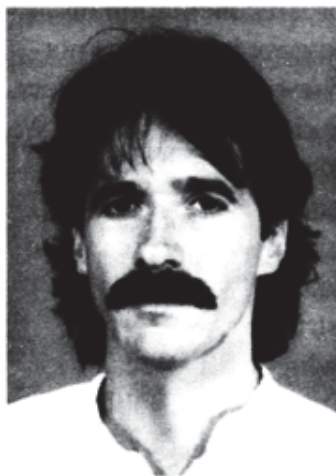




**Niki Jazdowska
is a trade union
researcher**



**Richard Saunders
is a freelance
journalist**

Zimbabwe: *Public sector unionists celebrate landmark victory*

By **NIKI JAZDOWSKA** and **RICHARD SAUNDERS** in Harare.

In a landmark victory for Zimbabwe's trade unions, workers in the parastatal Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (PTC) have forced the capitulation of government and management following a bitter long-running dispute which culminated in an 8-day national strike in late February.

In an unprecedented climb-down by government and humiliation of state-appointed management, Information, Posts and Telecommunications Minister David Karamanzira appeared on national television on 22 February, at the height of the strike, to order the PTC to accede to all demands put forward by its 9 000 striking employees. The nation-wide shutdown of post offices, savings banks and telephone services had paralysed the country.

The strike was launched by the 7 800-strong Posts and Telecommunications Workers Union (ZPTWU), after three years of negotiations with and court orders against the PTC failed to prod management to implement agreed adjustments to salaries, job grading and conditions of service. It was brought to a sudden end by government's abrupt decision to reverse its support of PTC management. As a measure of the degree of this quick turnaround, union leaders were driven directly from police detention to the press conference at which Minister Karamanzira handed down new orders to the PTC.

The union's triumph represents the first-ever total collapse of state nerve in the face of striking workers.

Privately, leading figures in the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) national labour centre wonder whether the victory marks a decisive shift away from the state's

uncompromising labour politics of the 1980s and early '90s.

The ZPTWU's disciplined organisation of the strike and the swell of third party support for the ZPTWU from key opinion makers, indicate for some that the state's past commandist approach to labour control is no longer viable.

Within the ZCTU, ZPTWU's success against a comparatively rich and powerful PTC management has underlined the value of meticulous union organising and boosted the confidence of unions in their call for more open, participatory tripartite labour relations.

A distinctive feature of the strike was ZPTWU's ability to attract 2 000 new members during the stoppage, bringing the union's current strength to 88% of the PTC workforce.

The lead-up to the strike

In earlier actions within ZPTWU and other unions solidarity among workers has often been lax and inconsistent, particularly during strikes. But this time union officials prepared carefully by keeping in close communication with branch representatives across the country. Earlier strengthening of union structures made this possible.

Three years ago ZPTWU launched an internal nation-wide educational programme with the help of its international umbrella body, the Posts, Telegraphy and Telephones International (PTTI). Hundreds of new members were recruited, after years of factional bickering and diminishing membership. Communication and feedback links within ZPTWU were improved.

The current dispute with PTC management began in the late 1980s when the union was still weak. The conflict has been punctuated by stormy relations involving management intimidation and obstructiveness on the one hand, and wildcat strikes and union-led legal appeals on the other.

The latest legal appeal was to the national Labour Tribunal. By the end of 1993 the Tribunal ruled in ZPTWU's

Gift Chimankiri* talks about the background to the strike

We had about 75% membership before the strike. Now it's about 90% – around 7 500 workers.

Trouble with the current P&T management began in mid-1992, when a job evaluation exercise, conducted jointly by management and union, was unilaterally implemented by management without allowing the union any say as to what wages should be paid to the agreed grades. The management gave themselves big increases while 67% of the workers either got no increase at all or a miserable Z\$4 per month (about R9) increase.

Our union ran a campaign to expose the goings on in the P&T to the public. Soon after, we began to discover and expose other self-serving practices on the part of P&T management: for example, P&T contracts being awarded without proper tender to "friends of friends". When management objected that this area was managerial prerogative and had nothing to do with the union, we argued that anything affecting the profitability of the P&T was an issue for employees also, since their wage increases would relate to the profitability of the company. Management were badly rattled by our inside knowledge of what was going on in the P&T: when they attempted to deny an alleged malpractice we were able to put the original documentation on the table in front of them, proving our allegations. On one occasion a senior manager presented with such facts burst out in

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Gift is the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Posts and Telecommunications Workers Union.

favour, and ordered the PTC to pay a 12% increase back-dated to July 1992. Still, the PTC refused to pay out, claiming that they could not afford it. Instead they lodged an appeal with the Supreme Court.

In the meantime, corporation management implemented a new strategy aimed at undermining ZPTWU from within. First, top PTC officials encouraged the establishment of a splinter union in the corporation. When this failed, with the Ministry of Labour's refusal to register the splinter union in June 1993, management approached ZPTWU rank-and-file through mail-outs, falsely stating that union officials were refusing to negotiate.

By late 1993 PTC Management was inexplicably claiming that ZPTWU was unconstitutional and should be deregistered. When ZPTWU leaders countered these accusations, they were told by the PTC there would be no further management-union contact until union counter-charges of management deception were withdrawn and an apology made. In January 1994, the PTC began withholding the bulk of union dues it collected on behalf of the union.

Faced with an increasingly intransigent management and rapidly depleting resources, ZPTWU started organising for a national strike. Leaders were sent around the country to co-ordinate with branch representatives.

The strike begins – and government arrests union leaders

Early in February 1994 the strike began in the form of a go-slow. By 16 February it had escalated into a full-scale national work stoppage.

Government response was quick and hostile. The Minister of Labour, John Nkomo, threatened to issue a Disposal Order, allowing the corporation to fire all 10 000 workers. ZPTWU leaders, three of whom were detained by the police, were warned in private that the Minister would deregister the union. Meanwhile PTC management announced that it would have no problems finding replacements for its

skilled staff.

Under intense pressure, the detained ZPTWU officials, were forced to announce an end to the strike on Friday, 18 February. However, in anticipation of their absence, a new strike leadership within the ZPTWU continued to mobilise for collective action.

At the same time, public sympathy for the strikers was growing.

A majority of parliamentarians were vocal in their condemnation of the PTC's high-handed flouting of the Labour Tribunal's findings. Letters of support poured into the national newspapers. Overseas, affiliates of the ZPTWU in the international trade union movement threatened to isolate Zimbabwe from world posts and telecommunications networks.

When, because of confused communication, some PTC post offices and savings banks reopened for business on Monday 21 February, groups of striking workers clogged the queue and then announced the strike was continuing.

Under the supervision of local union leaders, hundreds of workers flooded out of their workplaces in a remarkable show of solidarity. By the end of the day a complete stayaway was back in effect.

Government capitulates

The decision to re-arrest top ZPTWU leaders the next day was short-lived in the face of mounting chaos and growing public anger over PTC intransigence. After only hours in detention and following the mediation of ZCTU Secretary-General Morgan Tsvangirai, ZPTWU officials were brought to the press conference at which the Minister of Information announced the government's capitulation to the strikers' demands.

Since then, pressure has been maintained on the PTC by ruling party parliamentary backbenchers who have recommended that President Mugabe replace the top management and Board of Directors of the besieged parastatal, and rectify severe salary imbalances between top and ordinary staff.

Backbenchers called on Deputy Minister of Information Chen Chimutengwende to

resign when he told parliament he was unaware that strikers were grieving the enormous disparity in salaries – more than \$200 000 in extreme cases – between top and lower grade posts.

And another blow to the legacy of Ian Smith

In the meantime, trade unionists in general were further bolstered by a decision of the Supreme Court handed down soon after the end of the ZPTWU strike. On Friday 25 February, the Court ruled in favour of the ZCTU-led appeal against a section of the Law and Order (Maintenance) Act restricting public demonstrations.

Long used by the Rhodesian and Zimbabwean government to control the activity of perceived opponents, Section 6 of the Act required advance police permission for any public demonstrations. The ZCTU appeal, part of a court case dating from the arrest of six demonstrators in the June 1992 ZCTU protest, argued the Section violated the right to freedom of expression and assembly, and was unconstitutional. The appeal was finally carried when government conceded the argument with no contest.

Labour leaders, along with human rights activists and officials in Zimbabwe's growing number of opposition political parties, have lauded the decision as a hall mark of democratic advance.

In the context of previous government intimidation of opponents – and labour activists in particular – the de facto scrapping of Section 6 by government is as much a landmark in Zimbabwean social relations as ZPTWU's victory earlier in the week at the PTC. ☆

“25.2.94:

... Zimbabwe Supreme court rules unconstitutional the Law & Order Act requirement of police permission for public demonstrations”



Gift Chimanihiri

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frustration: “This organisation is a sieve!”

Pretty soon the management hit back. Firstly they wrote to me advising my position in the P&T was terminated. (The long-established practice in our union is for the General Secretary to be a P&T employee seconded to the union, whose P&T job is held open for him pending his return.) We had to go to the High Court to get a reversal of this victimisation.

After that the P&T systematically began pressurising the union executive members to remove the union leadership since it was “not seeing eye-to-eye with management”. They also attacked the union leadership in the press, and started promoting a splinter union amongst employees, providing it with transport, access etc.

When all these moves failed to remove the leadership, the P&T unilaterally broke off contact with the union until the union “apologised” for its behaviour. But our Congress late

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in 1993 supported the union leadership, so even this tactic of the management failed. Finally, in January this year the P&T management began withholding all but a small fraction of the members' subscriptions, which meant the union was going to collapse very soon through lack of resources.

So the strike which began in February was only secondarily about wages and conditions. It was primarily about the P&T's refusal to negotiate, and its determination to destroy the union. Soon after the strike began the union leadership was all arrested in the early hours of the morning at their homes by large groups of heavily-armed police. I asked them why they were acting in this fashion, since I was at my office every day and they were at liberty simply to call me in to their office if they wished to speak to me. It was blatant bully-boy tactics designed to intimidate!

We were arrested under the Law and Order Maintenance Act, on the basis that we were undermining the maintenance of essential services. But we claimed our strike was lawful because Clause 120, subclause 4(b) of the Labour Relations Act provides that, irrespective of other laws, workers can take action where there's the threat to the existence of a registered and certified union.

We won the strike confrontation because our membership support was very strong, and because the public supported us. In one instance we had to appeal to a crowd of about 1 000 members of the public queuing at the Harare main post office. We just explained to them why there was no postal service and they simply dispersed without further ado.

The hardline attitude of the management of the P&T was not, in

my view, just bad industrial relations practice. The Deputy Postmaster General, who is in charge of personnel, salaries etc is a political appointee. Although the government is talking more nowadays of the importance of collective bargaining, it seems to us that the real policy is seen through the actions of the government's political appointees, and this particular individual had no qualifications whatsoever in industrial relations – he was a lawyer. Anyway, since the strike I have not seen him. It is said he is "on leave".

So what is the government's "real" policy towards labour, then? There are stories that the coming-to-power of the MMD in Zambia (with ex-miners' leader Chiluba now president) has caused a panic amongst ZANU leadership for fear that the unions may play a similar role in Zimbabwe. This fear may explain the hardline attitude of the P&T. Even after the strike, although the wage issue has been settled at the instruction of the Minister, no progress had been made in any of the other grievance areas.

As "essential service" workers we do not normally have the right to strike. But the alternative open to us – the Industrial Tribunal – is hopelessly slow, with delays of a year and more. The government must sort out this mess or it must accept that there will inevitably be strike action, even by essential service workers, in defence of their interests. ☆

"Soon after the strike began, union leadership was all arrested at their homes by large groups of heavily armed police"

Socialism via Social Democracy?

The December 1993 edition of the South African Labour Bulletin carried a substantial debate on the topic “Social Democracy or Democratic Socialism?”

A key contributor to this debate, Australian political scientist Winton Higgins, pointed to the political practices in Sweden during the 20th Century as a useful example of how Social Democracy as a political system could be used pro-actively to promote the goal of Democratic Socialism. Higgins suggested that certain similarities between Sweden and South Africa, especially in respect of the “social movement” character of their labour movements, meant that the Swedish approach to, and use of Social Democracy was well worth considering as South African socialists strategised for the future.

In this edition, **Liv Tørres**, herself a Scandinavian, takes issue with Higgins, pointing to the differences between Scandinavian societies and South African society, and questioning the extent to which the Swedish socialists quoted by Higgins ever represented, or still now represent, the main thrust of Swedish Social Democracy which now – rather than advancing towards Democratic Socialism – appears to be in retreat.

A further contribution by **Winton Higgins** in this edition, focussing on his home ground, examines the importance of an Industrial Policy from a socialist perspective, and analyses the success of Australian trade unions’ attempts to hold the governing Australian Labour Party to an agreed Industrial Reconstruction plan.

To provide context to the Australian comparison, economist **Frank Stillwell** charts the progress of the Australian Government -Trade Union Accord over the last 10 years, the Accord being the forum through which national Wage Policy Agreements have been arrived at.

Responding to the foreign contributors, SALB Guest Editor **Mike Murphy** attempts to isolate the important common lesson for trade unions in the here-and-now of post-election South Africa, arguing that a focus on Social Contracts (or Government/Labour Accords) and Social Democratic “statecraft” to the neglect of a revived and sustained involvement of members in their own trade unions will result in an empty-shell “House of Labour” which can aspire neither to Socialism, nor Social Democracy, nor meaningful trade unionism.