

# Trade unions in Africa:

## some reflections

Numsa



Outside of East and Southern Africa trade unions on the continent are still struggling to get to their feet. **Bethuel Maserumule** looks at current efforts to strengthen African trade unions.

### AFRICAN CONTEXT

Trade unions in Africa are weak as a result of both external and internal factors. The formal economy in most African countries is very small, forcing multitudes of people into unemployment and/or survivalist activities in subsistence and informal economic sectors. Unemployment in countries across Africa goes up to 40% even by conservative estimates. The non-formal sectors of the economy account for 80% of the labour force, with the remaining 20% located in the predominantly commodity-based formal sector. Reorganisation of work has resulted in the growth of various forms of vulnerable employment. This difficult economic environment has not been conducive to the emergence of sustainable trade union organisations.

On the other hand, the political environment has been characterised by constant violation or denial of trade union rights, political interference in the affairs of unions and suppression and hostile treatment of unions by ruling elites. As a result of these developments

a very weak and fragmented union movement has emerged without significant social power to assert its influence and with limited capacity to significantly improve the employment conditions of workers.

It is estimated that not more than 10% to 12% of workers are organised in the trade union movement in Africa. Those most in need of union protection – young, migrant, women and other vulnerable categories of workers – are outside of the unions. Also within the established unions there are limits with regard to financial sustainability, involvement of the rank and file in union affairs and limits also in terms of strategic capacity, strategic planning and mobilisation.

Yet despite their weaknesses unions still pose a huge challenge to Africa's ruling elites, and emerge as a relatively better structured voice regarding rights of workers and citizens. Unions have performed the role of representing the interests of workers and the broader society either alone, in partnership with other groups within civil society and

established political parties, or by forming labour-type political parties.

It is suggested that the situation of unions in Africa could improve with the migration from the unsustainable extractive industries inherited from the colonial era, towards sustainable and diverse forms of development guaranteeing job-rich inclusive growth.

### STATE OF AFRICAN UNIONS

There are two regional trade union organisations in Africa – the Africa Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (Oatuu). ITUC-Africa consists of about 90 national centres with a declared membership of 16-million. Oatuu has 62 affiliated national centres and claims a membership of 20-million. Oatuu has relations with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, among others. There is a huge overlap in affiliated national centres between the two

organisations. They share 50 affiliates from 45 countries. Thereafter ITUC-Africa has 38 other affiliates who are not members of Oatuu, while Oatuu has 12 affiliates who are not members of ITUC-Africa.

Since 2011 important steps were taken to establish and improve on the cooperation between ITUC-Africa and Oatuu. Regular meetings have been held to exchange information, joint programmes are undertaken and the two organisations work together in engaging within the organs and structures of the African Union. The two organisations share the common objective of ensuring that labour views are included in continental political and economic integration.

The situation within ITUC-Africa has improved significantly since the election of a new leadership, which has positioned the organisation properly around international, continental and national worker and social struggles. The role of the new leadership has been strengthened by the strategic input of the tri-lateral coalition bringing together the National Labour Council of Nigeria, TUC of Ghana and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The tri-lateral cooperation – which can be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of COTU from Kenya which plays a dynamic role in East Africa, has become an important source of strategic ideas on how to strengthen the union movement on the continent.

#### UNIONS AT SUB-REGIONAL LEVELS

The situation of unions in Africa has induced both ITUC-Africa and Oatuu to value the role of sub-regional trade union formations. Currently there are two active sub-regional trade union structures – the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) and the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (Satucc). EATUC and Satucc represent the voice and interests of unions and workers within their respective inter-governmental

structures – the EAC in the case of EATUC and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) in the case of Satucc. The main objective of these sub-regional structures is to express labour views so as to influence regional integration and coordinate trade union cooperation and solidarity across countries in the sub-regions.

Trade union engagement with regional integration is relatively more advanced in the SADC region where Satucc is formally recognised and there are formal arrangements for regional social dialogue. Satucc has already scored major gains such as the SADC Social Charter, SADC Decent Work Agenda, and SADC codes of good practice on matters like HIV and AIDS, occupational health and safety, etc.

Satucc is now actively involved in regional discussions to formulate a SADC regional employment policy. In contrast the situation in East Africa is still lagging behind. While the EAC recognises the EATUC and invites the unions to EAC activities, there are not yet formal tripartite arrangements as practiced within SADC. Another important issue relates to divergent concepts of regionalism embraced by Satucc and EATUC.

Satucc believes in state-driven development and is vocal against a neo-liberal policy framework associated with structural adjustment programmes introduced by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s. The pro-market framework emphasised liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation, which resulted in rapid de-industrialisation and reduced state expenditure, leaving multitudes of people unemployed and poor.

EATUC, on the other hand, embraces private sector-driven regionalism, ostensible because of experiences with failure of states and weak political leadership, which left the private sector as the stronger force to drive development.

There are stronger unions in West Africa (such as in Ghana and

Nigeria), Central Africa and North Africa, but sub-regional trade union structures have not yet developed to similar levels as in East and Southern Africa. Also trade union engagement with inter-governmental processes in these regions is still far behind.

#### UNIONS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Trade unions in various countries have been affected by serious levels of underdevelopment, politics and lack of effective organising strategies. There has also been a problem of fragmentation of unions in almost all countries. There are pockets and islands of better union organisation in only a very few cases where some levels of industrialisation have been achieved. These include countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. Unions from these countries play an active role in their respective regions where they operate as useful anchors of the sub-regional union structures.

South African unions have also been playing an active role in facilitating continental and sub-continental union cooperation and solidarity, especially around South African multinational corporations (MNCs) which have been expanding their operations rapidly into different parts of the continent.

Social and political campaigns are undertaken by trade unions from time to time. Trade unions play a key role in struggles for democracy in Swaziland, Zimbabwe and some parts of North Africa. Unions have also been active in campaigns around social issues – such as fuel price increases in Nigeria, food price increases in Mozambique, tolling of main roads in South Africa, etc. Militant living wage struggles are very common – wage strikes have been undertaken recently in countries like Lesotho (especially in the low-wage clothing and textile industries which grew rapidly as a result of the benefits of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Kenya (in the tea plantations), Botswana (in the public

services) and in South Africa (in the mining and farming sectors).

While the wage strikes in Botswana, Kenya and Lesotho were led by established unions, the recent situation in mining and farming in South Africa has been different. In these cases the strikes have been coordinated by non-unionised committees as workers voiced dissatisfaction with the role of established unions. There was also the role of radical left non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements which supported the striking workers to raise the political profile of the strikes and highlight the historical injustices associated with the mining and farming sectors. The phenomenon of worker strike activity without established unions has raised questions regarding the distance between unions and their membership base, as well as the quality of representation offered to workers by unions.

### GUFs IN AFRICA

Global Union Federations (GUFs) run programmes in Africa to strengthen the capacity of unions. Some of the key activities of the GUFs in Africa are:

- Programmes aimed at the regulation of practices of multinational corporations: UNI and IndustriALL have been leading efforts to regulate the behaviour of MNCs from SA through building regional trade union networks around the companies, signing Global Framework Agreement (GFAs) and coordinating cross-border union solidarity actions.
- Programmes to improve on the movement-oriented character of trade unions: BWI ran an impressive campaign with construction sector unions around the soccer World Cup in SA in 2010. The campaign knitted together recruitment, education, research, bargaining and mobilisation dimensions of

union organising function into a single dynamic campaign that scored major gains for workers around this big international event.

- Engaging with regional/national sector policies: IndustriALL has embarked on a project to build a sub-regional trade union platform around energy supply and policy within SADC. IndustriALL has also initiated a discussion on the transformation of Africa's extractive economy and the transition towards sustainable development. On the other hand the Public Service International (PSI) is leading campaigns to locate quality tax-funded public services as central pillars of vibrant economies and societies.
- Coordination among the GUFs: to share information and exchange strategies around good organising practices, the GUFs in Africa have formed the GUF Forum which is also attended by ITUC-Africa, sub-regional trade union structures such as Satucc and EATUC, representatives of labour research bodies and trade union solidarity support organisations such as FES, Solidarity Centre, SASK, FNV, etc. At the heart of the discussions is the need to develop a common understanding of the African trade union landscape and agree on key elements of strategic trade union work in Africa.


These and other activities of GUFs promise to go a long way in strengthening trade unions and enhancing their role in the workplace and broader society.

### CONCLUSION

The underdeveloped state of African economies, largely due to the legacy of colonialism and failure of leadership contributed strongly to the emergence of a weak trade union movement on the continent. Lack of effective organising strategies has added

to the weaknesses, while the impact of politics on unions contributed to the problem of fragmentation. However, despite the constraining economic and political environment, African trade unions made important strides in representing the interests of workers and citizens.

In order to strengthen unions in Africa the GUF Forum has identified the following areas of work:

- Enhanced focus on *organising*, with particular focus on young, women, migrant and other vulnerable categories of workers. Successful models and strategies of organising must be shared.
- Enhanced union role in *campaigning and mobilisation* around key union and social issues, in alliance with other progressive social actors. The idea is to bring 'movement' back into labour in order to revive the labour movement.
- Improving on *internal union democracy and accountability* and *ensuring proper servicing of members*.
- Strengthening union role in inter-state processes of regional integration and *economic transformation*.
- Advancing and deepening the culture and practice of cross-border cooperation and *solidarity*. The GUFs have been leading important cross-border activities around MNCs, while trade unions in South Africa are leading solidarity efforts in support of political struggles in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Palestine, Western Sahara, etc. These are important initiatives which need to be strengthened. 

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