

Zimbabwe: the gulf widens

A shortened version of a report from Harare by MIKE HALL on the growing rift between President Robert Mugabe's ZANU Government and Zimbabwe's trade unions. The full article was published in *International Labour Reports*, Jan/Feb 1990

An "occupational hazard" was how Morgan Tsvangirai, Secretary - General of the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), described his five weeks detained by the Zimbabwean Government, accused of being a South African agent. He was freed on 14 November.

The detention of critics of President Robert Mugabe's Government seems to have become routine. Tsvangirai's case has highlighted the gulf between the avowedly socialist ruling ZANU Party and Zimbabwe's trade unions. Mugabe's popularity has waned, and the political climate is volatile. Against this backdrop, the ruling elite is unsure of how to handle the ZCTU - the umbrella body of 29 unions - which is increasingly independent and critical.

Observers are concerned that Tsvangirai's detention means the Government of

Zimbabwe is not prepared to allow the development of a genuine independent trade union movement which could oppose government policies more than by just issuing reports.

"Subversive"

Tsvangirai was arrested on 6 October for a press statement criticising the Government's handling of protests by Harare University students amid a general clampdown. He warned that attempts to suppress disenchantment over rising living costs, transport problems and unemployment would "certainly plunge the whole society into complete turmoil sooner rather than later". It had already brought about the naked use of brute state force and the suppression of individual rights, according to Tsvangirai.

Trade unions in Zimbabwe are weak. Unionisation is low (about 20% of workers in formal em-

ployment are union members). Most jobs are insecure because of unemployment, and most workers lack the political consciousness of their South African counterparts. Observers say Tsvangirai's call for action which the government deemed 'subversive' was rhetorical.

His detention was widely condemned within Zimbabwe as an affront to democracy. Numerous international labour organisations also strongly protested. The ZCTU campaigned for his release, although the organisation, close to the ruling party, probably tempered its response.

Dissatisfaction

Underlying the Government's intolerance of dissent is the volatile political climate in Zimbabwe. ZANU has been badly shaken by a corruption scandal last year involving the illegal sale of cars. Five cabinet ministers resigned, and one of them, a close associate of Mugabe and hero of the liberation struggle, committed suicide.

Still formally pledged to building a society based on Marxist - Leninist principles, Mugabe's ZANU has chosen a pragmatic capitalist path. Most of the structures of the old regime of Ian Smith remain intact and foreign multinationals are being encouraged to invest.

President Mugabe's aim is a one-party state, with a clear mandate to rewrite the Constitution after next April,



ZCTU Secretary-General
Morgan Tsvangirai

Photo: ZCTU

when the Lancaster House Agreement (which laid down certain conditions after independence such as protection for white farmers against having their land appropriated) expires.

His ZANU party (whose political base is the majority of Shona people) and its former arch-rival, Joshua Nkoma's ZAPU Party (centred on the minority Ndebele) are engaged in a delicate process of sealing a 1987 decision to merge.

However, former ZANU General - Secretary and close colleague of Mugabe, Edgar Tekere, has launched a new party, the ZUM. Tekere was expelled from ZANU in 1988 for his outspoken criticisms including a statement that "democracy in Zimbabwe is in the intensive care unit".

In four recent by-elections, several ZUM officials were beaten up allegedly by ZANU youth league members and others were detained by

ZANU's 1990 election manifesto - more promises

In anticipation of elections, ZANU(PF) has once again affirmed its "Marxist-Leninist" principles. ZANU(PF)'s election manifesto, according to the *Star* (7/3/90), promises to improve life for workers and peasants, and to "keep a tight rein on the activities of the petty-bourgeoisie". It speaks of the "second phase of the revolution", which will see the government using drastic measures to acquire land for peasant farmers. The manifesto also promises to reduce the presence of foreign multinationals in the economy, through "individuals, co-operatives, joint ventures and government (being) fully involved as partners and co-owners in public and private ventures."

Such things have been promised by ZANU(PF) before. How much of it is mere election rhetoric, and how much sincere intention, remains to be seen. What seems clear, though, is that Mugabe's style of government - which is often highly intolerant of criticism - seems set to continue. For example, the election manifesto denies students the right to challenge the government on "matters of policy concerning the university or on the general maintenance of law and order".

Devan Pillay

the security services.

Most agree that the ZUM is a rag-bag of political has-beens and opportunists, but Tekere has raised issues which have embarrassed the ruling party. The ZUM could well attract a protest vote in urban areas.

There is considerable public dissatisfaction with the Government. Transport is a major headache for working people. Wages have not kept pace with the high rate of inflation. Unemployment levels are alarming. Taxation is very high, and housing and education expensive. Mugabe has been seen as too soft on corruption and the abuse of power by politicians and senior officials.

Workers' gains since Independence, especially minimum wage laws and controls on dismissals, have to be

put beside wage freezes and price rises, thousands of job losses (100 000 jobs were lost in commercial agriculture 1980 - 1985), and laws banning virtually all strikes.

Land re-distribution remains a key political issue which many Zimbabweans believe the Government has not adequately addressed. Above all else, it was land for which the liberation war was fought. Yet a handful of white commercial farmers still control vast areas of fertile farmland, while hundreds and thousands of peasants are either landless or till barren land, even though the peasant sector has shown huge increases in productivity since Independence.

Rhetoric

Faced with these uncertainties, the Government has

clamped down on dissent, with the ZCTU as a prime target. For several years after its formation in 1981, the organisation has been hampered by corruption, bureaucracy and a leadership close to ruling interests and far removed from workers. Under Tsvangirai, a former mineworker, and his colleagues elected last year, the ZCTU had begun organising workers meetings and forcefully criticising government policy on matters of wider trade union importance.

"For the first time since Independence," says ZCTU lawyer Albert Musaruwa, "we began to question issues affecting workers, such as national economic policy and new legislation. Government control over the trade union has disappeared," he adds, "and the Government finds it difficult to enter into public debate on these issues."

A major area of difference widening the gulf between the Government and the unions is ideological. The ZCTU has drawn attention to government rhetoric, accusing ZANU of "ideological indecision and ineptitude". Orthodox Marxists at the University, also critical of ZANU's ideological direction, have been harassed and suspended.

"The Government says it is socialist," said one unionist, "but it is moving away from socialism. If it believes socialism has failed then it should say so openly."

Some observers believe that one reason why Tsvangirai was arrested is that the

Government may have feared the emergence of a new opposition workers' party. "The Government says our criticism amounts to opposition," says Mike Mushyabasa, head of the 5 000 strong chemical workers' union and ZCTU Deputy Secretary-General, "but we are not an opposition party. All we are saying is: let's debate the issues that affect workers."

ZCTU activists say their aim is to encourage workers to transform ZANU into a vanguard party. "It must have strong links with workers," says Mushyabasa.

Investment code

Ideological criticism is linked to two recent government initiatives in particular which have been strongly attacked by the ZCTU. One is an Investment Code launched last April to attract foreign business to help combat the unemployment crisis, and another the extension of the emergency powers legislation - inherited from the Smith regime - limiting the right to strike.

The Investment Code offers tax incentives and up to 100% profit remittance to investors in priority areas. It promises to de-control prices while the Government will set wage ranges. It also promises "greater flexibility" for employers wanting to dismiss workers.

The Code has been criticised from both sides. The private sector argues it does not go far enough. The ZCTU says it "symbolises an almost

total abandonment" of the aim of building a socialist society.

The ZCTU argues that foreign investment would create few jobs, since it is likely to be capital-intensive and may put local firms out of business. Zimbabwe, says the ZCTU, would become even more dependent on foreign capital (already 75% of the economy is foreign-owned) and it would mean the loss of regulations which protect workers.

Another major issue for the unions has been extension of the emergency powers (Maintenance of Law and Order) regulations to control strike action. This followed a minor dispute by railway workers and came at about the same time as the Investment Code.

Most industries have been declared 'essential' and managers have been given powers to sack striking workers. "There are now so many laws banning strikes," says Albert Musaruwa, "that some ban the same things several times over."

"If we don't have the right to strike," says Mike Mushyabasa, "we have no power." The ZCTU wants to see a strike provision enacted.

The labour movement in Zimbabwe feels under pressure from an increasingly hostile Government. Unionists are concerned that the hidden agenda is to make the ZCTU an arm of the ruling party and the Government. "If we don't review the situation quickly", says Mushyabasa, "we could find ourselves non-existent." ☆