

## **Chapter 7. From liberation to repression: trade unions in post-colonial Zimbabwe**

Since Independence in 1980, the democratic and economic spaces in Zimbabwe have been perpetually shrinking. The shrinking democratic space is in many ways reflective of the survivalist strategies of the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which epitomise the regime's authoritarian style of ruling. It seems highly improbable that such an environment could be the most conducive for labour union bodies and other civic organisations to operate in. However, when one revisits particular historical junctures in Zimbabwe's labour union history, it is anti-factual to suggest that the combination of state authoritarianism and economic crisis under the Robert Mugabe regime and ZANU-PF have rendered the labour movement completely useless.

Indeed, in the forty-one years of independence, there have been mixed fortunes in the progress of the post-colonial labour movement. On the whole, the labour movement's greatest obstacle has been a lack of political will by successive governments to support labour unions and the workers' cause. Workers remain underrepresented and unaware of their labour rights. This article concludes that, in order to prop up the labour movement in Zimbabwe, more pressure needs to be exerted on the Zimbabwean government to open up the democratic space by promoting democratic institutions. Regional and international bodies also have a central role in their advocacy not only for the advancement of labour rights in Zimbabwe but also for human rights in general. Furthermore, education on labour issues at the grassroots, using existing labour union structures in a bottom-to-top approach, may be a great tool towards advancing a more robust and holistic agenda for worker militancy in Zimbabwe. Overall, the trade union movement has to put on its agenda a global agenda and create solidarity with labour organisations globally.

## The colonial legacy

Historically, the labour movement in Zimbabwe had not always been malleable to state pressure. This is attributable to the highly political nature of the labour unions.

Since the colonial period, labour unions and worker militancy were hardly ever divorced from the politics of the day. During the struggle for political independence in the post-World War Two period, successive and successful Black nationalist organisations mobilised their support from the workers. Early nationalist movements recognised the latent political potential within the black proletariat. Mutually, black middle and lower class citizens saw labour unions as representing their agendas through wider political issues beyond the parochial issues of wages and living and working conditions. Therefore, at Independence, the ruling party, ZANU-PF, had trade unionists at its helm and within its ranks. In a twist of events that was not surprising, the newly elected black majority government under Robert Mugabe began to feel threatened by the same labour movement from which it had rallied its support in the struggle for independence.

After many failed promises, the agitation spread from among many social and economic groups, and it was not long before the government felt compelled to suppress the labour movement as well as any form of opposition. The politics of survival became the hallmark of ZANU-PF's political ambitions and its authoritarianism. Within the context of a state with genocidal tendencies, the labour movement has never gained much traction (Saunders, 2001). During these nascent days, the government attempted to keep its tentacles in the labour movement and control it from within by appointing proxy leadership. Notwithstanding such attempts, the labour movement, through the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), remained significantly autonomous. It is unclear how the political structures of the ZCTU managed to continuously wriggle out of the thorny grips of the state; but for nearly an entire decade since Independence, the labour movement became one of the fiercest and most active opponents of government policies. A case in point: in 1991, the ZCTU was quick to caution the government against adopting neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs. This was at a time when other countries were reeling from the negative effects of SAPs. Such effects were clearly evident among workers through declining wages and per capita indices. During the next decade, the labour movement mutated and became more overt and confrontational as a response to the government's nonchalant attitude and the adoption of ruinous SAPs. Although the ZCTU had previously been the sole voice against government corruption and misgovernance, during the 1990s, civic

organisations also mobilised from among the working classes' riotous actions. While the labour movement became more confrontational by expressing the plight of the working class, the state deflected and became overt in its ways of suppressing this discontent. In 1997, numerous labour strikes were ruthlessly suppressed in an open show of the government's power to quell discontent among its citizens.

## Crisis and unionism

At the end of 1997, Zimbabwe went into a decade of the political and economic crisis that others have referred to as the lost decade (Raftopoulos, 2009). On the one hand, economic mismanagement had led the economy to a grinding halt. Politically, ZANU-PF went through an identity crisis through waning support. The party's political relevance was becoming even more questionable with the rise of a more formidable opponent, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC was again birthed by the labour movement, with its high ranking officials being former leaders of the ZCTU. The ZCTU itself became highly political and supported the MDC in urging Western countries to impose sanctions on the Robert Mugabe regime. Although sanctions were intended to force ZANU-PF and elite party cohorts out of repressive attitudes, there is no doubt that sanctions also affected the working class and ordinary Zimbabweans. Therefore, some have argued that supporting the MDC and politicisation of the labour movement by the ZCTU terminally weakened its organic basis in the working class (Paris, 2013). Furthermore, the heavy involvement of workers in the politics of the nation as forces of political opposition to ZANU-PF provided the government with a trump card to unleash organised violence on the labour movement, particularly the urban working classes.

Members of the opposition party and labour unions were subjected to abductions, arbitrary arrests and torture for organising strikes and other forms of industrial action. The government continued to press for the replacement of union leaders with government agents to subvert industrial action calls. Using a combination of violence, undemocratic legislation and harmful economic policies, the Zimbabwean government considerably weakened the labour movement during the crisis period. Union support became weak due to a combination of fear and the fact that the economic crisis forced many workers into the informal sector, which reduced the number of workers affiliated with labour unions. Even beyond the crisis period, evidence reveals that Zimbabwean workers generally fall out of

the ambit of labour union representation, especially at the grassroots in informal employment (Sauti, 2020).

## Pressure from the region and beyond

Even though most of the trade unions in Zimbabwe are recognised as affiliated to global union and labour federations such as the International Labour Organisation, there has not been enough pressure exerted on the Zimbabwean government to free up the democratic space to allow trade unions the ability to articulate their agendas. Regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Committee have thus far been reluctant to intervene due to the geopolitical concerns within the region. Within the country's borders, the political and economic environment has often left political leaders polarised with regard to the correct position to adopt on the relationship between the state and labour unions. While the 2018 inaugurated government promised a new style of governance, its position on the labour movement still remains quite ambiguous.

In conclusion: the labour movement in Zimbabwe has been responsible for the articulation of broader political issues. This political flair has led the Zimbabwe government to become highly acrimonious against the labour movement. The only clear cut government policy towards the labour movement has been repression, which is linked to the ruling party's survivalist strategies. There thus remains much-limited representation and information about trade unions at grassroots for Zimbabweans.

Although outside observers have continued to put pressure on the Zimbabwean government to reconsider its position on democracy and civil rights, the ruling party has remained divorced from the labour movement.

## References

- Raftopoulos, B. (2009) The Crisis in Zimbabwe, 1998-2008, in Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from Pre-Colonial Period to 2008*, Weaver Press,.
- Saunders, R. (2007) Trade union struggles for autonomy and democracy in Zimbabwe, J. Kraus (ed.), *Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa*.
- Sauti, C. (2020) A critical reflection of trade union representation during the Covid-19 pandemic. A case of General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe's members in Mutare. *Journal of Social Development in Africa: Special Issue on Covid*.

- Sutcliffe, J. (2013) *The Labour Movement in Zimbabwe 1980-2012*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/07/the-labour-movement-in-zimbabwe-1980-2012/>
- Yeros, P. (2013) The rise and fall of trade unionism in Zimbabwe, Part II: 1995-2000, *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, No. 137, pp. 394-409.

