive. Copper production, which accounts for more than 80% of Zambia's foreign currency, has continued to decline over the past years. The drop in world copper and cobalt prices in 1998 reduced the country's metal export earnings and led to an overall decline of 11% in the mining sector's contribution to the GDP. Consumer price inflation increased to 31,5% in 1999.

For most of the 1990s, the GDP has recorded a negative growth rate. The high external debt of the country is also making it difficult for the country to alleviate poverty.

## **Labour markets**

In 1997 the Central Statistics Office estimated the Zambian labour force to be 4 194 million of a population of 9,4 million. Zambia's labour force is dominated by the youth as 54% of the total labour force is composed of persons between the ages of 12 and 34. About 64% of the total labour force are in rural areas. The implementation of liberal policies in Zambia has had a major impact on the working population. Since 1990, more than

**Table 1: Zambian economic indicators**

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Real GDP growth (%)	-0,43	-0,35	-1,7	6,8	-8,6	-2,3	6,4	3,5	-2,0
External debt USD (millions)	6 600	7 190	6 950	6 800	6 200	6 380	6 570	7 100	6 500

Sources: Muneku, 1998; World Bank.

45 000 workers have been retrenched as a result of privatisation.

As the economy has been declining and employment opportunities diminishing, only 11% of the labour force is employed in the formal sector, which itself is declining at an annual rate of 2%. The rest of the labour force is either unemployed or involved in the informal sector. A large part of the unemployed population is the youth and women.

According to Muneku, the crisis in unemployment in Zambia is largely due to the lack of policies or strategies on job creation.

As formal sector employment has declined for the large part of the 1990s, the informal sector has grown. More than 70% of the total labour force in Zambia has become dependent on this sector, with women being in the majority. The informal sector is characterised by low incomes, poor working conditions, low productivity and a high prevalence of child labour.

### Labour relations

The Labour Relations Act stipulates that workers have a right to join trade unions of their choice but requires that there be at least 25 workers to form a trade union.

The union should enter into a recognition agreement with the employer no later than three months after the union has been registered. Union members have a right to attend meetings within the workplace during working hours.

### The right to strike

According to the Act, workers have the right to strike. Where a collective dispute arises and settlement is not reached within seven days, the parties concerned have to appoint a conciliator.

The conciliator should convene a meeting with both parties in an attempt to reach a settlement. Failure to reach settlement through conciliation means that the dispute can either be referred to the industrial court or a ballot to strike may be conducted.

However, the Minister of Labour can intercept the strike after consulting the Tripartite Consultative Labour Council. The minister has the powers to apply to court and declare the strike as not being in the public interest.

While the Act stipulates that workers have a right to strike, the procedures make it virtually impossible for workers to engage in legal action. As a result, workers in Zambia have either taken their

**Table 2: Formal employment and labour force trends in Zambia**

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Total labour force (millions)	3,3	3,5	3,7	3,8	3,99	4,2
Formal sector employment (thousands)	546	526	496	485	479	472
Formal sector employment as % of total labour force	17	16	15	13	12	11

Source: Muneku, 1999

employers to labour court or embarked on illegal strikes. Going to labour court is costly for unions and employers. Embarking on illegal strike action has had negative consequences for unions - since many workers have lost jobs through illegal strikes, unions now avoid going on strike for fear of losing membership.

### *Collective bargaining*

The Act gives employers and unions the option of either bargaining at industry or enterprise level. Previously, bargaining took place at the Joint Industrial Council between the unions and employers' organisation. However, with the deregulation, both unions and employers have tended to favour enterprise bargaining.

### *Tripartite Consultative Labour Council*

The labour movement participates in the Tripartite Consultative Labour Council, composed of government, employers and labour representatives. The council meets twice a year and delegates discuss issues pertaining to labour markets and the economy. The Act stipulates that at any meeting, one half of the members form a quorum. Decision on any question shall be by a majority of the members present and voting at the meeting.

Unions feel they do not have much influence because government is the largest employer and often forms alliances with other employers in the tripartite meetings. This impacts on unions' voting power. 'When it comes to voting, workers' representatives do not have large support.'

For the unions in Zambia, this structure simply operates as a consultation forum as they do not have much influence over the final decision. The unions are expected to make presentations or suggestions, but the Minister of Labour still has the final say on

the decisions taken at this council meetings. Unions report that in most cases recommendations made in this structure are never implemented or followed up.

### **Trade unions in Zambia**

The ZCTU was formed in 1965 by an Act of parliament. From the initial stages, the ruling party, the United National Independence (UNIP) aimed to gain control of the labour movement. This was also done through legislation such as the Industrial Relations Act, which recognised the ZCTU as the only workers' representative. However, this strategy worked against government, strengthening the ZCTU.

The strength of the labour movement in Zambia lay on the shopfloor, where worker militancy was used to push forward the workers' demands. It is through strong shopfloor structures that unions maintained their independence from the state. With ZCTU as the only recognised trade union federation before the '90s, their membership increased from 100 000 in 1964, to 111 824 in 1967 and 184 000 in 1973. (Torres, 1998) In 1986, ZCTU membership stood at 348 960.

However, democratic changes and liberalisation process have had a major impact on the labour movement. Although the ZCTU campaigned for democratic changes and supported the MMD during the elections, unions have not gained much. In fact, membership has declined. Among the most affected sectors are the manufacturing sector with a drop in trade union membership from 27 000 in 1990 to 12 000 in 1998, and the construction sector where membership fell from 25 000 in 1990 to about 11 000 in 1998.

The democratic changes and liberalisation process have also led to the

**Table 3: Zambian trade union membership 1990-1998**

Name of union	1990	1994	1998
Airways & Allied Workers Union of Zambia	8 858	3 010	2 500
Bankers Union of Zambia	-	-	500
Civil Servants Union of Zambia	28 000	29 001	30 000
CBUWU	-	-	560
Hotel Catering Workers Union of Zambia	7 000	6 840	5 600
Guards Union of Zambia	13 000	8 000	8 000
Mineworkers Union of Zambia	58 808	48 000	38 000
National Union of Building, Engineering & General Workers	25 000	14 310	7 000
National Union of Commercial & Industrial Workers	27 000	26 000	12 000
National Union of Communication Workers	6 319	6 494	3 900
National Union of Plantation & Agricultural Workers	16 674	18 332	19 000
National Union of Public Service Workers	65 610	35 000	20 000
National Union of Technical Education Lecturers	-	-	800
National Union of Transport & Allied Workers	7 592	5 500	3 000
Railway Workers Union of Zambia	10 000	8 501	4 000
Secondary School Teachers Union of Zambia	-	-	4 500
University of Zambia & Allied Workers Union	2 794	5 075	2 500
University of Zambia Lecturers & Researchers Union	-	-	100
Workers Union of TAZARA	-	-	2 000
Zambia Electricity & Allied Workers Union	6 600	3 600	4 000
Zambia Union of Financial & Allied Workers Union*	11,754	10 116	5 800
Zambia National Union of Health & Allied Workers	1 319	5 030	5 000
Zambia National Union of Teachers	36 230	48 000	46 500
Zambia Revenue Authorities Workers Union	-	-	2 000
Zambia Typographical & Allied Workers Union	1 509	2 500	1 000
Zambia Union of Journalists	-	300	300
Zambia Union of Local Authorities Workers Union	24 000	22 626	17 000
NESAWU*	-	-	-
PETUZ*	-	-	-
Total registered unions	358 067	306 334	245 500

Source: ZCTU statistics, 1998 \* not affiliated to ZCTU

weakening and fragmentation of the labour movement. (Gostner, 1997) The labour movement had campaigned against the implementation of SAPs since the mid-1980s but had not developed policies on what to do if SAPs were implemented. As a result, when the MMD government implemented SAPs, the labour movement had no clear strategy or position on certain issues. This led to disagreements and disunity within the leadership,

resulting in five unions breaking away from the ZCTU in 1994 (see Gostner, 1997). Those unions that split from the ZCTU have now formed their own federation - the Federation of Free Trade Unions.

### Constraints facing unions

As the economy continues to decline, trade unions are facing major difficulties. Massive retrenchments have not only

affected membership levels, but also unions' ability to function effectively. As membership has declined, the financial status of the unions has also dropped. This has had an impact on union resources. For instance, some of the unions do not have telephone lines, fax machines, computers or motor vehicles.

As union funds have decreased, services to members have declined. Limited resources have meant that trade union accessibility to membership has become increasingly difficult. Unions are also unable to offer trade union education, which is seen as a major empowering tool for workers, particularly on the shopfloor. The recruitment process has also been slowed down by lack of resources and funds. According to Muneku (1999), apart from retrenchments, the decline in union membership has been further aggravated by the incapability of trade unions to organise workers, especially under the new economic order.

## Challenges

Workers join unions hoping that the union will protect their rights and advance their interests. Workers' satisfaction with the union is based on the services it offers its members. This is based on the union's influence and effectiveness in engaging with management during negotiations. (Torres, 1999) Job security is an important concern for workers and is one of the major factors that has drawn workers into organising and building solidarity.

With the deregulation of the markets and the privatisation of state assets, it has increasingly become difficult for unions to protect jobs. Trade unions have lost more than half of their membership since 1986. Workers have realised that they can be fired at any time and at any rate with less protection from the union.

According to the union officials, most of

the new investors that are coming to Zambia are anti-union and are taking advantage of the poor economic situation in Zambia and the vulnerability of the working force.

As one union official argued, 'When unions agitate for labour rights, they are told to choose between labour rights and employment.' The government seems to believe that trade unions are a hindrance to economic growth - thus the tight labour laws.

Given the above problems, the labour force is increasingly questioning the role of trade unions. The questions that arise are - how do the unions convince workers that unions are still relevant in situations of economic depression where there are massive job losses? How do the unions convince workers they can defend and protect workers' rights in a situation where it has become difficult to use the strike as a bargaining tool because of fear of further job losses and decreases in union membership? Such questions are not only relevant for the labour movement in Zambia, but many unions in African countries. ★

## References

- Gostner, K (1997) *Playing Politics: Labour's political role in Zambia*. SALB vol 21 no 3.
- Muneku, A. (1999) *A Survey Report on Trade Union Membership and Profile in Zambia*. ZCTU Report.
- Muneku, A & Banda, D. (1996). *The Impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes on the Labour Market and Unionisation in Zambia*. Unpublished paper
- Muneku, A (1998) *Active Labour Market Policies A paper presented to the Seminar on Labour Issues in Privatisation*
- Torres, L. (1998). *Labour Markets in Southern Africa*. Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science: Norway.
- Torres, L. (1999) *Bread, Butter and Politics Paper prepared for the COSATU Congress, June 1999*

*Malehoko Tshoedi is a researcher at FAFO*