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Where to for Namibia's labour movement?

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

Last month a new booklet on Namibia's trade unions was published under the title "trade unions at the crossroads". It looks at the challenges but also at the opportunities for Namibia's trade unions today, including their role at the workplace and beyond. Namibia has almost 40 registered trade unions which are divided into 2 federations and possibly a third federation in the making. The differences between unions are most pronounced when it comes to the question of their broader role in society. Unions have long debated the question how they can decisively influence policies in favour of their working class constituency. What should unions do if the party they were fighting alongside during the liberation struggle is no longer pursuing an agenda that benefits workers? Which kind of alliances should unions form to push for a more radical and transformative socio-economic agenda? These questions must be confronted by any progressive labour movement not only in Southern Africa but everywhere.

A key factor that currently undermines the potential strength of Namibia's labour movement are the ongoing internal divisions between and within unions. During the UNAM lecture series last year, the audience repeatedly asked the union leaders: "We are told that we are fighting poverty, but it seems that before fighting poverty we start fighting each other...How can we fight collectively instead of fighting each other?" The audience also questioned how unions influence national documents like Vision 2030 and the National Development Plans. Despite forming the economic backbone, workers seem to have little or no influence on the content of development plans and similar guiding documents. During the UNAM discussions it was also noted that Namibian unions are resorting less to mass mobilisation regarding employment and other social and political issues. Instead they are merely negotiating for better wages on wages at the workplace. "Are unions still interested in broader national issues such as the economy?" was one of the questions asked.

Another critical aspect is the question of whom Namibian trade unions represent today. Given the fragmentation of the labour market (into formal and informal, casual and permanent, rural and urban, employed and unemployed etc.) unions seem to be unable to recruit beyond the confines of permanent workers in the formal economy. Although they are aware of this challenge, very few unions have practically tackled the task of recruiting marginalised workers on a significant scale. This raises the question if unions are representing the working class or just a section thereof.

Also, Namibia's unions have not yet addressed the country's enormous levels of inequality in a visible and meaningful way. As pointed out during the UNAM lecture series, today about 10% of the population controls 65% of the cash income while 90% of the population have to share the remaining third. Thus Namibia has not managed to change the structures of apartheid as income structures were largely maintained. Even

the unions' approach to salary negotiations often reinforces this trend because across-the-board increases benefit those in higher income categories at the expense of those at the lower end. A 10% increase for a person earning N\$ 1500 a month, for example, means an increase of N\$ 150 while a person earning N\$ 20 000 a month will benefit from an additional N\$ 2000. Thus across-the-board increases widen the income gap,

Unions today have to deal with poverty, inequality and the clash of interests in a capitalist society. Such clashes of interests even occur within unions as some union leaders earn far more than their members and thus do not face the same challenges as workers who struggle to make ends meet. Today, the issue of class divisions permeates the whole Namibian society and it includes even the trade unions. One of the fundamental questions thus is if the working class is still adequately represented by trade unions?

It will be interesting to see which route Namibia's trade unions will take in the years to come. They need to take stock of what they fought for since independence, what they have achieved and what the current constraints are in terms of moving forward. Unions also need to debate what kind of society they envisage, and how they can meaningfully contribute towards building it. Fragmenting the labour movement into more and more splinter unions that fight each other rather than building substantive working class unity and strong bargaining units at workplaces across the country is certainly not going to benefit Namibian workers in the long run. Namibia's labour movement is currently "work in progress" and the slogan of the Mozambican revolutionaries "a luta continua..." (the struggle continues) still seems very relevant today.

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