

Playing politics

labour's political role in Zambia

Zambian workers have a long history of political struggle. Twice in 30 years they have forged alliances with opposition political parties to bring democracy to the country.

In 1961 the United Trade Union Congress supported the UNIP in the struggle for independence. Zambian workers became the 'industrial arm of the independence struggle'. However, this relationship was not necessarily in the best interests of workers. It was not long before the UNIP embarked on a campaign to secure the political subordination of the trade union movement.

In 1964 the UNIP passed the *Trade Unions and Disputes Act*, which was to give birth to the ZCTU. Zambia's unions were brought together under one central body.

This was followed in 1971 by a new *Industrial Relations Act*. The Act had a number of consequences:

- It forced unions to affiliate to the ZCTU in order to be able to represent workers
- It gave the ZCTU the right to:
 - ☛ examine the validity of changes to any of its affiliates' constitutions;
 - ☛ insist that affiliates consult with leaders of the ZCTU before going on strike.
- It instituted lengthy arbitration procedures which effectively made strikes illegal.
- It created party committees at shopfloor level, the function of which was to create awareness of 'national economic interests'. The intention of these

The ZCTU's main goal is to defend workers' economic interests. Its political interventions are directed towards this end. Karl Gostner warns that the federation is in danger of becoming a rubber stamp for the state's agenda.

structures was to persuade workers to sacrifice their own interests for the 'national good'.

This legislation provided the government with tools with which to control the ZCTU. Workers did not accept these changes lying down. In 1973 the Guards Union of Zambia (GUZ) embarked on a recognition strike in the Copperbelt. This led to the majority of the union's membership being arrested. The strike, which was one of a number of similar actions, indicates the growing tension between the ZCTU and the UNIP.

Also in 1973, the *Chona Commission* recommended that the ZCTU become part of the UNIP. This would mean that in order to hold union office one had to be a member of the UNIP. The ZCTU protested against this suggestion and it was dropped. Nonetheless, the ZCTU's leadership now had to attend the UNIP's National Council meetings.

In 1981 the Zambian Parliament passed the *Local Government Act*. The provisions of the Act meant that local officials would not be elected by people living in an area but would be appointed by the party. The ZCTU contested the Act on the grounds that it would undermine the provision of services at local level.

When the federation launched protests against the Bill, a number of trade unionists were expelled from the UNIP. In terms of the new law, this meant that they could no longer hold office in their unions. A strike by 50 000 members of the Mineworkers Union forced the government to capitulate. Most of the provisions of the new act were dropped and the unionists who had been expelled from the party continued with their union work.

Shopfloor power

The success with which Zambian workers resisted the UNIP's attempts to undermine democracy rests very much on the presence of strong shopfloor structures. The Zambian trade union movement, like COSATU, grew out of struggles at the rockface.

Shopstewards represent workers at each workplace and national leadership are elected by the shopstewards. The strength of shopfloor structures ensured that, when the UNIP threatened ZCTU leadership, workers were able to take action.

Economic restructuring

From the mid 1970s, the Zambian economy was being restructured according to an IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The SAP created incredible hardships for the majority of Zambians.

In December 1986, in keeping with IMF conditions, the government abolished subsidies on maize meal. This led to widespread protests by both workers and the broader community. Eventually the government restored the subsidies. This did

not, however, signal the end of the SAP. Between 5 February and 30 April 1987, Zambian workers embarked on a series of strikes to demand wage increases. Protests against the SAP, which were spearheaded by the ZCTU, continued until 1990.

In 1972 Kaunda's government had banned all opposition parties. This made it wellnigh impossible to organise effective political opposition to the UNIP. The ZCTU realised that if it were to stand any chance of achieving its goal of meaningful economic development there had to be a change in the political order. It launched a campaign for a return to multi-party democracy.

While Kaunda called the campaign "a joke" the international community lent strong support. In July 1990 the ban on opposition parties was lifted. The ZCTU called the Garden Court Conference where people from all walks of life came together to form the MMD.

In February 1991, Frederick Chiluba, the then General Secretary of the ZCTU, was elected as head of the MMD. On 25 October 1991 the MMD became Zambia's new ruling party and Chiluba became president.

Liberalisation

The MMD forged full-steam ahead with a process of economic liberalisation. Zambia has now replaced Ghana as the World Bank's shining example for Africa.

Liberalisation has had a severe effect on the Zambian working class. Essential foods have become extremely expensive and inflation has rocketed. Subsidies on staple foods have been removed and marketing has been privatised. In 1991 a 25kg bag of millic meal cost 250 kwachas. In 1996 this same bag cost 18 000 kwachas, an increase of 720%.

Over the same period, the value of the kwacha has declined by 325%. Zambian workers' wages last them only three or four days of every month.

Privatisation and the SAP have resulted in many job losses. Since 1991, at least 69 companies have closed in the Livingstone area alone, mainly in the textile sector. Retrenchments have led to a major drop in union membership and to a growth in the informal sector.

The MMD promised that the money saved by removing subsidies would be used to improve social services, but these promises have not been kept. The government has moved onto a 'cash budget'. This means that it does not run a deficit and is unable to pay for day-to-day running expenses.

While large-scale retrenchments continue to be the order of the day, government is unable to pay the severance packages it offers workers. In some instances retrenched public sector workers have waited more than six months for their money.

ZCTU General Secretary, Alec Chirwa, is bitter about the changes: "We accepted SAP because we saw a need to turn the economy around. We were willing to sacrifice, but ordinary people continue to sacrifice while managers are not sacrificing. They are milking the cow even harder. Why should sacrifice be confined to the poor? Those who say we should tighten our belts are loosening theirs!"

Fragmentation

Liberalisation has also caused a split in the ZCTU, with five 'rebel unions' as they are referred to by Zambian commentators,

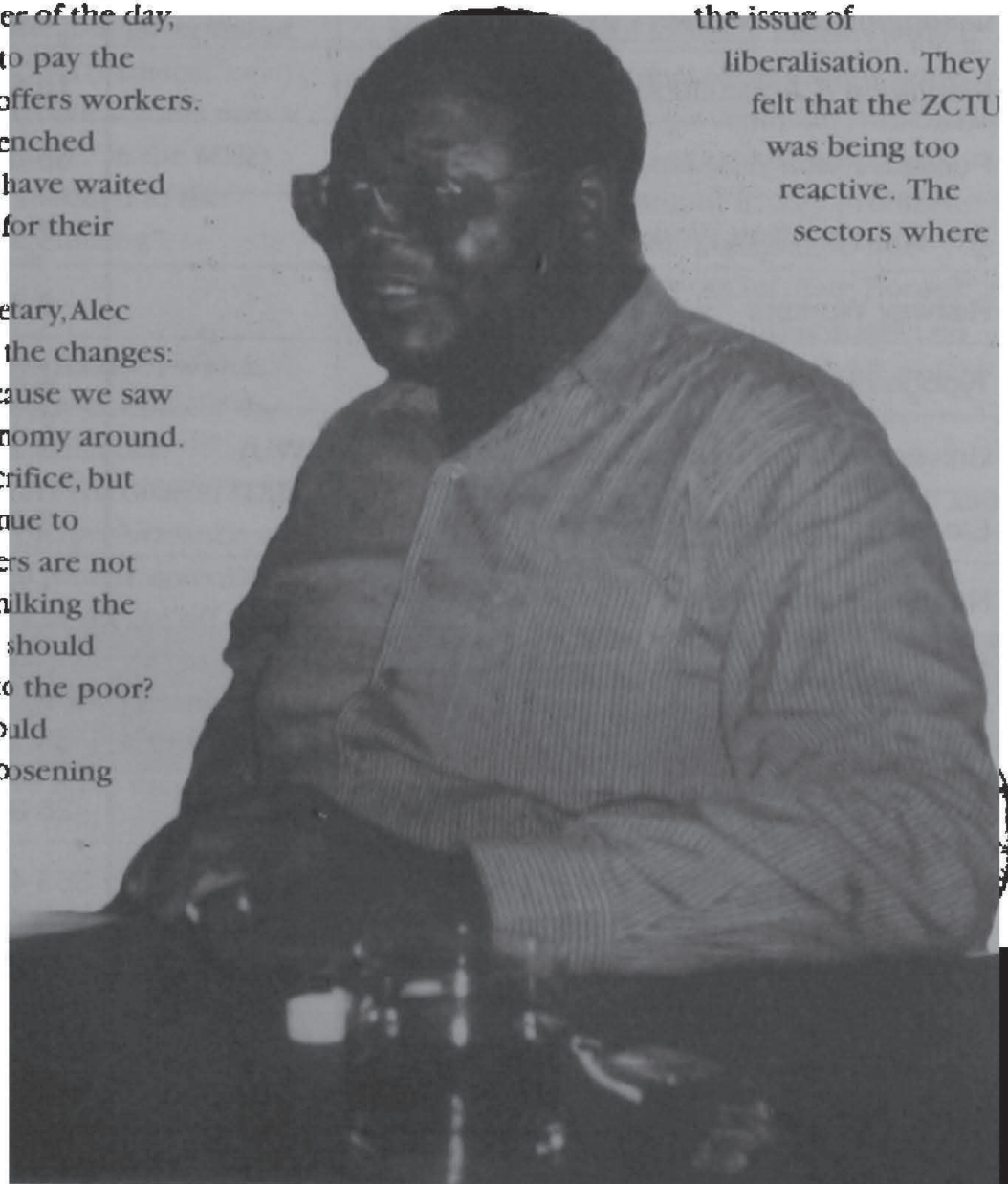
breaking away at the 1994 ZCTU congress. The unions - the ZNUT (teachers), the MUZ (mineworkers), the NUCIW (commercial and industrial workers), the ZUFIAW (financial institutions) and the NUBEGW (building and engineering workers) represent 40% of organised labour in Zambia.

The relationship between the ZCTU and the MMD

The key reason for the split was that these unions represent workers who will bear the full brunt of economic restructuring.

Accordingly, they wanted to develop a proactive approach to the issue of

liberalisation. They felt that the ZCTU was being too reactive. The sectors where



ZCTU General Secretary, Alec Chirwa.

ZCTU affiliates and membership

AFFILIATE AND SECTOR	1990	1994
Airways and Allied Workers (AAWU)	8 558	3 010
Civil Servants (CSUZ)	28 000	29 000
Guards (GUZ)	13 000	8 000
Hotel & Catering Workers (HCWU)	7 000	9 693
Mineworkers (MUZ)	58 808	52 058
Building Engineering and General Workers (NUBEGW)	25 000	14 310
Commercial & Industrial Workers (NUCIW)	27 000	26 000
Communication Workers (NUCW)	6 319	6 494
Plantation & Agricultural Workers (NUPAW)	16 674	18 332
Public Service Workers (NUPSW)	65 000	35 000
Transport & Allied Workers (NUTAW)	7 392	7 896
Railway Workers (RWUZ)	8 858	8 501
Typographical Workers (ZTWU)	1 219	2 500
University of Zambia & Allied Workers (UNZAAWU)	2 794	5 074
Electricity and Allied Workers (ZEAWU)	3 850	3 600
Health & Allied Workers (ZNUHAW)	1 219	3 030
Teachers (ZNUT)	36 000	40 000
Financial Institutions and Allied Workers (ZUFIAW)	11 754	10 116
United Local Authorities Workers (ZULAWU)	25 000	22 000
Total Membership	353 445	304 614
Losses due to disaffiliations		142 484
Losses due to retrenchment		38 346
ZCTU Membership 1994		162 130

(Shading indicates "dissident" unions) Source: E. Akwetey, "Dilemmas of Labour Regime Reform in Zambia," unpublished paper, 1996.

they organise have recently seen the growth of splinter unions. A section of the finance union, for example, has broken away to reaffiliate to the ZCTU. Liberalisation has therefore led a weakening of labour solidarity and a fragmentation of the union movement.

Influencing government?

Understandably, the ZCTU's relations with the MMD have not always been cordial. While many in the ZCTU assumed that labour would be assured of a privileged position once the MMD took power, labour leaders have difficulty in even getting to speak to the president. Consultations have taken place on some issues, but government has by and large ignored ZCTU advice. Chirwa says that the ex-labour leaders now occupying positions of power in the MMD government have been "subdued to the capitalist-oriented way of thinking".

Workers' Charter

In the run-up to the 1991 elections which brought the MMD to power, sections of the ZCTU proposed that the federation formulate and adopt a Workers' Charter. This would be used to judge the performance of both the government and former unionists like Chiluba. The Charter never got off the ground, with the result that labour has no tools with which to engage the process of economic liberalisation. It also means that former unionists are free to act as they please.

Alliances

Unlike COSATU's relationship with the ANC, there has never been a formal alliance between the ZCTU and the MMD. The unions were also never in alliance with the UNIP, despite the latter's attempts to force them into such a relationship.

Instead, the Zambian labour movement has engaged in electoral alliances. An office-bearer of the Guards Union explains the

reason for this: "We don't want to play politics, we want to play industrial politics." In other words, while the ZCTU will engage in national political issues, its primary focus is the economy. The federation takes part in political processes in order to defend workers' economic interests.

Industrial politics

This political struggle is of critical importance because, notwithstanding the protestation of IMF economists to the contrary, economic liberalisation is a politically driven project rather than simply the result of the 'logic of the market'.

The ZCTU has adopted two main strategies to make its voice heard. Firstly, it has relied on personal relationships with former unionists in government, particularly with the President. As an official of the Mineworkers' Union put it: "Any problem that we have, we don't hesitate to be knocking on those doors [of State House]." Secondly the ZCTU has representation on three bodies dealing with economic policy and its implementation. These are the Tripartite Consultative Labour Council (TCLC), the Economic Advisory Council and the Board of the Zambian Privatisation Agency (ZPA).

As in South Africa, Zambia's democratisation gave birth to a new tripartite institution. The TCLC consists of representatives of government, business and the ZCTU, with each entitled to an equal vote.

The similarity stops there. Unlike Nedlac, the TCLC has no permanent secretariat. Nor does it have any statutory right to review legislation. Its role is merely 'advisory' and its decisions are not binding. It meets at the convenience of the Minister of Labour - who has been identified as one of the most anti-labour members of Chiluba's government. In 1996 it met only once. A top official of the Ministry of Finance referred to it as "that consultative body where once a



The ZCTU is represented on the board of the ZPA.

year government informs labour of decisions that have already been taken”.

Nonetheless, the ZCTU has not entirely written off the TCLC. Chirwa says they are lobbying with business to revise the structure: “We don’t want it to be advisory. We want it to make binding decisions. We want a calendar of normal meetings to be set at the beginning of the year...our proposals are likely to be accepted. Business supports our decision, so the vote is two to one. We have also captured many MPs who support this position.”

The Economic Advisory Council (EAC), in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance, formulates privatisation policy which is then implemented by the ZPA. The EAC is a multipartite body in which labour is just one voice amongst many. Whilst labour has a seat on the ZPA’s board, unions do not have an automatic right to be consulted over the way in which privatisation impacts at enterprise level.

Lessons

The Zambian experience demonstrates the danger of labour engaging with the state on the basis of personal relationships. There have been no meaningful gains for workers.

The reliance on personal links runs the risk of legitimating the actions of a state that is attacking the working class.

Zambian policy-making bodies have very little legislative power. They are loosely constituted and have very little power with which to influence the formulation of policy. Even if this situation was to be changed, it is questionable whether it would make any difference, given the uncritical support of labour leadership for privatisation.

ZCTU leaders argue that privatisation is the only way

forward for the Zambian economy. However, they have no clear policy on how to deal with the effects of these policies on workers. If labour is to engage effectively on policy-making bodies it must do so on the basis of a clearly formulated agenda. Otherwise, it runs the risk of being no more than a rubber-stamp for the state’s agenda.

The final word comes from an executive member of the Mineworkers’ Union, who said: “The ZCTU was the only voice of dissent. Then we gave birth to this baby, the MMD, and then we fell asleep again and kept quiet.” If labour is to ensure that its interests are represented it needs to be wide awake and make enough noise so that governments are forced to listen to it.

References

Rakner, E (1992), *Trade Unions In Processes of Democratisation: A Study of Party Labour Relations in Zambia*. Bergen: Cbr Michelsen Institute.

Karl Gostner is a SWOP research associate. His is presently employed by Labour Market Alternatives. He writes in his personal capacity. Thanks to Jenny Parsley for material based on her interview with Alec Chirwa, the ZCTU General Secretary.