

Unions and political parties in Africa

New alliances, strategies and partnerships

Trade unions in Africa have a long tradition of political engagement. **Eddie Webster** explores the changing relationship between unions and political parties through a comparative study of developments in eight African countries.

The long tradition of political engagement by unions in Africa began with their involvement in the anti-colonial movements through to present day struggles for democracy. Their historical engagement in politics has been divided into three phases.

- The first phase was marked by a common struggle against colonialism where close ties were developed between unions and the national liberation movements. Unions, while being important actors, usually played the role of junior partners to political parties, without developing an autonomous

social agenda outside and beyond the struggle for political independence.

- The second phase begins with independence and the introduction of state-led projects which rapidly expanded public sector jobs. During this phase formal union rights were often protected in theory but in practice unions were subordinated to dominant parties, losing an autonomous capacity to intervene politically. Unions were expected to play a dualistic role of both aiding overall national development and representing the job interests of their members. The argument for this reversal of the primary role of unions to be developmental rather than representational was based on the government belief that trade unions only represent a proportion of the labour force of these countries.
- A third phase of market regulation began in the 90s. Faced by widespread state indebtedness, governments came under pressure from the international financial institutions to adjust their budgets in line with the neo-liberal orthodoxy of fiscal austerity. Widespread job losses took place under these Structural Adjustment Programmes and most unions sought to disengage from the state-corporatist order which seemed to have lost its capacity to deliver. As unions began to resist retrenchments, wage cuts, privatisation and deteriorating

social services, the labour movement emerged as a significant opponent of the one-party state that had come to characterise post-colonial Africa. Hence, despite their weaknesses African unions are often feared by post-colonial states because they have challenged authoritarian governments.

In studying the changing relationship between labour movements and political parties in different parts of Africa (South Africa, Uganda, Egypt, Senegal, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Nigeria), the following issues were explored:

- How can unions advance their political influence while simultaneously protecting their autonomy?
- How successful have unions been in advancing autonomy and influence when they are closely allied to national political parties?
- Are alternative ways of influencing politics emerging?

FINDINGS

The country studies revealed that despite a trend towards a 'loosening' of union-party alliances, considerable variation occurred across the countries with respect to both the extent and the nature of the relationship between unions and politics. While the proportion of the population in formal wage employment remains small and diminishing, unions remain a political force to be reckoned with. Unlike advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their membership base and



strategic location in the economy, especially in transport and key public services, gives them the capacity to mobilise and disrupt on a country-wide basis. Also, unlike advocacy groups, unions are not issue based. As a result organised labour is capable of offering voice and leadership to a wide range of popular forces. This does not mean that unions are surrogate political parties, nor is labour necessarily capable of building a parliamentary constituency of its own. Instead, the combination of global forces and internal struggles in post-colonial Africa, are leading to a reconceptualisation of labour's historic relationship with governing political parties opening up opportunities for new alliances, strategies and partnerships. This reconfiguration of union-party relationships is illustrated in the following approaches:

- ***The traditional client model***

Being historically part of the nationalist camp, many unions continue to be closely allied to nationalist political parties. Both Senegal and Egypt fall into this category. In Senegal each party on the 'Left' has had its own affiliated unions, although the defeat of the ruling Socialist Party during the 2000 elections accelerated a move towards greater union autonomy. In Senegal intense debates have emerged within the labour movement around how best to influence government policy: Should they fight from a basis of greater union unity and autonomy or should they seek party political alliances to

ensure better access to policy makers? In some cases, as in Egypt, unions remain incorporated into authoritarian ruling party structures, deprived of both autonomy and influence. Evidence has emerged that this 'model' has led to workers' grievances and concerns being expressed at enterprise level resulting in informal stoppages and the emergence of networks of activists alongside the official structures.

- ***Divorce from the nationalist alliance and formation of an oppositional labour party***

To some the formation of a 'Labour Party' directly linked to the union movement is assumed to be the 'natural' means by which unions can influence politics, not the least in view of the European experience of a strong link between social democratic and communist parties and the organised labour movement. However, the case studies reveal that the African experience is different. Attempts by labour to form a political party have taken place in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Zambia, but they have not led to enduring relationships, neither has the state been willing to tolerate such a relationship. Unions in Zimbabwe are a case in point. Although instrumental in the formation in 1999 of the oppositional Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) is not part of it. The multi-class basis of the MDC is reflected in its ideological

outlook which is largely supportive of liberalisation of the economy. The Zimbabwean government has sought to undermine the ZCTU through arresting, detaining and harassing its leadership, as well as by encouraging and funding rival 'suitcase unions'. In spite of hostility to the ZCTU, the federation remains committed to social dialogue through participation in the Tripartite Negotiating Forum in an attempt to stabilise society and the economy (see pg 50). The challenge facing the ZCTU is to balance this dual agenda of defending itself against violent harassment and intimidation while trying to seek social dialogue with employers and government. In Nigeria, a long tradition of union political involvement has generated a succession of unsuccessful 'Labour Parties'. Since the return of civil rule in 1999, repeated confrontations with the state have occurred, where the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has demonstrated a wide popular following, especially over the pricing of local petroleum products. It has failed, however, to transform its undoubted political clout into effective parliamentary involvement.

- ***Unbappy marriage where labour retains an uneasy alliance with the governing party***

In the South African case the leading union federation, the Congress of South African Trade



Unions (Cosatu), is aligned to the ruling party, but retains considerable autonomy and influence. Contrary to constant speculation that this alliance is about to break up, research among Cosatu members revealed their continued support for the alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Although Cosatu is in a uniquely strong position in the continent, it does share similar problems to unions in the rest of Africa in terms of the growing informalisation of work and the fact that a union-backed government came to power and implemented neo-liberal economic and social policies. In Uganda the trade union leadership retain an alliance with the governing Museveni regime and seats are reserved for trade unions in Parliament. But unions lack autonomy and the parliamentarians are compelled to toe the government line. The result is the emergence of a patron-client relationship between the governing party and the union representatives. A feature of Uganda was the introduction of more progressive labour laws as a condition of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). These changes were however, not the result of local union pressure but from the United States

government for the recognition of international labour standards.

- **Abstinance**

In Ghana, unions have explicitly disengaged from party politics. The policy of non-association was adopted in 1992 and incorporated into the constitution of the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC). This decision was taken partly from past experience with Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party (CPP) but also arising from unsuccessful attempts by the GTUC to form a party of its own. Although the GTUC has not succeeded in shifting government policies from its neo-liberal direction, they have taken the lead in civil society and succeeded in stopping the privatisation of water. Labour has been able to win public space by not aligning with a political party. This is in contrast to those unions which have tried to form oppositional parties and those which are subordinated to the ruling party, as exists in the client model.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The political implications of the findings include the following:

- Unions in post-colonial Africa have, until recently, tended to rely on their alliances with ruling parties in trying to influence public policy. This preoccupation with political parties has, for

example, led to the divisive involvement of Cosatu in the succession debate within the ANC. This close identification of union leaders with specific camps has created deep tensions in the unions and the federation. Many affiliates are divided into two camps and struggle to get on with the core union activities because of a breakdown of trust between union leaders. Evidence from the country studies reveal that unions are rethinking their approach to political alliances which relies less on their alliance with the ruling party and more on an attempt to build coalitions with other organisations in civil society which can provide an alternative way of engaging in political activity. It is clear from the experience of the formation of the MDC in Zimbabwe and the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) in Zambia that forming a political party is a difficult choice to make. In the Zambian case the unions have been disappointed with the performance of the MMD in government and have been dumped by the government they helped to bring into power. In both Zambia and Zimbabwe the unions withdrew once they had helped establish these parties.

- Labour has the capacity to blunt neo-liberal policies but is not able to present an alternative set of economic and social policies. What is clear from the case

studies is that labour in Africa, as in countries world-wide, does not have the capacity or the programmatic vision to provide an alternative to this phase of market driven politics. At best some examples were identified where labour has been able to blunt neo-liberal policies, as in the case of Ghana over water privatisation, or in South Africa where the transport union was able to prevent the privatisation of the railways. In the main, labour is involved in defensive politics where its interventions have no impact on the macroeconomic policies that underpin the neo-liberal paradigm. Given the strength that capital now wields in the global economy it makes sense to develop a multipronged approach to the sources of power that labour can draw on. In addition to traditional sources of power – workplace bargaining and social dialogue – there is a need to identify the new sources of power that have emerged in the global economy. This involves establishing links with community structures or utilising international pressure such as codes of conduct to promote fair labour standards or, more centrally, on the commodity chains that link Africa to the global economy. Value chain analysis has the potential to ground the development of unions in the real world of working people. It offers the opportunity to understand better how workers at different points in the production chain may have different access to a ‘ladder of protection’. Conventional value chain analysis can be broadened and enriched to include what has been called a ‘labour benefit approach’.

- Labour has, and continues to play, a central role in the struggle for democracy in Africa. Unlike established democracies, post-colonial African countries are engaged in the complex task of nation building and economic reconstruction. As a result, a very distinct culture of ‘us’ and ‘them’ develops, whereby people are accepted as ‘one of us’ (a comrade or a veteran) on the basis of their commitment to national liberation. Those who oppose the government become ‘the enemy’ or even ‘counter-revolutionaries’. In other words, the margins of tolerance are much lower in such situations as democracy has not been consolidated. The result is, as the Zimbabwean case illustrates, not institutionalised opposition by the MDC and its union counterpart, the ZCTU, but open and violent confrontation with a union-backed opposition becoming the focus of organised violence by the Zimbabwean state. However, the existence of strong unions has historically been central to the creation of a democratic order. Labour in Africa, as was the case in Europe and North America, has been at the forefront of the struggle to maintain democratic institutions and democratic rule. Vibrant militant independent trade unions, it can be argued, are the most important bulwark against authoritarianism. Furthermore, after a long period of little new investment in Africa, recent years have seen the growth of investment especially from China. And where capital invests, labour follows, including struggles around the recognition of trade union rights and democratic rule.
- Labour needs to develop new

partnerships with research entities and universities to engage and contest the neo-liberal ideas that have become the dominant paradigm in the international financial institutions. The power of labour does not only lie in its strategic location in the workplace and its capacity to mobilise and organise, but also in the power of ideas and its ability to present ideas that challenge market-driven development and provide alternatives that point towards a more labour friendly global order. There is evidence that the labour movement is beginning to connect more directly with research entities and universities to start to develop alternatives. Both labour and universities have tended to approach each other in rather instrumental ways; labour when it needs research to support its campaigns and researchers when they need access and support for their funding proposals. But a true partnership rests on reciprocity and a willingness to learn from each other. The Global Labour University (GLU) and the Global University Research Network (GURN) are examples of new partnerships between educational institutions and workers’ organisations that could form a joint global learning, research and discussion network.

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