

Zimbabwe

a different point of view

For the first time since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, President Mugabe confronts a serious opposition, both in parliament and in the country. In the recent elections, held on 24 and 25 June, his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) won 62 seats, while the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) took 57.

The MDC and most international observers concluded that the elections were neither free nor fair. The pre-election period was marred by violence, in which more than 31 MDC supporters were killed. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, a near monopoly of the broadcast media, was thoroughly biased in favour of ZANU-PF. Had intimidation been absent from the election, the MDC would almost certainly have won the majority of contested seats.

Even so, the MDC swept the board in all the nine largest towns. In the working-class constituencies of Harare and Bulawayo its vote ranged between 70% and 86% of the total poll. In focus-group interviews I conducted with factory workers in Harare, two main reasons were provided for this support:

First, workers are experiencing severe hardships as a consequence of spiraling inflation. This is running at over 60%, and is set to rise to over 80% before the end of the year. One worker asked me to tell South Africans, 'the boys in Zimbabwe are

Peter Alexander reports on the outcome of the recent Zimbabwean election. We also publish his interview with rail worker Gibson Sibanda, now the MDC's vice-president.

suffering! Others said they were being paid about Z\$2 000, less than R300 per month (yet the cost of living is similar to that in Johannesburg). With the poverty datum line at Z\$8 100 per month, most workers are regarded as poor. Many are no longer able to send their children to school, and some are experiencing hunger. The situation is made worse by high levels of unemployment and the need to feed relatives in urban and rural areas. Workers blame Mugabe's policies for their problems, and they see the MDC as the only alternative.

Workers see the MDC as their party. Although it has a number of middle-class leaders, the top leadership - Morgan Tsvangirai and Gibson Sibanda - are trade unionists. Tsvangirai, now president of the MDC, was, until recently, the secretary general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), and before that he was a mineworker. The ZCTU is the only union federation in Zimbabwe, and nearly

all unions are affiliated. Having called a number of successful stayaways in 1997 and 1998, it realised that strike actions could not solve Zimbabwe's problems, and in February 1999 it convened the National Working People's Convention, modelled on the Congress of the People. It was this gathering that launched the MDC.

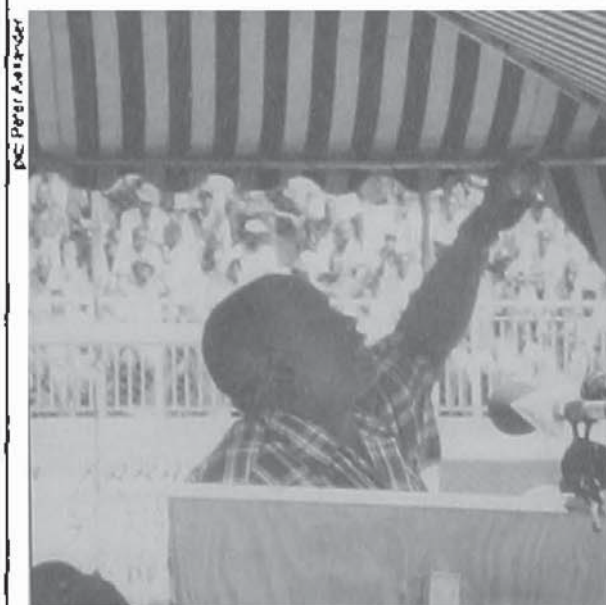
The MDC, like the ZCTU, favours a social contract, a market based economy, and co-operation with the World Bank and IMF. Some of us might think that such an approach is misjudged. Nevertheless, the creation of a labour-based party is a tremendous achievement, and a big step forward for Zimbabwe's workers.

Workers I interviewed thought that, given President Mbeki's support for democracy, he should be supporting the MDC, not ZANU-PF. Sources close to Mbeki say that his backing for Mugabe is conditioned by the fact that he does not

want to encourage a worker-based opposition movement in South Africa. More surprising is the Congress of South African Trade Unions's (COSATU's) lack of support for the ZCTU and its party, the MDC. ZCTU leaders say that COSATU representatives have visited Harare and are aware that the unions back the MDC. They are concerned that COSATU has become so close to the ANC that it is losing its independence.

Having returned to South Africa, I am aware that there has been distortion of the Zimbabwean situation by the South African Broadcasting Corporation. For instance, the MDC's final election rally, at Rufaro Stadium in Harare, was attended by 30 000 to 35 000 people, but much smaller numbers were reported in South Africa.

In the following interview, Sibanda responds to some of the misrepresentations that have occurred.



Gibson Sibanda

Gibson Sibanda was born in southern Matabeleland in 1944, and started work on the railways in 1965. Unlike Morgan Tsvangirai, who was a ZANU-PF commissar, he was a member of the Zimbabwe African People's Union. In 1976,

when he and his wife, Zodwa, were detained at gunpoint, they were taken from their house leaving behind a six-month old child. Later they had another three children, and in the 1980s Zodwa Sibanda was detained for six months on suspicion of political subversion. Sibanda was held until independence in 1980.

In 1982 he was appointed to the Railway Pension Fund Advisory Committee, and in 1987 he was elected president of the Zimbabwe Amalgamated Railwaymen's Union. Two years later, he was elected as president of the ZCTU, a position he held until, with the encouragement of the ZCTU executive, he withdrew to take on responsibilities as vice-president of the MDC. He was recently returned as the representative for the Bulawayo constituency of Nkulumane, and with Tsvangirai's failure to secure election as a member of parliament (MP), he has become the MDC's parliamentary leader.

'We are waging an economic war'

Alexander: Congratulations on your election as an MP. The NUM has been sympathetic to the MDC, the ANC has backed ZANU-PF, and COSATU has said very little. What would you say to a South African workers to convince them to support the MDC?

Sibanda: We've got inflation running at about 70%, and now unemployment has jumped to about 56%. It was out of that that the workers started saying, 'what's the major cause of the economic crisis? It's because of government expenditure'

They were not doing anything to cap this expenditure, and then they started raising the taxes. We started protesting and doing all sorts of things, but they were not doing anything to correct the fundamentals on the economic side. It was out of that that the ZCTU said 'we have tried negotiation, they were not taking us seriously, so we had no option except to form a party.'

So my message to the South African workers is that we've got solidarity messages from throughout the world, from all the workers, that an injury to one is an injury to all. The economic woes, that are now faced by the workers of Zimbabwe, will sometime face them. They should support us, both practically and morally, because we are waging an economic war to address those very conditions that they, probably, are enjoying now.

Alexander: You may have seen an opinion poll which showed that, among black people in South Africa, the occupation of white farmers' land by the war vets was very popular. People think the MDC is completely opposed to that. You might like to comment.

Sibanda: We want to proclaim land redistribution, but on a properly financed programme, not the chaos he [Mugabe] is doing. There must be compensation. It has been stated [and agreed by ZANU-PF] that we need about six million hectares to settle everybody. Four million is already within the government, but those farms have been distributed to themselves [ie to ministers and their friends and relations] some of them have got five farms. We are saying we will take the four million they have already acquired, and then we will look for the two million from absent landlords and those who are owning more than one farm. We are saying the inequitable distribution of the land is a very important issue, and we want an equitable redistribution of land based on a programme which will be administered by a land commission, which will not be politically used.

At all three elections, Mugabe used the land distribution question. But for the last 20 years, what has he been doing? The Lancaster House constitution [of 1980] only says ten years [when specifying how

redistribution should be conducted], and after that he could have changed the law. In our manifesto it is clearly the number two issue. But, first is the economic issue. We cannot remove people from industry and say, because industry has collapsed you must go to the land. It is always the other way round – people want to come from the rural areas into industry.

Alexander: Another issue in South Africa concerns support for the MDC from wealthy farmers, financiers and the Democratic Party; and the assumption that, if these people give something, they expect something back in return.

Sibanda: Let me state very clearly, we have had no support from Tony Leon and his party. He came when we were still in the ZCTU, and he saw Morgan. There was no money. He actually tried to invite us to his congress, and there was no response. We decided to have nothing to do with him.

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We have been supported by the commercial farmers and business after the draft constitution referendum. They came forward and they gave donations and that was because we put forward our programme on recovery. We've got support – not only from the whites, but the Indians as well – because we're the only party that has got a national command, and because of the programme we put forward, which they supported.

What is wrong with us accepting donations from well-wishers who see the

same view as us? The real issue is whether they make any meaningful decisions in the MDC. The answer is 'no'. They [the whites] are not even in the structure, other than the David Colharts [now MP for Bulawayo North] who we started off with, who have no money what-so-ever (because they have been battling on human rights issues).

But I must quickly say that ZANU-PF has been financed by the Tiny Rowlands, and this British man who owns farms here, whose farms have not been occupied. When Mugabe is having it hard, he blames the whites, but when the whites are on his side he says they are good Zimbabweans.

Alexander: Before the party was formed, there was some discussion about whether it should be a broad-based party or a workers' party, and I notice that at the MDC's closing election rally you described the MDC as a workers' party. Did you get into trouble with Morgan for using that phrase?

Sibanda: [Laughs.] Not at all. Basically, that's where our base is. When we say 'workers' we include the peasants. But the base really is the workers. There is no question that it is a workers' party.

Alexander: Of the members of the national executive committee, how many of them are workers and how many of them are peasants?

Sibanda: Two-thirds are workers plus peasants, with one-third from the university intellectuals, the professors and others we got when we combined with the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA).

Alexander: Amongst the 120 candidates, I think 16 were trade unionists, and I don't think any were listed as peasants.



'There is no question that the MDC is a workers' party'

Sibanda: We had peasants. For instance in Matabeleland there was one, Thabane, from Umguza, and one lady from Umzingwane, and then this one we lost, Gwanda South, he's a peasant, a headmaster there.

Alexander: One of the things one notices about the MDC is that it is a very broad church. There's Eddie Cross [a business leader], then there's Munyaradzi Gwisai [a leader of the International Socialist Organisation, now an MDC MP]. Is that going to cause problems for the MDC?

Sibanda: We set out at the convention an agenda which must address the issues. We have broad policies on each of the issues, so whatever the case of anybody having his own position, it must be contained within that broad framework. I hope you have seen the manifesto – that was before

the Eddie Crosses came in.

Alexander: But when I talk to [MDC] people, most of them say 'yes there are tensions, and yes these will be brought out in the future'. I have asked some of the same questions to all these people and got lots of different answers. [Sibanda chuckles] One of the questions is, 'what do you mean by "change"?'.

Sibanda: The change we are talking about is the change in the whole culture of doing things. Democratisation actually – good governance and accountability, we don't have them. The main reason we are in this mess – economically, politically and socially – is because of the government's undemocratic way of doing things. There must be transparency with tender procedures and an end to violence, corruption is big.

Alexander: There are differences within any broad party and perhaps that doesn't matter. What's more problematic is when there are differences over economic questions, for instance price controls and minimum wages. How would you deal with those questions?

Sibanda: Basically we say we want a social contract. On the basis of an agreement between business, labour and government, we can come down on the fundamentals. The issue of a minimum wage naturally goes with the price control, and once we agree on the basic benchmark then the price controls on basic commodities – that's where we'll apply them – will be agreed by a committee of experts. That's the sort of price control we are talking about, agreed by social partners. A tripartite committee would determine, based on the poverty datum line, what minimum wage would be applied in the various sectors.

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Alexander: OK. But what would happen if there's no agreement. Employers say they don't want control but workers I've spoken to say we have to have that increase now.

Sibanda: It's a very, very precarious situation which is existing. They're trying to address the economic crisis, but once you approach the issue of macro-economic stabilisation you will have to

deal with a range of issues. Now, it's just a yo-yo sort of situation. There is no approach as to how to deal with the issues. The government gave the civil servants between 60 and 90%, but it was unbudgeted, and what does it do, just inflation.

Alexander: But in terms of the immediate problems, do you think there should be an increase in minimum wages so people can catch up with the inflation?

Sibanda: Minimums yes. We have been advocating for a minimum wage review. Then we can go to the individual sectors and negotiate whatever's best on the productivity. We have a Salaries and Wages Board, which mostly they ignore, which is tripartite. We will not engage in a unilateral imposition by government.

Alexander: Is it possible that there can be a social contract while Mugabe is president?

Sibanda: In 1997, we brought the country to a standstill. We were advocating to bring a social contract. He didn't respond. One of the issues was that he wanted us to impose a wage freeze, but let the state expenditure runaway. We are spending, what, US\$1-million a day, to sustain that army in the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo]. Bring those soldiers back. Cut the cabinet down, because that's one of the biggest expenditures. The MDC is committed to only 15 ministers. Then we will negotiate how we will reallocate the civil service and the packages. I don't think a social contract is possible with Mugabe because we've tried. I don't see how we can bring it about, when he's not committed to bring down government expenditure.

Alexander: Given the pressures that there are on workers in particular, it must be very likely that there'll be substantial civil disobedience. Do you think this would be a good thing?

Sibanda: Definitely, with the economic hardships that are now coming. With this political campaign a lot of shortages are looming. Already they've started showing, and the inflation is just galloping further. The wage demands are now on, because the negotiations are usually in this month, July.

Alexander: Whereas in February 1999, at the convention, the workers and peasants were central, when it came to the national executive elected at the congress [in January 2000], there was a shift.

Sibanda: Each of the provinces were electing their members of the executive. We've got the top six, on open election – the president, myself and the secretary general, the chairman of the party, the treasurer, and the assistant general secretary – then 12 provinces, two for each province, 24 in all. Then because of our constitution, we had to co-opt some women, and some more because of specialisation. The composition of the executive was determined because of mass popular and regional representation.

Alexander: My point though is that there seems to be, a) a decline in working class influence over the MDC, and, b) no built-in institutionalised influence for the trade unions, even though they initiated the MDC.

Sibanda: I agree with you. It is something which we will have to address at the congress in January or February of next year. At the current situation, once myself

and Morgan were in, the workers thought we are all assured. But there were also other forces and we had to strike a balance. But I agree with you that there has been quite a voice saying that we are not clearly assured and I am sure they are going to push the resolutions at the next congress. I have heard this.

Alexander: Do you see your job in the leadership as representing the interests of labour?

Sibanda: Yes, yes. I mean first and foremost, I always get a balance. I have been in the ILO for the last ten years, and I have been a member of the governing body for three terms, that's nine years. Compromise has been my game for quite some time. I don't think we will fail to find a balance, and it is that balance which always gets us forward.

Alexander: From your experience campaigning in the rural areas, what convinced the peasants to vote for the MDC?

Sibanda: The economic issue. We are telling them we are going to create jobs, we are going to bring the prices down, that's what they were voting for. There's no doubt. Most of the youth in the rural areas have got no jobs and those are the people who voted for us. They will not dispute the issue of the land but they are talking about the price increases which are galloping every day. We'd have been home and dry if we'd had no violence. Once they know who we are, what we stand for, they are fine. They did not vote because they are frightened of the war vets. ★

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