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The global struggle for decent work

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

Earlier this month, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) convened an international conference on the question of precarious work which has affected an increasing number of workers world-wide over the years. Namibia is no exception as the practices of fixed-term contracts, labour hire and sub-contracting have robbed many Namibian workers of job security and benefits.

Speakers at the conference pointed out that in Asia precarious forms of employment are widespread and that the most affected workers are those with low skills levels and women. Many are facing “triangular” employment relations as they are supplied to companies through labour brokers which are known in Namibia as labour hire companies. Unions have often struggled to organise such workers and they face the challenge of high levels of intimidation and thus had to devise new strategies of how to reach and protect such workers.

Likewise, precarious work is spreading in Latin America. Magda Biavaschi from the University of Campinas in Brazil pointed out that the wave of outsourcing is just an expression of contemporary capitalism and benefits a small economic elite. Therefore, governments and unions have to intervene and labour legislation has to be designed to give effective protection to workers. Despite many claims by employers that strict regulations prevent job creation, there is no global evidence to support to support this. On the contrary, Brazil has managed to create more jobs while closing down on outsourcing and only allowing it in special circumstances. The Brazilian state regards the protection of standards of work and of the dignity of workers as a critical element of decent work and is aware that ongoing initiatives are required to fight precarious work in all its forms.

Prof. Richard Heyman from the London School of Economics pointed out that permanent employment with job security and benefits is not the standard anymore and that the boundary between formal and informal employment has become blurred as a result of neo-liberal capitalism which is destructive of decent work. While protective labour law can provide some form of damage limitation, there is an ongoing attack by business on national labour legislation with a view of increasing “flexibility” and weakening protection for workers. This poses a major dilemma for union today as they have to find ways of countering the ongoing attack.

Precarious forms of employment affect especially young workers and women who are less likely to join unions. However, some trade union managed to re-invent themselves through new forms of organising. Forest workers in India, most of them women, for example started organising themselves as a social movement taking on the onslaught of multinational companies and the neo-liberal policies that facilitated their take-over of

land. Despite the often brutal repression that these workers faced, they continued to organise and managed to form a trade union, led by women. This union not only raises issues about the dignity of work but also environmental justice and social equality as part of what the union's deputy general secretary Roma Malik called "the political economy of working people". Thus the Indian workers and their union have gone beyond a narrow focus on just decent work.

Other encouraging examples were reported from Latin America and even closer to home from Nigeria where workers successfully campaigned against the demolition of informal settlements. In South Africa some unions have gone beyond just organising permanent workers and instead cover "casual" workers as well. Overall, the conference has clearly shown that job security and decent working conditions are under attack in most parts of the world and that protective legislation, including global framework agreements to bind multinational corporations to upholding certain labour standards are important to protect workers' livelihoods. Most importantly, however, will be the enforcement of agreements and the trade union's ability to use their organisational and political power effectively. Only by recruiting and empowering their members to fight back and to overcome the divisions between permanent workers and those in precarious work and by utilising strategic alliances to politically challenge what at times seems to be the overwhelming power of global capital will unions be able to start reversing the trend.

The FES conference in Berlin has shown that this will be a long and ongoing struggle but also that trade unions in various corners of the world have indeed recognised that some fundamental changes will have to occur if the idea of decent work in the sense of restoring dignity and decent working and living conditions for all are to be achieved. This lies at the heart of a global fight against poverty and for the achievement of social and economic justice.

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