

We must forget our borders

regionalisation and regional trade union structures

The notions of labour market regionalisation and regional trade liberalisation are very topical today. All around the world, countries that are close to each other are developing regionalism. The best known case is the formation of the European Union (EU), where European countries developed a common currency (the Euro), regional institutions (such as the EU parliament), a regional trade block and common labour laws.

In the southern region of Africa there are also discussions on developing a regional trade and labour regime – commonly known as the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SADC trade protocol's main thrust is the creation of a free trade area in the region. Manufacturers will no doubt move production to different countries within the region looking for lower manufacturing costs which includes lower labour costs.

Horton's research shows there are already manufactures and clothing firms which have relocated. This unstable environment poses threats to the labour movement and its long-fought entitlements, both within their countries and within the region.

The ITGLWF workshop

The International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) –

Matsobane Aubrey Nkoko spoke to unionists from Southern African countries and found them to be critical of globalisation and confronting enormous challenges in developing regionalism to further workers' interests.

an International Trade Secretariat (ITS) in the clothing and textile sector – organised a training workshop in Durban in July and August 2000. Trade union representatives from various SADC countries assembled to discuss issues related to the regional trade liberalisation and the possibility of establishing a 'competent' regional trade union structure.

I had the opportunity to take part in the discussions at the workshop, talk to and interview several trade union representatives. Union representatives present at the workshop were trade unionists from the Botswana Clothing and General Workers Union (BCGWU); Lesotho Clothing and Allied Workers Union of Lesotho (LECAWU); Textile, Garment, Leather and Security Workers Union (TGLSWU) of Malawi; Sindicato Nacional do Trabalhadores do Industria Textil,

Vestuario, Couroe Calcado (SINTEVEC) of Mozambique; Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU); Tanzania Union of Industrial and Commercial Workers (TUICW); National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers (NUCIW) of Zambia and the Federated Unions of Textile, Clothing and Leather (FUCTL) of Zimbabwe.

Interview findings

Jauch argues that the Southern African governments are following the logic of globalisation although experiences in many parts of the world show that leaving development to market forces does not benefit ordinary people. This argument also reflects the trade unionists' attitude towards liberalisation within the SADC region. They feel that the Southern African governments' decision to liberalise trade is suicidal and homicidal for a number of countries in the region. They also think that the decision to liberalise trade is an attempt by governments and business' to do away with trade unions.

The trade unionists I talked to gave a range of opinions on what regional trade liberalisation meant to them. The unionist from Zimbabwe labelled looming regional trade liberalisation as 'a very touching issue to workers'. For her, trade liberalisation encourages competition between countries, but countries also have economies at different stages of development. She argued that only rich countries within the region will benefit from liberalisation - the poor ones are certain to be even poorer.

The NUCIW representative from Zambia shared the same sentiments and argued that regional trade liberalisation is just a modest way of turning weak economies into a dumping place for the rich economies. He argued liberalisation will result in employers moving from one

country to another and playing workers in the region against each other. 'Countries with labour-friendly laws will lose a large number of these employers,' he argued. He pointed to jobless growth as another likely consequence.

For the Lesotho unionist, regional trade liberalisation means many problems for countries in the region. He pointed out that 'the Lesotho government derives revenue from the taxes paid for imports. Therefore, since trade liberalisation means scrapping import tariffs and taxes, workers in general, but "mainly civil servants" stand to suffer the loss as a result of this liberalisation.'

The Botswana trade unionist hinted that the liberalisation of trade in the region has come at a time when workers are not 'mobilised, trained and educated' about what it entails and its possible consequences. He therefore emphasised the need to educate workers, but felt that it is already a bit too late because educating workers will itself need a lot of time.

From Swaziland, the union representative argued that trade liberalisation in the region means that 'as unions, we must just forget about our borders and form a regional coalition which will enable us to deal with this challenge. Individualism will not help any of us.'

When asked what the impact of trade liberalisation on unions is, the unionists shared a common opinion that trade liberalisation's main aim is to weaken unions.

They argued that through various forms of deregulation linked to trade liberalisation, workers and unions are made to compete amongst themselves and this destroys unity on the part of workers. Some pointed out that the bargaining power and labour laws in various

countries will be eroded. 'Business is now given control,' argued the trade unionist from Botswana.

The trade unionists from Zimbabwe and Lesotho provided very touching information concerning the liberalisation of trade in their countries. The Lesotho unionist argued that in 1988 and 1989, LECAWU experienced problems with the companies leaving the country without paying their workers. He argued that it was mainly due to the liberalisation of trade and the lack of a regional trade union structure that this problem came up.

The Zimbabwean unionist stated that between 1992 and 1997, there were 'appalling levels of retrenchments in Zimbabwe and unions lost a large number of their members'.

She argued that the removal of tariffs was responsible for these catastrophes. She also commented on the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) that was imposed on their government by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). She stated that this programme, which included trade liberalisation, pushed the Zimbabwean economy into decline. 'Because of the adverse effects that this programme had on our country, it was even renamed the Extended Suffering of African People in Zimbabwe,' she added.

Regional trade union structure

Some trade unionists think there is a need to establish regional trade union structures, and where they exist - like the Southern African Trade Union co-ordinating Council (Satucc) - make them more active and effective.

Union representatives realised a pressing need for the formation of a regional trade union structure if they are to be able to bargain with the Southern

African governments and employers in the region. They were positive that a regional trade union structure could be formed, but had a number of concerns.

Trade unionists from Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe felt the countries in the region operate from very different positions, both economically and politically.

Taking this into consideration, they felt there is a need to develop a common ground for all countries in the region as employers have, or certainly will do. They were also concerned about the lack of sufficient information on the subject and the need to educate rank-and-file members on regionalism. They argued that failure to provide such education may render the project completely futile.

The Zimbabwean unionist further argued that the issue of minimum wages is a problematic one. She identified the need for a compromise from all sides on a minimum wage.

Acknowledging the different strengths of the economies in the region, she argued that it would be easier if workers do not call for a common minimum wage across the region. In her opinion, unionists should consider various countries' economies when deciding what the minimum wage in each country should be. The unionist also felt that the fact that workers' problems differ from country to country could potentially hinder the development of an efficient regional trade union structure, as seen with Satucc.

Trade union representatives further gave differing opinions regarding regional declarations such as the Maputo Declaration on the Textile and Leather Industries. For some, this symbolised that the labour movement in the region has already started to build an effective regional collective response.

However, some unionists feel the

'declarations should go beyond just pen and paper, and be put to practice'. The unionist from Zimbabwe felt declarations on paper do not make any difference. In terms of a solution, she argued: 'we need regular meetings to facilitate cross-border relations, but resources limit us'. She stated 'a regional action like a regional strike will make a huge difference because it will make governments and multinational corporations suffer'. She felt this would prompt an effective dialogue between governments, employers and unions.

The unionist from Botswana shared the same sentiments. He argued that declarations could be effective if unions become active. 'Resolutions and declarations need to be enforced by the people taking them,' he added. He also felt the most effective response would be to 'sell ideas to other organisations and people at large, not just workers' organisation'.

SACTWU's role

In the final analysis, the trade unionists felt that SACTWU, together with the ITSS should play a very active role in bringing the workers of the region together, especially in the 'Butterfly' industry. They argued that given SACTWU's resources, both economically and in terms of its personpower, it should help with both technical and economic assistance. According to these trade unionists, SACTWU should also help educate unionists from other SADC countries since some of these unions cannot even provide for their own education due to financial and other difficulties.

The Zimbabwean unionist stated that 'other unions are failing to even maintain their individual day-to-day needs. Therefore it would be impossible for them to go out of their way to start organising regional campaigns.'

From Lesotho, the unionist argued that SACTWU should deploy officials who can help other unions organise meaningfully in their countries. This had been done successfully in Lesotho where a SACTWU official was provided to help with recruiting workers for LECAWU. The Zambian and Botswana unionists felt that SACTWU should start the campaigns and the unions should set up a committee that would only deal with regional issues.

Unionists assessed what they could do to build trade union regionalism and said they would be able to share information with SACTWU, other unions and the ITSS. This information could help further the interests of workers in the region. The Zambian unionist specifically stated that his union organises in all industries and that makes it very reliable in terms of gathering and sharing information. From Swaziland, the unionist offered his union's promise to provide solidarity, 'even if it means closing borders for manufacturers'. In addition to the above, the Zimbabwean unionist stated that they will also help with tracing the multinationals that operate in two or more countries within the region. ★

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