



The ZANU(PF) government's growing hostility towards Zimbabwe's trade unions seems to be part of a strategy to downgrade their role and influence in Zimbabwean society. DOT KEET reports on recent developments towards more independent trade unionism in Zimbabwe and the need for 'social movement unionism' there.

Zimbabwe trade unions: from 'corporatist brokers' towards an 'independent labour movement'?

In an unprecedented action at the beginning of the year the Zimbabwe government suspended the legal registration of one of the largest and strongest trade unions in that country, the Zimbabwe Amalgamated Railworkers Union (ZARU). The order from the Ministry of Labour, on 22 January, cut ZARU's legal right to represent its 12 000 members and to continue receiving their stop-order union dues. At the same time, ministerial orders upheld the sacking and then the draconian re-employment terms imposed on more than 4 000 workers by the management of the state-owned National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ).

These drastic measures were ostensibly in response to an "illegal strike" on 14-17 January by semi-skilled railway workers protesting the NRZ's special treatment of skilled workers. These latter had just been awarded a special 7% wage rise following their own illegal strike on 7-8 January. This award was quite outside established procedures and legal agreements

against dual pay scales on the railways.

By contrast, when the unskilled railworkers went on their own 'wild cat' strike, they were summarily dismissed and their union put under severe legal - and political - pressures by the Minister of Labour.

Highly regulated labour relations

ZARU was blamed for causing the strike - or at least not intervening to prevent it. Under Zimbabwe's highly regulated labour relations system it is incumbent upon unions to obey a "show cause order" - and a 14 day delay - before embarking on strikes. These are then invariably pre-empted by government "disposal orders" imposing the terms of settlement of the industrial disputes.

Thus, through a combination of restrictive legal procedures, and substitutionist government interventions, legal strikes are virtually impossible in Zimbabwe. Although guaranteed as a right in the constitution, they

are also effectively forbidden by government prohibitions on strikes in "essential services" - which in Zimbabwe applies to most sectors of the economy.

Zimbabwe trade unions have accommodated these impediments to their own independent initiatives by developing a mediatory 'brokers' role between government and management, on the one hand, and their members on the other. The usual pattern is for workers to take 'independent' wild cat action and for unions to then step in as mediators to negotiate settlements. Even in their regular wage-bargaining and job control functions Zimbabwean trade unions' role is frequently only auxiliary to statutory reform handed down by government.

This system of labour relations derives from a combination of the highly state-regulated industrial relations inherited from the authoritarian pre-independence regime, with the forms of "paternalistic corporatism"* typically developed by 'Marxist-Leninist' and many other one-party regimes in Africa.

The Zimbabwe government's measures against ZARU this year signal the advance of a process under way since 1990. When the ZANU(PF) government adopted an IMF-sponsored Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) that year, it began the gradual unravelling of the existing regulatory system. This has been accompanied by a turn away from paternalistic incorporation of trade unions - almost as an arm of the ruling party - towards a gradual demotion of the unions from their role hitherto in the regulation of industrial relations.

From enforcing unity to encouraging divisions

Government strategy seems to be focused initially on undermining the unions organisationally. In the case of ZARU, the government was provided with an opening through which to divide and weaken the union in the long-standing tensions caused by the forced integration of formerly independent skilled railway workers associations into the

newly constituted ZARU in January 1987.

Under the ZANU(PF) government's prescription of "one union one industry", four railway workers bodies which had earlier co-existed, and all been represented on the statutory Railway Employment Council, were obliged to join into one union. ZARU's president Samson Mabheka says that they themselves were not in favour of such an imposition but they accommodated to it "in good faith and obedience" to a government that they believed was "in favour of the workers".

It has been argued, however, that within that organisational unity ZARU could have structured itself internally in such a way as to accommodate the different origins, needs and aspirations of its components. This was done successfully by the Zimbabwean food workers union, for example.

Failing to do that, ZARU was faced with a festering problem with skilled engine-drivers and artisans on the railways. Although these skilled workers are now almost entirely black Zimbabweans, they are to some extent heirs to the elitist craft traditions of the old pre-independence white skilled workers' associations.

Although only about one third of such workers were ZARU members, the union was called in by government to mediate in repeated industrial disputes from 1987-1991 involving artisans - whose interests ZARU was 'legally registered to represent'. The union might have aggravated the problem by setting very high 'agency fees' to be levied on such workers for the union's services. ZARU president Mabheka says that up to 50% of such workers opted to join the union, and he vows that, in practice, those that stayed out were not in fact ever levied by the union.

Ministry-management instigation

By the end of 1990, however, the artisans were refusing ZARU mediation altogether. The union declares that this was under the direct instigation of the Ministry of Labour and NRZ management. The union obtained concrete

* *Brian Wood SA Labour Bulletin, Vol 12 No 6/7, August 1987*

evidence of this in the minutes of a government-management-artisans meeting in May 1991. The Ministry of Labour's Chief Labour Relations Officer "assured" artisans representatives that he would "fight by all legal means within the LRA" to ensure that artisans and engine-men could obtain separate registration from ZARU.

It was at this time, too, that the Ministry of Labour was instituting investigative proceedings against the country's national trade union federation the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). It was accused of corruption and incompetence, and of living beyond its means - and threatened with the withdrawal of its legal registration.

It was also no mere coincidence that ZCTU general secretary Morgan Tsvangirai had earlier that same month publicly criticised the ZANU(PF) government. Speaking at the Zimbabwe trade unions' 1991 May Day rally, he had expressed the trade union federation's opposition to the Harare government's adoption of a structural adjustment programme, under the aegis of the IMF.

Direct collusion

ZARU appealed to Zimbabwean Deputy President Simon Muzenda with its evidence of the Ministry of Labour's collusion in splitting the union - in direct contradiction of government's official policy.

Yet at the beginning of 1992, the Ministry of Labour and parastatal NRZ management were still colluding with breakaway railway artisans. Prior to their 7-8 January strike, artisans' leaders were flown up to Harare and put up in hotels there. This followed a meeting with the Labour Ministry's Registrar of Unions who had earlier flown down to Bulawayo to meet them together with NRZ management. They even shared the same lawyer.

The government/management promotion of the breakaway actions was also evident in the "kid-glove" treatment of the illegal artisan strikers, in contrast to the severe legal and political pressures on ZARU by the Minister of Labour John Nkomo.

Speaking to the press on 25 January, Nkomo

accused the unions of being "reactionary" and "opposing industrial trade union democracy" while, he said, their federation the ZCTU was publicly supporting multiparty democracy "as if they were an opposition political party".

The new political line from the Labour Ministry - that had itself earlier prescribed single sectoral unions and one national trade union federation for Zimbabwe, along with the one-party state - was that "much as we would want to discourage workers from forming splinter unions," the government was "encouraging democracy to prevail in the labour movement as well as in the political arena."

Trade union responses

ZARU president Samson Mabheka argues that the government singled out ZARU first because the railways is the largest employer in Zimbabwe, after government itself, and ZARU is one of the few unions to have a truly national presence.

The railway union is also one of the stronger unions organisationally and financially. Tracing its roots back to the formation of a white railway workers union, in the then-Rhodesia, in 1916, ZARU inherited the pre-independence railway workers' facilities, including ownership of the building in which its headquarters is based.

If the government can weaken ZARU, other smaller and weaker unions will be intimidated and government will face less trade union resistance to the painful costs of ESAP.

Unionists declare that such measures against ZARU are but the first act in a broader campaign anticipated against the unions. The Iron and Steel Workers Federation and the postal and telecommunications workers are indicated as the next probable targets of divisive 'break away' stratagems.

ZARU has been fighting its suspension and the unfair dismissals and treatment of its members through all legal channels open to it, including repeated appeals to the High Court.

There have been demonstrations by the affected workers, and hundreds of their wives staged a sit-in at NRZ headquarters on 23 January before being dispersed by the police. It



Wives of striking railway workers demonstrate their support

Photo: Bulawayo Chronicle

is not clear whether the union encouraged - or welcomed - such direct workers' protest actions, although ZARU leaders said that they were appealing for "national support and action".

The ZCTU threatened to call for "national action" should the Minister not agree to withdraw his suspension of ZARU, but the unions do not seem to be taking concerted joint positions. Far from standing up to the government's unreasonable measures against ZARU, the Federation of Transport Unions of Zimbabwe (FTUZ) agreed to act as government-appointed "agent" to "represent" railway workers. ZARU declares that FTUZ "are not able to defend our workers" but it has acquiesced in FTUZ collaboration in a process that ZARU insists is both illegal and unjust.

Government's changing policies

At the beginning of March, the Minister of Labour retreated from his head-on, and legally unsustainable, attack on ZARU by lifting his suspension of the union. ZARU has welcomed this.

As president Mabheka pointed out, however, there still remain the broader economic and labour policy changes demanded of the Harare government by the IMF in terms of its structural adjustment prescriptions.

- **"Liberalisation"** of the Zimbabwean economy demands a withdrawal of the government from its highly interventionist role in all areas of the economy. This includes moves towards the deregulation of industrial relations. Despite its continued utilisation of the regulatory LRA, the Ministry of Labour is actually moving towards legitimising management's right to hire and fire, and de-linking the unions from any role in these areas.
- **"Privatisation"** of the many large parastatals in Zimbabwe presents the Harare government with further challenges particularly with regard to the national railways. Not only is nationalised rail transport crucial to the functioning of the entire economy, but it has a large trade union in ZARU which is committed to defending it as a national service not a private commercial enterprise.
- **"Rationalisation"** of the operations of such enterprises that cannot (yet) be privatised demands that government reduce the power of the unions to resist the massive retrenchments and wage restraints required to make continued public sector enterprises 'commercially viable'.
- **"Socio-economic restrictions"** in government expenditure to reduce its budget deficit, as demanded by the IMF, will com-

bine with spiralling free(d) market prices to hit the standard of living of working people in Zimbabwe. Trade union-led resistance to such austerities must be prevented.

In a situation of deepening social and economic difficulties for the population - aggravated by the worst drought on record - and pervasive popular political alienation from the ruling ZANU(PF), the potential for ZCTU to become an "opposition political party" is clearly a major concern for ZANU(PF). This probably also accounts for the Ministry of Labour's tactical retreat from its head-on confrontation with the unions as exemplified in the ZARU case.

Independent labour movement in prospect?

ZCTU itself does not seem to be looking towards the route taken by Zambian trade unions in backing the right wing MMD into power, but towards an independent role for trade unions.

Interviewed after a union rally in Bulawayo on 15 February, ZCTU general secretary Morgan Tsvangirai spoke of the necessity for "workers not only to think about trade unions but the formation of a labour movement." He stressed that "we are not political as unions but that does not mean that we cannot form our own labour movement" so that workers can "begin to think of themselves as a political force."

This is a tall order as Zimbabwean trade unions are quite weak organisationally let alone politically. Their representation of workers is more legally ascribed than organisationally acquired. Their heavily legalistic *modus operandi* has reinforced them as centralised bureaucratic machines far removed from the workers they 'represent'. The "emasculating legal strangleholds"* in which they have been placed by government labour policies has made them cautious and accommodating. They have little experience of active campaigning or worker mobilisation. Indeed - as in the case of ZARU - they are quick to declare that they are "not political" even (and especially) when they are under

political attack by the government.

Furthermore, even as (or if) Zimbabwean trade unions now begin to turn towards a more independent political and campaigning role, their mass base is weak. Only 20% of Zimbabwe's wage earners are unionised. Workers have little experience of acting together as workers beyond the immediate work place. If anything, workers tend to look more towards the government-promoted system of work-place "workers committees" to solve their problems rather than to distant trade union bureaucrats.

ZCTU itself has also, until very recently, been just a central structure carrying out a national representational role on behalf of workers within the ZANU(PF) ideological/political framework. It is only since its last congress in 1991 that ZCTU has begun to turn its attention actively towards creating regional and district structures. Its Western Region Committee was launched with elections in Bulawayo on 15 February this year, and five other regional structures are due. Resources are scarce and it is not certain that ZCTU will have the time to carry through its programme effectively as the government's changing economic and labour policies take effect.

Paying the price

Zimbabwe trade unions are paying the price for their (over) long belief in and dependence on the ZANU(PF) party.

The long reliance of Zimbabwean trade unions on 'pro-worker' reforms from the ZANU(PF) government meant that the government frequently usurped their role. As a consequence, the trade unions were not obliged to rely on and develop fully their own strengths.

Conversely, the prolonged union strategy of allying with 'pro-worker currents' within ZANU(PF) encouraged continuing mass illusions in its actual or 'greater potential future' commitment to the interests of workers and peasants.

The unions - and others - even persisted in a belief in the possibility of transforming

* Pete Richer, former official in the Zimbabwean Ministry of Labour, unpublished paper, January 1992

ZANU(PF) into "a genuine workers' party". As late as 1990, Morgan Tsvangirai was still urging workers to "draw the ruling party away from the right wing" and "convert it to our purposes".

Such continued orientation towards the possibilities of 'working within' ZANU(PF)'s 'broad representation of national interests', enabled the ruling party to continue presenting itself as the defender of the workers and peasants - or more vaguely 'the masses' - under the mantle of 'national interests.'

At the same time, Zimbabwean trade unionists came under accusations from the highest levels of the state and the ruling party for being "narrowly selfish" and "irresponsible". The so-called "privileged position" of organised workers in comparison to the peasantry was repeatedly invoked "in a latter day nationalist rendition of the labour aristocracy thesis"*.

This has been the strategy common to nationalist governments in many African countries in order to take advantage of real differences amongst the working masses, and present themselves as the true defenders of 'the poorest of the poor' within 'broader national development interests'.

Broader 'social movement' unionism

Now, as ZANU(PF) "identifies with the employers" - according to ZARU's Mabheka - and abandons even its rhetorical 'socialist' commitment to the workers and peasants, Zimbabwean trade unions will have to work extremely hard to establish their own credible programmes and independent organisational means to defend their members.

According to ZCTU's Tsvangirai, the unions have not only to mobilise their own members. They have to link up with other non-unionised - and unemployed - workers, as

* Brian Raftopolous, *Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies Working Paper #17, 1991*

IMPLICATIONS - AND LESSONS? - FOR SOUTH AFRICA

As the countries of Southern Africa open up to SA trade and investment, it is evident that the gains made by trade unions in workers' wages and conditions in South Africa will be under constant pressure if SA business can easily re-locate to neighbouring countries where such conditions have not (yet) been won.

South African unionists are already aware of the need to form alliances with trade unions throughout Southern Africa to fight for regional agreements to protect - and project - those gains for all. And, in this, it is important for the SA trade union movement to have a realistic picture of the organisational and political strengths and weaknesses of their counterparts in the region.

It is evident from the above, for a start, that Zimbabwean trade unions are not the strong mass-based, and democratic worker-controlled organisations that most SA trade unions are trying to be. Yet the Zimbabwean trade union movement can be

said to have been the strongest in the region after South Africa's. What then are the implications - for the region - of the latest developments there? Equally importantly, are there other pertinent lessons from their experience for SA trade unions?

Although there are significant differences between Zimbabwean and SA trade unions - in their origins, history, and methods - there are enough similarities in the *tactics* and *arguments* within SA trade unions in relation to the national liberation movement in this country for it to be useful for the main lesson of the Zimbabwean experience to be explicitly spelled out.

Zimbabwean trade unions are now reaping the results of their too long and too close relationship with their ruling party. Even as the pro-worker-and-peasant claims of ZANU(PF) became increasingly ambivalent, trade unionists and others in Zimbabwe continued to argue that it was necessary to 'take advantage

well as the rural poor, to build a broader mass social movement.

ZCTU is working to cut the ground from under government's divisive demagogy and challenge its claims to be defending the 'the masses' - by *themselves* taking on that role.

Thus the trade unions in Zimbabwe are taking on a double task. They have to become genuine plant-based collective bargaining organisations in order to build up the convinced and active support of industrial workers. At the same time, however, in the context of the uneven development of Zimbabwe (as in other African countries) large masses of working people are outside of the formal wage sector and the urban areas - and indeed outside of employment altogether, let alone the unionised working class. So the trade unions have to take on the needs of working people outside of the unions, and social and economic issues outside of the work place. They have to adopt the mantle of "social movement unionism".

In Zimbabwe, this entails the trade unions developing alliances with other mass organisations in their country. General secretary Tsvangiari says that ZCTU has close relations with the 250 000 strong OCCZIM (Organisation of Collective Co-operatives of Zimbabwe) and links with student and womens' organisations and professional associations of teachers and public servants. There is also a growing network of grassroots 'NGO' literacy, development and other community-based groups throughout the country.

With the rather more independent organising skills and direct mobilising experiences to be found in these organisations, a genuine mass democratic social movement can be created that can contribute towards the shaping of alternative organisational and development strategies of relevance not only to Zimbabwe but to the Southern African region as a whole. Division and defeat will also be of significance to the region as a whole. ☆

of those claims to get policies favourable to workers, or to 'influence and strengthen those currents biased towards the working class', or even to 'work from within to transform it into a workers movement/party'.

Unionists in South Africa will recognise the above arguments about the need to work with... within... and upon the national liberation movement in SA [see for example *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 15 No 8 June 1991]. Many SA unionists and others are aware, however, of similar future dangers for independent union defence of working class interests in a too-prolonged COSATU alliance with, or reliance upon, the current liberation movement-cum-putative government of a democratic SA.

The problem for the trade union movement, and COSATU in particular, is not only how, in this phase, to keep on developing their own organisational strengths and maintain their political independence while co-operating with the national liberation movement. The danger is that - once in a relationship, and having built up a certain modus operandi - there are always so

many 'tactical reasons', there are always so many arguments that can be presented for maintaining it. It is going to be extremely important - and extremely difficult - for the unions to agree when, precisely, to take the strategic decision definitively to part company with a future national democratic ruling party.

SA trade unions may, through their 'alliance,' continue - like their Zimbabwean counterparts - to foster popular hopes in the liberation movement/ruling party as representative of 'the masses' within its 'broad national representativity'. And SA trade unions may also - like the Zimbabwean trade unions - find themselves being portrayed as representative only of 'narrow working class' or narrower-still 'organised working class' interests, in contrast to the ruling party's representation of 'broad national interests'.

How and when will the trade unions assume their role as the core and moving force of an independent mass labour/social movement in South Africa? v