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## **Between politics and the shop floor: Which way for Namibia's labour movement?<sup>1</sup>**

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Despite the prominent role played by Namibian trade unions in the country's liberation struggle, and regardless of the fact that the labour movement is still the strongest organised force among Namibia's 'civil society' organisations, trade unions seem to have lost much of their popularity and political influence in recent years. Due to Namibia's large rural population and the underdeveloped manufacturing sector, trade unions might seem to represent only a minority of the population. However, as pointed out by Mbuende (1986:177-9), there are close links between the Namibian peasantry and the industrial working class as a result of the contract labour system, whose legacy is still visible today. Workers' wages contribute significantly to the survival of family members in the rural areas and Namibia's industrial workers bear a substantial burden caused by the widespread unemployment, about 37% nationwide (Ministry of Labour 2005:3). Over the past two decades a permanent urban working class has emerged, but most workers in formal-sector employment share their income by way of remittances to members of their extended families in urban and rural areas. The labour force surveys of 1997, 2000 and 2004 revealed that almost half of Namibia's national household incomes are derived from wages and salaries (Ministry of Labour 2001, 2002 and 2006).

Despite its small population of less than 2 million people, Namibia has about 30 trade unions grouped into two federations and several unaffiliated unions. The largest trade union federation is the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), which represents 60,000-70,000 workers. The NUNW played a key role during Namibia's liberation struggle and continues to be affiliated to the ruling SWAPO party. The second trade union federation is the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA), which was formed in 2002 by unions that rejected NUNW's party-political link (Jauch 2004:38-47)

This article sketches some of the challenges faced by the Namibian labour movement 17 years after independence, with particular emphasis on the question of trade unions and politics. It is argued that Namibia's trade unions are at a crossroads today and that the choices made now will have a lasting impact on the future and the relevance of the labour movement in the years to come.

### **The socioeconomic environment**

Seventeen years after independence, Namibia is still characterised by huge socioeconomic inequalities that are largely a reflection of its colonial apartheid history, but also of the class stratification that has taken place since independence. Namibia has

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws extensively on the author's earlier publications in 2002 and 2004.

relatively limited financial resources in both the government and the private sector to conduct frequent surveys on social-economic developments. However, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) under the National Planning Commission (NPC), the Bank of Namibia and the ministry of labour all conducted several national surveys on which this paper draws.

Namibia's population of about 1.8 million people is relatively young. More than half the population is less than 25 years of age and more than 40% is less than 15 years old. In 2004, only 37% of the population lived in urban areas compared to a rural population of 63%. These figures are changing steadily due to the increasing urbanisation that has taken place since independence. In 2000, the average Namibian household had 5 members with an average size of 5.6 members in rural areas and 4.2 members in urban areas (Ministry of Labour 2002:26).

### **Economically active population**

In 2004, 888,348 Namibians were 15 years or older and the labour force survey classified 493,448 (56%) of them as economically active. The bulk of those classified as economically inactive were students (41%), followed by 'home-makers' (25.3%), retired and old people (25.9%) and those affected by illness and disability (6.9%). There was a gender discrepancy, as males are dominant among economically active Namibians accounting for 63.7%, while most of the economically inactive Namibians (51.7%) were women (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2006:3, 38).

Although the number of jobs in the agricultural sector has declined steadily over the years, it is still the largest sector in terms of employment in Namibia, accounting for 102,636 (or 26.6%) jobs in 2004 (see table 1). It is, however, important to point out that this figure included about 36,000 communal/subsistence farmers, 490 commercial agricultural employers and 5,765 'own account' self-employed agricultural workers. There were 42,620 farm workers on private farms and 2,034 workers on public farms (ibid:53).

Other important employment sectors were the public sector (19.6%) and especially the service sectors, which accounted for about 35% of all formal sector jobs. On the other hand, manufacturing has remained severely underdeveloped in Namibia and accounted for only 6% of employment (see table 1).

Overall, there were 86,161 employees in the public sector (including parastatals) and 194,516 in the private sector. The total number of employees thus stood at 280,677 in 2004, while there were 12,209 employers outside the agricultural sector and 37,441 'own account' self-employed workers (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2006:53).

**Table 1: Employment by sector (1988-2004)**

Industry	1988		1997		2004	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agriculture	34,398 (commercial farms only)	18.6	146,899 (commercial & communal farms)	36.6	102,636	26.6
Fishing	1,673	0.9	6,771	1.7	12,720	3.3
Mining & quarrying	10,062	5.4	6,592	1.6	7,563	2.0
Manufacturing	9,442	5.1	25,983	6.5	23,755	6.2
Electricity, gas & water supply	1,273	0.7	4,576	1.1	6,151	1.6
Construction	12,657	6.9	19,801	4.9	19,605	5.1
Wholesale & retail trade, repair of motor vehicles, hotels and restaurants	29,394	15.9	36,803	9.1	67,027	17.4
Transport, storage & communication	7,880	4.3	13,480	3.4	15,861	4.1
Finance, real estate and business services	4,325	2.3	28,061	6.8	16,956	4.4
Government service including administration, defence, education, health, social work and social security	38,098	20.6	56,974	14.2	75,863	19.6
Other community, social & personal services (including domestic work)	35,589	20.6	53,065	13.1	36,713	9.5
Other			2,135	0.6	479	0.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>184,791</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>401,203</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>385,329</b>	<b>100</b>

Sources: Department of Economic Affairs 1988; Ministry of Labour 2001 and 2006.

Table 1 shows significant changes in employment patterns between 1988 and 2004. Overall, there was a shift away from the primary sector (such as agriculture and mining) towards the tertiary sector. The manufacturing industries remained fairly stagnant and insignificant in terms of employment, despite various government attempts to boost this sector. This presents the classical picture of a neocolonial economy, characterised by a jump from the primary sector to tertiary industries without the foundation of a significant manufacturing sector as a basis for industrial development.

### **The importance of wages and salaries**

About half of all Namibian households (47%) relied on 'wages and salaries' as their main source of income. In urban areas, this figure was as high as 74%. These figures indicate the critical importance that wages and salaries have for the survival of Namibian households. This is further emphasised by the fact that 68% of households in the country (82% in urban areas) lack a secondary source of income (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2006:36-7).

### **Employment and Unemployment**

The Namibian government's unemployment definition is based on three criteria, namely:

- being without work,
- being available for work, and
- seeking work.

The 'strict definition' of unemployment excludes from the ranks of the unemployed those individuals (15-65 years old) who are without jobs and available for work, but who are **not** actively seeking work. The 'broad definition' of unemployment on the other hand regards every person who is 15-65 years of age and without work but available for work as being unemployed, whether he/she is looking for work or not. The labour force survey of 2004 presented unemployment figures for both definitions as follows.

Unemployment in Namibia according to the 'broad definition' stood at 36.7%, whilst the 'strict definition' resulted in an unemployment rate of 21.9%. Using the 'strict definition' of unemployment in the context of the Namibian labour market is problematic. The criterion 'actively seeking work' for classifying the unemployed may not be accurate, as many unemployed people may have stopped looking for work, not because they do not want to work, but simply because they may be demoralised and have given up hope of finding a job. Others may not bother to seek work as they witness the fruitless efforts of their friends and relatives. Thus, the criterion 'not seeking work' may not be relevant in labour markets that are characterised by mass unemployment.

**Table 2: Unemployment – broad definition (2004)**

	<b>Overall percentage</b>	<b>Percentage among women</b>	<b>Percentage among men</b>
Nationally	36.7	43.4	30.3
Urban areas	29	33.8	24.4
Rural areas	44.7	53	36.5
Caprivi region	51.1	58.6	44.0
Erongo region	34.3	41.7	28.9
Hardap region	28.0	39.2	17.9
Karas region	26.8	36.3	20.2
Kavango region	44.4	47.4	41.3
Khomas region	24.2	26.7	21.9
Kunene region	40.1	56.8	25.9
Ohangwena region	64.2	66.7	60.7
Omaheke region	18.9	29.3	13.0
Omusati region	64.6	64.6	64.7
Oshikoto region	35.0	39.4	30.7
Oshana region	31.2	34.0	27.5
Otjozondujupa region	28.8	45.8	16.4

*Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2006*

Namibia's unemployment has regional, gender and age dimensions. In 2004, the rural unemployment rate (44.7%) was significantly higher than the rate in urban areas (29%).

Unemployment also had a gender dimension, as significantly more women (43.4%) than men (30.3%) were unemployed. Young people were especially hard hit, as 65% of those between the ages of 15 and 19 and 57% of those aged 20 to 24 years were unemployed. On the other hand, the unemployment rate was significantly lower (16-21%) among those between 45 and 59 years of age (ibid:3, 66 and 68).

Unemployment in Namibia is of a long-term nature, as 56% of the unemployed have been jobless for two years or more. Another 17% have been unemployed for 1-2 years while only 5.3% of the unemployed population has been without a job for less than three months. There was no significant difference between men and women regarding the duration of unemployment. However, there was a difference between urban and rural areas as the unemployed in the rural areas tended to be out of jobs for longer than those in the urban areas. Long-term unemployment (two years or more) in rural areas affected 60.5% of the unemployed compared to 49.9% in urban areas (ibid:69).

### **Unionisation rates**

Accurate statistics on trade union membership rates are difficult to find as only a few unions have computerised membership database systems. Most unions rely on their files and on membership-fee deduction records of employers to count their members. A trade union survey carried out by the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in 1998-99 revealed a unionisation rate of about 50% among employees in formal sector employment (LaRRI 1999:11). These figures were updated and indications are that the highest levels of unionisation are found in the public sector (75-80%), the mining and energy sectors (67%), the textile industry (63%) and the food, fishing, hospitality, wholesale and retail sectors (49%). On the other hand, unionisation levels are low among domestic workers, farm workers and in the banking and insurance sectors (see table 4). Likewise, only about 10% of workers in the small business sector are organised by trade unions (Karuombe 2002:47).

The labour force survey of 2004 put the unionisation rate among employees in the public and private sectors at 29%. This figure is significantly lower than those provided by trade unions and their accuracy would have to be established by examining the trade union membership records. This is very difficult at present because of the lack of accurate, computerised database systems. It is thus also impossible to determine the exact number of women in trade unions. It is estimated that 35-40% of union members are women, roughly in line with women's share in the formal labour market. Women are, however, underrepresented in decision-making structures and hardly any occupy the key positions of general secretary or president.

**Table 3: Estimated Unionisation Rates, 2004**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Approximate number of employees</b>	<b>Estimated unionisation rate (signed-up members)<sup>2</sup></b>
Agriculture	44,600	9,000 (20%)
Manufacturing, building and construction	27,000	10,500 (39%)
Mining and energy	6,700	4,500 (67%)
Food, fishing, wholesale, retail and hospitality	45,000	22,000 (49%)
Textile	8,000	5,000 (63%)
Public service, parastatals and municipalities (excluding army, police and teachers)	80,000	60,000 (75%)
Teachers	15,000	12,000 (80%)
Domestic work (private households)	21,500	3,500 (16%)
Banking, insurance, real estate and business services	15,500	4,500 (29%)
Transport, communication and security	14,000	3,500 (25%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>277,300</b>	<b>134,500 (49%)</b>

Sources: LaRRI 1999; Jauch 2004, Ministry of Labour and Social Services 2006; Updates from trade unions (2004). These figures do not include communal farmers and unpaid family labour.

### ***Working conditions and minimum wages***

The majority of Namibian workers fall into the category of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. With the exception of a few sectors where strong trade unions managed to negotiate reasonable working conditions (e.g., mining, fishing and the civil service), these workers usually earn below N\$ 1,000 per month<sup>3</sup> (US\$ 143) and enjoy very few benefits. The only benefits that are compulsory by law are social security payments for workers who work more than two days per week.

Workers at labour brokers, known as labour hire companies, experience the poorest working conditions. Workers there earn between N\$ 2 and N\$ 5 (US\$ 0.28-0.71) per hour without benefits and job security. Wages are also extremely low for domestic and farm workers, who often earn cash wages of only N\$ 300-500 per month (US\$ 42-71). Likewise, until recently Namibian textile workers at the Malaysian company Ramatex

<sup>2</sup> Signed-up membership refers to the number of workers who applied for union membership and received their membership cards. The number of paid-up members (whose membership fees are received by unions on a monthly basis) is likely to be about 20% lower than the signed-up membership.

<sup>3</sup> The Namibia dollar (N\$) is pegged to the South African rand and the exchange rate stood at around US\$ 1 to N\$ 7 in July 2007.

earned wages of only N\$ 600-800 per month (US\$ 85-114) (Jauch and Shindondola 2003:19-20).

The Namibia Farmworkers Union (NAFWU) managed to reach an agreement with agricultural employers to implement a national minimum wage of N\$ 429 (US\$ 54) per month in addition to food and housing. This national minimum wage came into effect on 1 April 2003 but was only implemented on most of the country's commercial farms. On communal farms, the average monthly wage was only N\$ 201-250 (US\$ 28-35) per month (Karamata 2006:3).

On the other hand, well-qualified and experienced professionals and managers earn huge salary packages that compare favourably with the best in the world when the costs of living are taken into account. Managers in the civil service earn packages of about N\$ 250,000-400,000 per year (US\$ 35,000-57,000), while some managers in parastatal companies earn up to three times that amount.

These enormous differences in payment have created a four-tier labour market:

1. a small elite enjoying a standard of living comparable to first world countries;
2. a significant group of formal-sector workers with permanent jobs and low to middle incomes;
3. a growing group of casual workers and 'labour hire' workers who are the victims of a labour market that virtually forces them to accept any job under any conditions; and
4. unemployed workers who turned to the informal economy, to sex work or to crime as a last resort.

## **Trade unions and politics**

The NUNW played a prominent role during the liberation struggle and in the public policy debates after independence. Its history is in many ways similar to that of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), as both played a critical role in terms of mass mobilisation during the liberation struggle. After decades of intense repression, the NUNW unions emerged from the mid-1980s onward as key players in the economic and political arena. They linked the struggle at the workplace with the broader struggle for political independence and formed links with other social and political organisations such as the Namibia National Students Organisation (NANSO) and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). The NUNW understood its role as that of a social movement, which could not address workers issues separately from those affecting the broader community. Exploitation at the workplace was thus linked to the broader struggle against racial and political oppression.

Most of Namibia's trade unions were established inside the country after the mid-1980s. Although several attempts to form unions had been made before, they were suppressed by the colonial regime time and again. However, the earlier efforts laid the foundation for the later emergence of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) and its affiliates (see Peltola 1995:167-97; Bauer 1997:69). Community organising surged inside Namibia from 1984 onwards, focusing on the crisis in housing, employment, health,

education and social welfare. In the absence of trade unions, workers began to take their workplace problems to social workers at the Roman Catholic church and the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). At that time, the umbrella of the churches provided political activists with a shield under which they could start organising workers. Unlike trade unions, which had been crushed by the colonial state, churches were able to operate across the country. By 1985, workers and community activists had formed a Workers Action Committee in Katutura, which became the forerunner of trade unions (Bauer 1997:70).

During the mid-1980s, South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) began to organise workers at Namibia's Consolidated Diamond Mines and Rossing mines in Oranjemund and Arandis. They linked up with the Workers Action Committee and formed the Rossing Mineworkers Union by April 1986. This union later became the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) (*loc. cit.*). The MUN and other NUNW-affiliated unions provided workers with an organisational vehicle through which they could take up workplace grievances as well as broader political issues, which were always seen as linked to the economic struggle.

Another factor that contributed to the emergence of trade unions inside Namibia was the release of Namibian political prisoners from 1984 onwards. Some returned to Windhoek and began working for the SWAPO structures again. A decision was taken to reactivate the NUNW inside Namibia and by April 1986 a Workers Steering Committee had been formed. It incorporated the Workers Action Committee and all other efforts to organise workers around the country. Fieldworkers began organising different workplaces and in September 1986 the NUNW's first industrial union was launched, the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) led by John Pandeni, one of the former Robben Island prisoners (*loc.cit.*). Shortly afterwards, the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) was launched, led by another former Robben Island prisoner, Ben Ulenga. In 1987 the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MANWU) and the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) were launched, followed by the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union (NATAU) in June 1988, the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) in March 1989, the Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers Union (NDAWU) in April 1990 and the Namibia Farmworkers Union (NAFWU) in May 1994 (LaRRI 1999:3). In 2000, the Namibia Financial Institutions Union (NAFINU) was launched as the first NUNW union catering to white-collar workers, while the Namibia Music Industry Union (NAMIU) joined in 2001. These unions constitute the affiliates of the NUNW today.

The exiled and internal wings of the NUNW were merged during a consolidation congress held in Windhoek in 1989. At that time, the NUNW unions inside Namibia had already established themselves and were a formidable force among grassroots organisations. They enjoyed huge support even beyond their membership and played a critical role in ensuring SWAPO's victory in the elections of 1989.

The NUNW maintained its links with SWAPO after independence through its affiliation with the ruling party. This link has led to heated debates both within and outside the federation. While the majority of NUNW affiliates argued that a continued affiliation would help the federation to influence policies, critics have pointed out that the affiliation

would undermine the independence of the labour movement and that it would wipe out prospects for trade union unity in Namibia.

Trade unions outside the NUNW have repeatedly stated that they differed fundamentally from NUNW over the question of political affiliation. They charged that NUNW could not act independently and play the role of a watchdog over government as long as it was linked to the ruling party. There was also a growing public perception that NUNW was merely a workers' wing of the ruling party, although the NUNW and its affiliates have on several occasions been vocal critics of government policies. They criticised government on issues such as the slow process of land redistribution and education reform and self-enrichment by politicians. However, developments since 2004 point to an increasing influence of the ruling party over the NUNW and its affiliates, as will be discussed below.

## **Challenges after independence**

The achievement of independence in 1990 had a tremendous impact on the labour movement and required a redefinition of the role that trade unions wanted (and were able) to play. The function of political mobilisation, which had taken centre stage before independence, was taken over by SWAPO, whose leadership returned to Namibia in 1989 and became the government after independence. Given the close structural links between the NUNW unions and SWAPO as well as the fact that most union leaders played a prominent role in the party as well, there was a widespread expectation among workers that the SWAPO government would be a 'workers' government.' A few years before independence, leading SWAPO intellectuals like Kaire Mbuende had argued that the interests of workers and peasants constituted the dominant position in SWAPO (Mbuende 1986:199). However, once in power SWAPO did not pursue revolutionary working class politics and instead maintained the predominantly capitalist structure of the economy, while introducing the notion of social partnership into labour relations. Trade unions were expected to define a new role within this framework and although the NUNW had previously called for radical change, it accepted the new framework with little resistance.

### **Social partnership?**

Once in office, the SWAPO government embarked upon a path of reforming Namibia's colonial labour relations system. The overall aim was to move towards a new system of 'social partnership' governed by the Labour Act passed in 1992. Tripartite consultations and collective bargaining were seen as critical for the implementation of this new labour dispensation. The government envisaged an improvement in the living and working conditions of Namibian workers to be brought about by a combination of successful economic policies and successful trade union engagement with the private sector. The government defined its own role merely as that of a 'referee,' trying to create a level (and enabling) playing field for collective bargaining between business and labour.

However, the consultative process leading to the formulation of the Labour Act was driven by government as the dominant partner, which decided on the scope of the consultations. Unlike in a corporatist, institutionalised arrangement – such as in the

classical cases of postwar, social democratic Sweden and Germany – where capital, labour and state jointly formulate socioeconomic policies (Sycholt and Klerck 1997:88), social partnership in Namibia did not take the form of a joint decision-making process. In the process of drafting the Labour Act of 1992, for example, government consulted with labour and capital but reserved the right to make the final decision without trying to achieve consensus with the social partners.

The Labour Act of 1992 constituted a significant improvement compared with the previous colonial labour legislation. It extended its coverage to all workers, including domestic workers, farm workers and the public services. The new law encouraged collective bargaining, entrenched basic workers' and trade union rights, set out the procedures for legal strikes and provided protections against unfair labour practices (Bauer 1993:11). However, the act fell short of some of the expectations of trade unions, which felt that employers had unduly influenced the law through 'behind the scenes' lobbying. The act did not make provision for minimum wages (as SWAPO had promised in its 1989 election manifesto) and it did not guarantee paid maternity leave. Payment during maternity leave was only introduced with the Social Security Act of 1996. Other key demands of the NUNW that were not accommodated in the Labour Act were the 40-hour working week and 21 days of annual leave for all workers (Jauch 1996:91).

Overall, post-independence labour legislation constituted a significant improvement for labour, but it also served to reduce worker militancy by shifting the emphasis away from workplace struggles to negotiations between union leaders and management. Bargaining issues in Namibia were (and still are) narrowly defined and usually deal with conditions of employment only (Klerck and Murray 1997:247). The trade unions' main function was thus narrowed to being the representative of workers in a tripartite arrangement. While this enabled trade unions to win improved working conditions in well-organised sectors like mining, fishing and the public service, collective bargaining remained almost meaningless for vulnerable workers such as farm workers, domestic workers and security guards. Despite the introduction of national minimum wages in 2003 and 2005 for farm workers and security guards, these workers are still exposed to highly exploitative practices. The ongoing adversarial nature of labour relations, coupled with racial polarisation in many workplaces and huge wage gaps, are further obstacles to the notion of social partnership.

Trade unions are also confronted with a threat of a dwindling membership base due to the increasing 'casualisation' of work. In an attempt to cut labour costs and to curb trade union influence, employers in various economic sectors, including retail, fishing, mining, hospitality and manufacturing, resorted to temporary and casual work contracts for low-skilled workers. The emergence of labour hire companies (labour brokers) in the late 1990s in particular, highlighted the threat of 'casualisation' to workers' incomes, job security and benefits. By 2006, over 12,000 workers were already employed through labour hire companies, which retained a significant part of workers' earnings as their fees and deprived them of the benefits enjoyed by permanent workers. Due to the insecurity of their contracts and their shifts between different workplaces, trade unions found it very difficult to recruit and represent labour hire workers (see Jauch and Mwilima 2006). Thus

trade union membership has become increasingly narrow in focus, covering permanent workers in 'traditional' sectors such as the public service, mining, fishing, construction and retail, while unions are unable to reach tens of thousands of workers in precarious working conditions on farms, in private households, at labour hire companies and in the informal economy.

Against the background of huge imbalances in terms of economic power between capital and labour, the state's chosen role as 'neutral referee' and creator of an enabling environment for collective bargaining effectively benefited business interests. Business representatives went as far as describing worker militancy as an obstacle to job creation and economic development. Such sentiments were even echoed by some government officials and politicians, which was just one indication that the close political ties between labour and SWAPO did not prevent the entrenchment of a pro-capitalist state after independence. This process was also assisted by the lack of political clarity on the side of trade unions regarding the development of a different social order after independence. Notions of worker democracy, worker control and social transformation that had just emerged in the late 1980s had not been developed into a coherent concept within the labour movement at the time of independence.

### **Conservative economic policies**

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing labour after independence was to define an effective strategy for influencing broader socioeconomic policies in favour of its working class base. This task proved to be extremely difficult in the face of an onslaught by the neoliberal ideology that was usually portrayed as the only practical policy option for Namibia and other countries in the region. Klerck accurately described the Namibian government's response to globalisation as:

... an open-ended encouragement of foreign investment; the marital stance towards the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; the confinement of social transformation to an extension of representative institutions; a tendency to reduce black empowerment to increasing the black entrepreneurial classes; and a failure to conceive of an economic policy that departs in substance from that of the colonial powers (1997:364).

IMF and World Bank advisors have become regular visitors to Namibia and 'assisted' with the country's public expenditure review and with 'training' high-ranking staff members of government economic institutions. Local economists by and large seem to be trapped in the neoliberal dogma and continue to promote the very policies (e.g., structural adjustment programmes) that have caused severe social hardships in other SADC countries. The Namibian government's increasing slide towards neoliberal policies manifested itself, for example, in the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and privatisation programmes. Opposition to such policies by the labour movement was frequently countered by accusations that trade unions were still living in the (ideological) past and that trade unions were obstacles to economic growth and job creation. In the absence of a comprehensive alternative development strategy by labour, trade unions

were forced on the defensive on several occasions and found themselves sidelined in economic policy formulation.

## **A divided labour movement**

The year 2006 in particular revealed deep-seated divisions within the Namibian labour movement. Failure to live up to the proclaimed ideal of ‘one country, one federation’ and ‘one industry, one union’ resulted in a multitude of trade unions. In some industries, three or more trade unions compete with each other for membership, for example in the fishing and security industries. Even at federation level, the NUNW now faces a significant rival. The Namibia People’s Social Movement (NPSM) and the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU) merged in 2002 to form the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA), which has 14 affiliates with a combined membership of about 45,000. The TUCNA unions focus predominantly on workplace issues and are less engaged with policy issues than the NUNW, which represents about 70,000 workers. The main dividing line between the two federations is the question of the NUNW’s affiliation to SWAPO, which the TUCNA unions reject.

### **Party-political conflicts**

The influence of SWAPO politics on the NUNW has repeatedly come into the limelight during the past two years. Following the crystallisation of ‘camps’ within the ruling SWAPO party during its extraordinary congress in 2004 (which decided on the party’s presidential candidate), the NUNW and its affiliates were drawn into the battle. Although there were no significant ideological differences between those in SWAPO who supported Hidipo Hamutenya and those who supported Sam Nujoma, rival camps began to emerge within the union federation. In the run-up to the NUNW’s congress in 2006, the former acting secretary-general of the NUNW, Peter Naholo, who was regarded as part of the ‘Hamutenya group,’ was removed from his post in December 2005. This set the stage for the months to come as trade union leaders mobilised intensively with a view to ensuring that candidates loyal to their own ‘camp’ would be elected at congress in April 2006 (New Era, 4 April, 10 April, 11 April, 20 April, 26 April & 28 April 2006; Republikein, 31 March 2006). During the congress, this battle for political control overshadowed proceedings despite the many labour, social and economic issues that workers had raised during their regional conferences in preparation for the congress. As the ‘Nujoma group’ among the NUNW congress delegates gained the upper hand during the congress deliberations, an unprecedented step was taken to cancel individual elections for each leadership position. Instead, congress endorsed the list of candidates that the ‘Nujoma group’ had proposed.

In the aftermath of the NUNW congress, the political divisions lingered. Some leaders of the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) openly criticised the NUNW congress as undemocratic and in violation of constitutional provisions. The union even suspended the payment of NUNW membership fees in protest. Other NANTU leaders, however, disagreed with their colleagues and engaged in a battle for control of the teachers’ union (New Era, 18, 24 and 26 May 2006). During the NANTU congress in September 2006, those who were seen as being part of the ‘Hamutenya group’ received only about one-

third of the congress votes and lost their leadership positions. Once again, the ‘Nujoma group’ had gained the upper hand.

### **Ideological contradictions**

Besides being drawn into intense party-political battles, Namibia’s trade unions also experienced a loss of vision. The statements and practices of several trade unions during the past few years revealed deep-seated ideological contradictions. Sentiments of radical nationalism and liberation, for example on the land issue, were mixed with an acceptance of neoliberalism as the ideology of the ‘free market.’ As trade union leaders entered (and continue to enter) company boards as part of a poorly defined union investment strategy, their views (and interests) increasingly converged with those of government and business. Also, some trade union leaders are now occupying management positions in the public and private sectors, which contradicts the principle of worker control within unions. These developments point to a lack of clarity regarding the working class base of the labour movement and whose interests it is meant to serve. Nationalist and ‘populist’ sentiments are still dominant and only a few union leaders advance positions based on a class analysis.

### **Worker control?**

There is also an increasing lack of accountability within unions, which need to reintroduce the practice of mandates and report-backs to their members before taking major decisions. This applies to wage negotiations and policy interventions alike. Unions need to reverse the increasing trend towards becoming ‘leaders’ organisations’ and instead return to the practice of grassroots democracy and worker control. An encouraging development in this regard was the strike at the Malaysian textile company Ramatex in October 2006. Under pressure not only from a ruthless company management that constantly threatened relocation but also from the Namibian government, which granted Ramatex special privileges and protection, the recognised trade union (NAFAU) failed to improve workers’ extremely poor conditions of service for four years. Following the resignation of many disillusioned Ramatex workers from the union, NAFAU managed to reinvigorate itself after its congress in September 2006. The union finally resorted to utilising its members’ dedication as a source of power. Frustrated by Ramatex’s unwillingness to accommodate even the most modest demands, the union finally held a strike ballot among its members in early October 2006. Over 90% of the Namibian Ramatex workers voted in favour of a strike and on 13 October the factory came to a standstill. In an impressive show of determination, over 3,000 young, predominantly female workers chanted and danced with their placards, indicating that they would not return to work unless their demands were met.

Faced with the prospect of huge losses and the pressure of delivering on time to its clients in the US, the company management responded within hours and indicated its willingness to improve its previous offers. On the second day of the strike, an agreement was reached which paved the way for significantly improved wages and benefits and thus constituted a victory for the Ramatex workers. Throughout the strike, the union leadership consulted the striking workers outside the factory building. Workers were briefed and asked to approve the proposed agreement before it was signed. This was a

significant departure from the widespread practice of union leaders negotiating agreements behind closed doors and informing their members through the media.

## **Conclusion**

Namibia's labour movement stands at the crossroads today as it tries to redefine its role 17 years after independence. Workers and their trade unions had to realise that the changes after independence did not lead to the expected socioeconomic transformation. There are signs that the labour movement lost its vision and now struggles to develop a strategy about how to play a meaningful role in the process of social change. Deep political divisions, not only between NUNW and its rival federation TUCNA, but also within the NUNW itself, worsen this dilemma. These divisions may serve individual political interests but undermine the potential power of the Namibian labour movement as a whole. A multitude of trade unions that are unable to work with each other cannot provide Namibian workers with the strong organisational base needed to advance a working class agenda.

Although it can be argued that trade unions' participation in tripartite arrangements does not necessarily conflict with the larger goal of bringing about social transformation, collective bargaining and tripartite consultations alone are certainly insufficient to address Namibia's huge socioeconomic inequalities. In order to become an engine of social change, trade unions will have to deepen their roots in Namibia's working class constituency and articulate its interests beyond the workplace. This implies that the labour movement will need to develop effective strategies for influencing policies, particularly in the economic arena, which is shaped by neoliberal dogma.

Despite its current weaknesses, the Namibian labour movement still has the potential to become (again) a key organisation in the quest for socioeconomic justice. Like trade unions elsewhere in Africa (see Kester and Sidibe 1997), Namibian unions have a long experience of struggle, a massive potential for organisation and action and an expectation to benefit from independence and democracy. Trade unions have structures (although sometimes weak) all over the country and a significant membership base that is only matched by the country's churches. Provided that unions can strengthen their internal capacity and achieve the level of rootedness in their working class constituency that they had in the late 1980s, the labour movement can become the driving force for more fundamental socioeconomic social change. This will also require that trade unions intensify and cement their links with other progressive organisations that represent socially disadvantaged groups.

Namibia's trade unions face two possible scenarios today. Provided they can meet the challenges outlined above and redefine their role as 'struggle organisations' with a specific class base and a strategic agenda, they are likely to play a central role in the fight for the interests of the Namibia's disadvantaged majority. Failure to seize this opportunity will result in Namibian unions gradually losing their mass base while union leaders are absorbed with bargaining issues, party-political careers, union investments and tripartite participation without addressing (and challenging) the fundamental

socioeconomic structures that uphold the continued skewed distribution of wealth and income.

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