

# The art of the possible

## *labour's role in change*

**H**ow many times has the liberation movement worked together with workers, and at the moment of victory betrayed the workers? There are many examples of that in the world. It is only if the workers strengthen their organisation before and after liberation... if you relax your vigilance, you will find that your sacrifices have been in vain... (Nelson Mandela speaking at the 1993 COSATU Special Congress)

The role of the labour movement in economic and political transformation is one of the main points of debate in Southern Africa, not least in Zimbabwe. This is largely because the movement has become a central actor in the developmental and political processes of the region. The story of democratic change in Zimbabwe and South Africa would be incomplete without the pivotal roles played by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and COSATU. An account of political liberalisation in Zambia in the 1990s would highlight the important role of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU of Zambia). The labour movement spearheads the struggle for democracy in Swaziland. It is, therefore, opportune to review the main currents of the debate about the role of the labour movement in economic and political change. This article will focus on this and the problems and prospects of

*Lloyd Sachikonye reviews the debates about the role of labour movements in economic and political change, focusing on Southern Africa.*

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Zimbabwe's labour movement.

There are three major issues in the debate:

- the autonomy of the labour movement in its relations with the state, and its role in democratic change;
- the structural context in which the movement seeks or consolidates its autonomy and contributes to democratic change;
- the global and regional context in which the movement seeks to bring change.

### **The state and the labour movement**

The autonomy of the labour movement lies at the heart of the relationship between the state and civil society. (Keane, 1988; Beckman, 1993) Are the state and civil society completely separate or do they penetrate each other? If there is some interpenetration, what is the ideal relationship between the state, political parties and the labour movement? These questions are posed in examining the

relationship between the state and labour movement.

In Zimbabwe, the discussion has focused on the dynamics and different phases of the state-labour relationship. (Sachikonye, 1986, Wood, 1987, Tengende, 1991) The autonomy of the ZCTU was extremely limited in the first six years of independence. Its subordination to the state was a prominent feature of the relationship. This contrasts with the relations between the labour movement and the state in Zambia, and between COSATU and the South African state. The different historical and political contexts in Zambia and South Africa explain why relations between the state and the labour movement have developed differently in the two countries. (Akwetey, 1994; Marais, 1998; Gall, 1998) This does not mean there were no attempts to subordinate the labour movement to the state. There were unsuccessful strategies to transform the ZCTU of Zambia into one of the mass organisations under the tutelage of the former ruling party, Unip. (Nordland, 1996) In South Africa, pressure continues to be applied on COSATU to bend to the will of the ANC, particularly on economic policy. (Adler and Webster, 1996)

Although the Zimbabwean labour movement enjoyed substantial autonomy in the 1990s, the issue has resurfaced with respect to the relationship between it and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Tandon, 1999, Raftopoulos, 2000)

### **The autonomy of labour**

The literature on the autonomy of the labour movement tends to argue that autonomy is desirable and should be jealously guarded. Most nationalist and liberation movements subordinated, and even fragmented, labour movements in order to neutralise their potential as a

political force. Not many governments and ruling parties want strong labour movements. This means that the unions must continuously assert their interests at both economic and political levels. They have to assert themselves in increasingly difficult economic and social conditions, including neo-liberal economic programmes that lead to de-industrialisation, retrenchments and the erosion of labour standards.

Governments and ruling parties frequently denounce trade unions that make political interventions for their 'political ambitions'. This is inevitable. The rivalry, potential or actual, represented by powerful trade unions makes a strong impression on government and ruling party leaders, including those in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. (Marais, 1998, Alexander, 2000)

When economic policies prove unpopular and unsuccessful, the most vocal critic is often the labour movement. Much the same applies when social policies go awry, or when authoritarian and despotic tendencies develop. The focal point of opposition in civil society to authoritarianism and mistaken economic policies is usually organised labour. This was the case in Zambia, when unions resisted first Kenneth Kaunda's regime, and more recently the government of Frederick Chiluba. COSATU has opposed certain ANC policies, and the ZCTU those of Robert Mugabe's government. The role of labour movements as central actors in democratic change stems from their broader role in society. More than most other organisations, they have the capacity to bring together economic, social and political struggles into a broad democratic movement. This is not an automatic process. It takes skills, experience and time to weave the various concerns, pressures and aspirations in civil society



into an alliance that can develop a credible and broad-based political programme.

### **The context**

The national context of such an alliance is an important factor in the democratic transformation of a society. In the Zambian context, the major goal was to move from a one-party to a multiparty state, while in Zimbabwe it is to mount an electoral challenge to an increasingly authoritarian regime. In South Africa, the possibility is growing that COSATU could become the focal point for civil society organisations and political forces disgruntled with the economic and social policies of the ANC government. However, democratic change must go beyond electing a new government, vital though this is.

The structural and global contexts are equally important in shaping the strategies of labour movements, and more broadly, the prospects for democratic change. Structural conditions include the ownership, control and state of the economy, and the level of integration of the national economy into the regional and global economies. Furthermore, the structure of the alliance led by the labour movement in the quest for economic and political change is of decisive importance. In most cases, it is a motley alliance of business interests, middle-class professionals, and student, youth and women's organisations. There is no guarantee that the economic and political agenda adopted will be principally that of the labour movement.

Whatever agenda emerges from the labour-led alliance is subject to structural conditions, particularly the economic framework. (Szefiel, 1992; Bond, 2000) The prevailing framework is a neo-liberal one prescribed by international finance capital. In the case of Zambia and Zimbabwe, the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund (IMF) have played a key role in enforcing the standard conditionalities of economic adjustment. In the case of South Africa, international finance capital and domestic capital have promoted a tough macroeconomic framework that is not very different from the typical structural adjustment programme.

Unions have to address a situation where countries are locked into economic programmes that are largely anti-labour. Their dilemma is how to re-define the national frameworks and broader structural and global framework in which economic and social policies are made and implemented. (ZCTU, 1996; Peros, 2000) This was the dilemma of the Zambian labour movement in the 1990s. (Kibble, 1992) The union-backed MDC will inherit a formidable problem if it wins political power in Zimbabwe. The structural factor is already the source of tension between COSATU and the ANC government.

### **The nature of the alliance**

A clue as to how the structural and global factors can be addressed lies in the political alliance woven and led by the labour movement. (Keek, 1992) The balance of power between the various classes joining forces in the alliance is crucial. If the labour movement does not have the upper hand, as was the case in Zambia, there will be little resistance to the adoption of a neo-liberal programme. In other words, there will be no break from the socioeconomic programmes of the previous government, and little change in the social conditions of the mass of the people. At present, it appears that organised labour faces an uphill task in asserting its agenda within the MDC and the ANC. It is a question of hegemony. How to make their agenda hegemonic in the alliances in which they are engaged is a formidable challenge. Unless they



*Organised labour face an uphill task in asserting its agenda within the ANC.*

succeed in asserting their hegemony, they will not be able to re-order the political and economic framework in a fundamental way.

### **The case of Zimbabwe**

For the Zimbabwean labour movement to win and consolidate its autonomy was not a simple matter. Having set the stage for a viable opposition movement in the form of the MDC, the issues of autonomy and the balance of power in the party quickly resurfaced. Other key issues were the social and economic agenda of the MDC alliance, which is, not surprisingly, ambiguous. How the MDC will address structural and global factors in its agenda will be a critical test for the labour movement, as will the question of whether its agenda will be displaced. The dilemma is that in seeking hegemony, the labour movement will have to accept and bring together the interests and aspirations of other classes and groups, some of which are powerful in Zimbabwe. It will have to outgrow its working-class origins. Its agenda and ideology will have to compete

and co-exist with those of organised business, professional associations and other civil society organisations which make up its membership. It will need skilful and innovative leadership to formulate that agenda and ideology, and to keep the alliance intact in the build-up to the 2002 elections and beyond.

To sum up, labour-backed alliances face formidable obstacles in bringing about significant economic and political change. The experience of the trade unions in Zambia illustrates this. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, economic transformation has stagnated and ruling parties continue to suffer setbacks. The structural and global framework hampers both governments and trade union movements seeking to transform society. This could easily lead to pessimism and resignation.

It has been said that 'politics is the art of the possible'. Yet politics can also be the art of making possible what seemed at first impossible. It took the Zimbabwean labour movement less than a year to mould a political alliance that won almost half the directly elected seats in the 2000





*Democratic change is not just about electing a new government.*

parliamentary election. There are still reasonable prospects that this alliance will win the 2002 presidential election and bring about decisive political change in Zimbabwe. Such a transformation would lay the foundation for the more arduous and long-term task of economic change.

South Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela, may have been more far-sighted than he knew when he warned the trade unions about the dangers of betrayal by liberation movements. When he stepped down in 1999, economic transformation showed signs of stalling, and there was a backlash from unions in South Africa. There is much that labour movements need to share in devising strategies for economic transformation, which is the only guarantee of consolidating democratic change. ★

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