

Globalisation

trade unions at a crossroads

Southern African labour movements are taking a backseat in local, regional and global politics as neo-liberalism policies take hold. National, social and economic development agendas are being dictated to by those forces of globalisation - the transnational corporations (TNCs) and multilateral aid agencies

As more southern African countries implement structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) as prescribed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the prospects for the working class seem bleak.

The *South African Labour Bulletin* (vol 21 no 3, July 1997) aptly summed up Zambia's experience of globalisation. Zambia has been re-colonised by the west and trade union politics have been eroded.

But Zambia is just one example. Imperialist agents can be found everywhere. It is important to assess the impact of globalisation on South Africa because of its position as a new power in the southern African region, and the fact that some countries are looking to it for leadership.

GEAR and globalisation

South Africa's adoption of GEAR confirms that the country has become an agent of Western neo-liberal thought. GEAR is a home-grown SAP.

by Ndangwa Noyoo

GEAR focuses on fiscal stability at the expense of job creation. Fiscal stability is achieved by maintaining a low budget deficit while ensuring that inflation is kept in check. Because of this, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost in 1996, and this downward spiral in the formal sector continues. Less money is also spent on social services like health and education.

The South African working class has since been placed at the mercy of international capital. Worker representatives are in alliance with the ruling class and have compromised working class ideals. GEAR is fraught with contradictions and does not provide for workers' wellbeing. GEAR provides lessons for all stakeholders in South Africa because it has the same disempowering effect as SAPs.

It would not be farfetched to say that South Africa is facing recolonisation. Agents of capital were already knocking on the government's door before they had even started tackling the upliftment of the disadvantaged population groups. South Africa is of particular importance to the west because it occupies a hegemonic position in the southern African region and TNCs have invested heavily in the country.

Future prospects

So what are the prospects for autonomous regional, economic and political activities in SADC if South Africa panders to the whims of international capital? How are fragile economies going to challenge western pressures to privatise and open up their economies to the agents of capitalism?

In terms of SADC, Bond (1997:7) asserts: 'The implications of uneven trade, investment and financial flows for regional integration are ominous, since the capacity of nation states to determine foreign economic policy is waning fast.'

Many governments do not have the capacity to meet the basic needs of their citizens. Nation-states have become more preoccupied with domestic issues than regional ones. Workers of southern African countries are once more trapped by the region's inability to transform export led growth, into social and economic wellbeing.

South Africa is also still reluctant to participate effectively and wholeheartedly in the sub-region's trade. It would rather dump its goods on poor neighbours than have equal trade with them. Because of globalisation, South Africa will never be an equal trade partner with the developed Northern countries, in spite of the fact that it has quite a solid production base.

Unionism and globalisation

Globalisation impacts on trade unionism in two noticeable ways:

- Point of political independence in most African countries. Post independence, many workers have been

co-opted into government to protect the interest of western capitalist countries

- Trade unionism was cracked down in those African countries where it provided the impetus to fight against authoritarian rule. With globalisation taking on a more neo-colonialist approach, South Africa has to take a cue from experiences of other African countries

South Africa must realise that it is not insulated from the process of globalisation or the re-colonisation of African countries. This has been evidenced in the cryptic messages put out in the Growth and Equity Bill, and if we decipher statements made during the United States' President Bill Clinton's trip to the continent. ★

References

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