Labour and liberalisation in Zambia

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Exactly ten years ago the *Labour Bulletin* produced a special issue on labour in post-independence Zimbabwe, edited by Eddie Webster.

This was a critical moment in both countries' history. Battered by the state of emergency, COSATU was embarking on a hotly debated alliance with the national liberation movement. By contrast, the labour movement in Zimbabwe was moving away from the ruling party and taking a more militant and independent position. There were hopes that this represented the beginning of a mass-based movement that could lead to a more effective and thorough democratisation of Zimbabwean society.

With the help of hindsight we know that this did not occur. A decade later, the labour movement in Zimbabwe is still grappling with these issues, though in considerably more unfavourable economic circumstances (see Adler, Barchiesi and Gostner, *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 20 No 3, 1996).

Ten years ago, the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) was also spearheading more effective opposition to the single party state. In 1986 and 1987 it led massive protests against structural adjustment and Kenneth Kaunda's political 'dictatorship'. By 1990, it had broken with the ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP), to become the driving force behind a mass movement – the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). In 1991 Zambians elected an ex-labour leader as president at a time when South Africa was tentatively embarking on its own negotiated transition. In 1996 Zambia concluded its second democratic elections.

Today, however, the Zambian experiment is rife with problems for the labour movement. Six years into the new regime it is possible to evaluate labour's role and to .. draw tentative conclusions.

Last December, a group of researchers from Wits University's Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) travelled to Zambia. Our purpose was to investigate labour's impact on political and economic liberalisation, and its effects on the labour movement.

South Africa has much to learn from Zambia's experience. One important lesson is that labour, which was a leading advocate of liberalisation, embarked on a process it did not fully understand, could not ultimately control, and which carried it towards unpredictable destinations (such as a partial embracing of the neo-liberal economic policy it had previously

criticised). Furthermore, labour has itself changed along the way. Retrenchments (caused by Structural Adjustment Programmes) have eroded membership. The creation of a new private sector (a direct result of privatisation) in an economy once dominated by the state has given rise to disputes and tensions between unions organising in 'winning' and 'losing' sectors. Finally, the principle of pluralism, which has been extended from the political sphere to industrial relations, has resulted in the ZCTU losing its monopoly. While domestic and foreign capital have been strengthened by economic liberalisation, labour has definitely lost ground.

These conditions are certainly not unique to Zambia's democratisation, though they may have been expressed there earlier and more strongly. They reveal comparisons and contrasts with South Africa that we cannot afford to ignore, and which should serve to broaden our understanding of what is happening here. We hope that the comparisons made in this review will stimulate debate on key issues facing the labour movement: labour and alliances, tripartism, macro-economic policy,

Zambia

Population:	8,6 million
Area:	750 000 km^2
GDP:	US$3 456-million
GNP ranking:	139th
GNP per capita:	US$210
¹Exports:	Copper, cobalt, zinc, flowers
Imports:	Oil, chemicals, machinery, foodstuffs
Trading partners:	EU, Japan, SA

privatisation and shopfloor and trade union organisation in a liberalised context.

Comparisons between Zambia and South Africa are also appropriate because of the strong historical links between the two countries. These are much more extensive than many realise. Both are part of a region that has been politically and economically integrated for over a century. While there are important differences, both share the legacy of racist and capitalist settler colonial domination; indeed, much of Zambia's domination was engineered and executed from South Africa. Furthermore, in both countries the relationship between national democratic and class politics has always been complex, posing difficult and subtle strategic and tactical choices for unions.

There is also the legacy of unity in the liberation struggle and ties of solidarity between labour movements. The trade unions of both countries share traditions of strong, militant shopfloor unionism and proud resistance to undemocratic regimes. Notwithstanding economic competition between the two countries, both movements now face increasing marginalisation and de-industrialisation in a hostile international economy.

Ten years ago, the authors of the *Bulletin* special edition interviewed Morgan Tsvangirai, then General Secretary of the Southern African Miners' Federation (and now General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions). Tsvangirai said: "We realised that the same...companies operate throughout the region...We realised that we needed to work together against multinational companies...We realised that we needed to pool our resources because we are faced by the same enemy." His words remain true today, and are the motivation behind this present contribution.