

Straight Talk (51), 16 September 2013

## **One Namibia, many unions?**

*Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper*

In the late 1980s when Namibia's trade unions, especially those organised under the umbrella of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), had massive popular support even beyond their membership, there was no doubt that the question of trade union unity was central for building a strong labour movement. The Katutura community centre at the time (now the shoprite complex) housed most of the unions and a prominent slogan was written on the wall: "One industry-one union, one country-one federation". This signalled the belief that workers' interests could be best served by having strong, large unions built around unity of purpose.

Today, there are over 40 registered trade unions in Namibia and 2 competing trade union federations, the NUNW and the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA). The NUNW is affiliated to the ruling party while TUCNA places great emphasis on its political independence. Despite a total union membership of only around 150 000, workers are divided into a host of competing trade unions which operate as rivals to each other. There are currently no prospects for greater trade union unity and the question needs to be asked if a multitude of unions is in the best interest of Namibian workers?

With independence and the adoption of the Namibian Constitution and later on the Namibian Labour Act, freedom of association became an entrenched fundamental workers' right. Namibian workers thus have the right to freely form or join trade unions and to participate in union activities without being victimised in any way by employers or by the government. This is certainly an important right against the background of a long history of repression of workers' right and the exploitation of labour during the colonial period. It is however, an entirely different question if a multitude of unions is the best way to effectively represent workers' interests at industrial and national level.

In order to understand why trade unions seem to be mushrooming today, one has to examine the reasons why workers join trade unions. Unlike in the colonial era when many workers joined unions as a way of fighting colonialism and oppression, today most workers seem to join unions mostly to be protected against victimisation and unfair treatment at the workplace. Unions are also seen as important vehicles for collective bargaining and improved working conditions. Thus workers today (especially younger ones) seem to consider the question of politics to a far lesser extent than the previous generation when they decide which union to join.

In case that workers are dissatisfied with how the union represents their interests, they are free to leave the union and join another one that they consider as serving their interests better. Thus unions have to ensure that they are representing their members effectively in order to retain and increase their membership. Ineffective unions and

those with an autocratic leadership are likely to lose members as there are other options open to workers. This could help keep unions on their toes.

There are however, also other and far less progressive reasons for the multitude of unions today. Some union leaders who lost out during leadership elections decided to form their own unions for purely personal reasons. Others refuse to merge with sister unions in the same industry for fear of losing their own positions and sometimes new unions are formed as a result of political or leadership struggles that have little to do with workers' interests. In some companies there are now several unions operating, each one representing only a very specific group of employees as is the case with Air Namibia.

Legally, all these unions have a right to exist and workers can freely chose which union to join. However, the multitude of unions often makes joint action difficult as a fragmented workers movement is likely to focus merely on particular workplace issues but is unable to tackle broader issues affecting the working class as a whole such as a living wage, inequality and poverty. Also, small unions are unlikely to be financially self-sufficient and thus lack the ability to effectively represent their members across the country. They tend to be concentrated in specific towns or regions and often lack national influence. It is for these reasons that the mushrooming of unions might in the end undermine labour's ability to speak with a united voice and to raise working class issues beyond the workplace. Workers themselves will need to decide how greater unity of purpose can be built and if a multitude of unions will be helpful in this regard. This is not a question of workers' rights but rather one of the best possible strategy to fight for socio-economic justice and greater working class influence.

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