

Workers take back control

Congress of National Union of Namibian Workers

For some time the leadership of the NUNW has been drifting away from its membership. **Herbert Jauch** describes however how at the federation's last congress workers stood up and challenged the leadership.

The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) held its national congress in early September 2010 under the theme 'Back to Basics: Workers Take Control of Trade Unions for Economic Emancipation'. The congress promised heated debate and two issues in particular were expected to be contested, namely the NUNW's withdrawal from the Basic Incomes Grant (BIG) Coalition and the events surrounding the Government Institutions Pension Fund (GIPF).

In addition, after experiencing years of declining influence, weakening union structures and an inability to mobilise workers on a significant scale, the theme suggested that the congress would also revisit the fundamental question of workers' control within unions.

In recent years, Namibian unions have adopted an increasingly hierarchical top-down approach which has caused a significant gap between membership and leadership in several unions. Spaces for open debates were increasingly narrowed and leaders' accountability to their members diminished.

ECONOMIC MATTERS

According to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report of 2009, Namibia is now 'officially' the country with the highest levels of income inequality in the world and government statistics show that since 2008, the country has an unemployment rate of over 50%. The NUNW congress thus debated questions of economic development and emancipation.

Workers confirmed their opposition to labour hire, criticised the Supreme Court ruling of last year which overturned the ban on labour hire, and called on parliament to enact the necessary laws to prevent the continued operations of labour hire companies.

The congress also called for improved skills development for workers, the recognition of prior learning, the introduction of national pension and medical aid funds as well as the inclusion of HIV/AIDS workplace policies as an issue for collective bargaining.

Reviewing Namibia's economic policies, workers noted that Export Processing Zone companies like the Malaysian textile company Ramatex held no benefits for Namibia and

they bemoaned government's silence on the matter. After ruthlessly exploiting workers for almost six years, Ramatex suddenly closed its doors in 2008 leaving thousands of workers stranded, often with health problems due to poor working conditions.

While accepting the need for foreign investment, the NUNW congress called for increasing local control over resources and an end to the export of raw materials. These and other resolutions dealing with Black Economic Empowerment, land acquisition from absentee landlords, better access to housing loans and the abolition of Regional Electricity Distributors (REDs) are in line with previous positions held by NUNW, the country's largest union federation.

'BIG' DEBATE

What set this congress apart from previous ones was the opening up of debates on what some unionists termed 'controversial' issues. Particularly important was the debate on the pros and cons of the introduction of a BIG and the decision by the NUNW's central executive committee (CEC) in July to leave the BIG coalition which

consists of churches, unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and youth organisations.

Although some union leaders tried to stifle debate on BIG, workers resisted from the floor, telling their leaders to sit down and let them debate. Workers discussed the issue for several hours and finally decided that the NUNW must rejoin the BIG Coalition and that BIG should be part of a broader initiative to fight poverty and to effect structural economic transformation.

This decision was significant in various respects.

Firstly, it contradicts the sentiments on a national BIG expressed by Namibia's Prime Minister Angula and President Pohamba and it nullifies the decision taken by the NUNW's CEC just weeks before the congress. Workers saw the CEC decision as political opportunism and it reflected how removed some union leaders had become from their base. The CEC decision pointed to a lack of accountability through mandates and report-backs within the labour movement.

At the congress, workers refused to 'toe the line' and at times openly defied the views of their leaders. This was an important step in the process of workers reclaiming control over their unions. The congress decision on BIG will re-direct the NUNW leadership and also increase the pressure on the Namibian government to seriously consider national BIG as a tool to fight poverty, which so far it has refused to do.

GIPF SCANDAL

For several weeks prior to the NUNW congress, the GIPF scandal triggered by the writing-off of over N\$600-million (R600-million) of public servants pension monies as a result of ill-advised investment practices, made headlines.

Despite the shocking revelations that pointed to mismanagement,

recklessness and corruption the unions in the public sector, whose members were directly affected by the squandering of the pension money, remained silent. The Namibia National Teachers Union replaced its delegate on the GIPF board but the Namibia Public Workers Union (Napwu) and the public sector unions affiliated to the Trade Union Congress of Namibia took no visible action.

To make matters worse, the general secretary of Napwu the largest public sector union, serves on the GIPF board of trustees and as a director of some of the companies that received GIPF loans which were written off. Hardly surprising, the Napwu general secretary and his supporters did not want to discuss the issue at congress and threatened to walk out.

The majority of NUNW delegates, however, made their views clear. Workers refused to be 'guided' in the GIPF debate and resolved that all those involved in the failed loan projects should be brought to book. The congress called for the management and board of GIPF to be suspended, the setting up of a special commission of inquiry, and the lost monies to be recovered.

This puts pressure on the Namibian government to act, not only as the employer of civil servants but also as the custodian of their pension fund. Due to the consistent pressure from NUNW, government finally announced a forensic audit into the GIPF scandal.

WHAT NEXT?

Namibian workers have expressed their views loud and clear and the resolutions passed will guide the NUNW leadership in the years to come. The challenge now is to implement them consistently in line with the workers' mandate. This implies reviving union structures to involve members and ensure accountability. It also implies resisting pressure, political

or otherwise, to amend or 'soften' the resolutions taken.

The NUNW will have to demonstrate that it is accountable to workers only. The union federation will have to heal the rifts that were apparent during congress to build unity within its own ranks. The election of particular candidates into leadership positions should not distract from the broader struggles awaiting the labour movement. Internal divisions will only weaken it and there are already worrying signs of open disagreements between leaders of the federation and its affiliates in the public sector.

The NUNW congress could not deal with all organisational and policy issues confronting the labour movement and much remains to be done in the months to come.

The question of managers serving as union leaders and the consequent conflicts of interest, for example, needs to be debated as a principled issue without being linked to specific individuals. The same applies to the unusual arrangement of former union leaders who are now politicians or business managers being represented on NUNW's CEC - the highest decision-making body between congresses.

In the broader socio-economic arena, unions will have to play a much stronger, pro-active and consistent role in advancing 'transformative economic changes' that its members have called for. The federation will have to develop a long-term vision and plan of action, informed by a coherent set of principles and ideological underpinnings to confront the challenges ahead. Events in the coming months and years will show how far the NUNW is willing and able to go. ^{LB}

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