

Labour's role in SADC

Koen: What do you consider the major problems of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to be?

Ngcobo: There are many levels of problems. At a contextual level, large parts of Africa represent some of the most disorganised and poorest areas in the world both economically and politically. Its contemporary history has been punctuated with coups, corruption and dictatorship.

In many countries the only booming industry is the parliament and possibly growing products for consumption in the North. The economic conditions caused by the regimes of structural adjustment on the continent are a root cause of this. SADC states are of course not always exceptions to this.

At a SADC governance level I think the status of SADC and the enforcement of decisions taken is questionable. Political and economic unity is not forged on goodwill alone especially where individual egos are allowed to usurp international politics. One of the primary functions of a constitution in a country is to limit the individual ego to balance it with the rights of society.

To be a force for positive change, SADC also needs to govern itself this way. This in itself is no guarantee that the kinds of economic decisions made will be of general benefit, but it is important to

Michael Koen interviews Jabu Ngcobo, Africa's regional secretary for the International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF), about the region and labour's role in SADC.

remove that form of politics so the spotlight can rest on developmental economic thinking.

Any form of governance requires an independent judiciary based on international human and labour rights and concepts of law, with the power to impose a sanction. This is not the case in SADC. Social charters are signed but often violated because there is no enforcement.

The same is the case where countries adopt enlightened legislation but is not worth the paper it is written on. Often national labour laws are there to satisfy clauses in investment protocols such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGO) and that is the end of it. A local business will often be more strictly regulated than a foreign one. This has simply fuelled a race to the bottom in the sub region and poor people have suffered the most.

Lastly, the processes of SADC have not

been transparent to civil society and have tended to be kept in a closed political circle with little input from labour or community. This has not just been because politicians have excluded these formations, but also because these groupings have not had the capacity or voice to ensure a different process is followed.

Koen: You described one of the root causes of conflict in Africa as being economic programmes. Would you say this is applicable to Zimbabwe?

Ngcobo: The current crisis has economic restructuring at its roots. Both Mugabe and the British need to share responsibility, as both have not kept promises they made. Zimbabwe was very progressive until it took loans and instituted [International Monetary Fund] IMF 'advice'. I think the land reform process is a result of tension building up in the country, which is then used as a short-term political tool. That is not to say that land reform is not critical, it is, but it could have started a long time before now. This may have avoided a lot of the conflict we see.

Koen: What solutions do you see?

Ngcobo: At the end of the day it is a democratic question and people should decide. Southern Africa could play a key role in ensuring that people are given a chance to make this decision. This would be a success story for the region. Internally a unified government would perhaps be the best way forward given the economic meltdown facing Zimbabwe.

Koen: Who benefits from SADC?

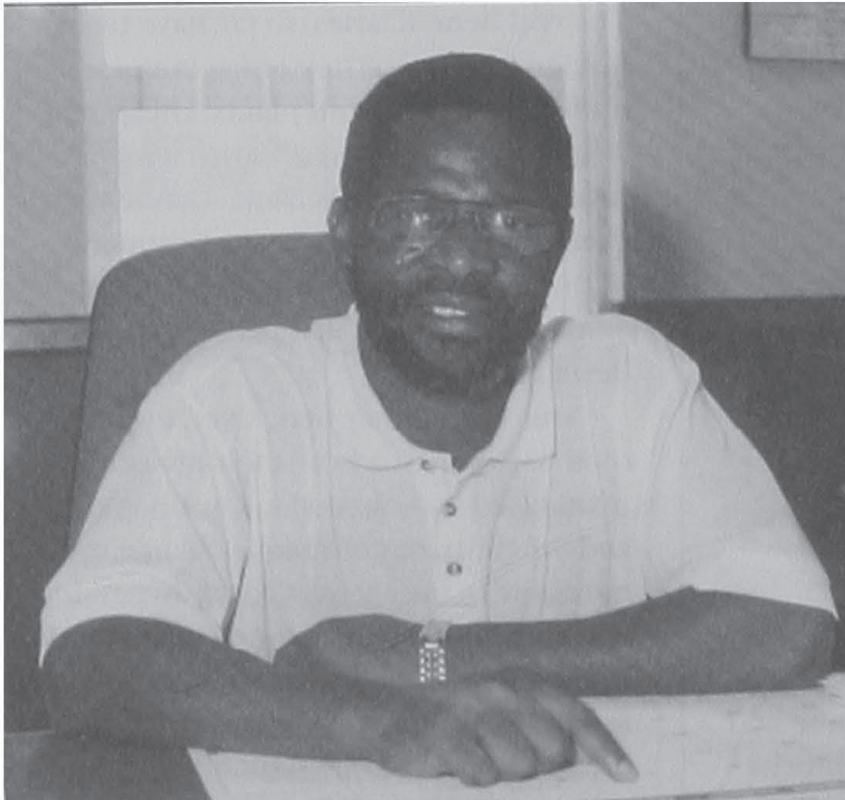
Ngcobo: No one locally as far as I can see besides perhaps the odd corrupt official.

The real beneficiaries, so far, have been foreign investors. They enjoy increased mobility of goods and plants, cheap real wage rates and all sorts of investment incentives from national governments clamoring for a few bits of investment in the hope that this will provide an engine for sustainable economic development.

This has not happened yet. Investors tend to move to where their investment is maximised by concessions or trade deals and when these conditions change they move on. In the interim, local ownership receives little or no encouragement and is frequently more closely monitored than foreign competitors. As goods move into the market of the sub region their ultimate effect is to destroy local businesses. In the clothing sector, the importation and sale of second hand clothing and shoes intended for charity has also hit those who produce for local markets. The International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation has launched a campaign around this issue.

Koen: Turning to the question of unions in the sub region what have your experiences there shown the biggest problems to be?

Ngcobo: The unions in Southern Africa are fraught with problems but what union anywhere in the world is not without its problems. The problems faced by Southern African unions do, however, reflect the economic realities of the North-South divide. Unions in 'developed' economies tend to be well resourced and professionally run but grapple with issues of their own increasing redundancy and irrelevance as the process of global capitalism has bolstered the living conditions of the working class in these countries.



ITGLWF regional secretary Jabu Ngcobo.

Unions in Southern Africa have far more real and severe membership issues to address and hence, a great deal of relevance as instruments of class struggle. However, they are poorly resourced and often badly run. The changing nature of the relationship between unions and their government's has also affected the way they operate.

Koen: Is pumping resources into these unions the answer?

Ngcobo: Unions in South Africa started off without resources, but were very creative in getting the job done despite this. Resources themselves are not a necessity for success. Rather, a critical and clear vision backed by commitment and an actionable plan is key to success.

We need to be practical about things. In many countries the common method of union organisation is that of industrial unionism focused on an industry or sector. The economies of scale are often not

sufficient to support this type of approach and where this is the case there is a strong argument for more general unions such as a manufacturing union, a service sector union etc.

Koen: To what extent has Satucc shaped the SADC agenda and especially in relation to trade issues?

Ngcobo: Satucc itself has a good structure and is strategically well placed but has largely failed to take effective leadership. This is partly a problem of resources and of political will of the different national centres.

Satucc has played a disappointingly small role in shaping the policies developed in SADC as a result of a lack of capacity. This has limited our ability to force a labour agenda into areas where it would often rather not be had. Governments have been quite untransparent around the negotiation of trade deals and protocols and we have not had the organisational capacity to force them to do otherwise.

The financial problems of Satucc have also led to a form of donor dependency that has been aggravated by a lack of a coherent programme. As a result, activities are often determined not by strategic need but by the areas in which funds are available. A programme of action was drawn up in August last year but it would seem little has happened by way of implementation yet.

Michael Koen is based at the Workers College in Durban. Jabu Ngcobo has been a trade unionist since the 1970s and was the former general secretary of Sactuu.