

Section 5. Labour Without Trade Unions

Chapter 10. The informalization of labour in Zimbabwe: opening the way for authoritarianism

In 2019, a press release by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) hinted that the informal economy had the potential to initiate a renewal of the trade union movement globally (ILO 2019a). This notwithstanding that the informal sector across the world is faced with a daunting task of mobilising and establishing collective action. Such conditions are quite prevalent in developing economies across the world and Zimbabwe is not an exception. What makes the Zimbabwean case unique is that the ruling ZANU-PF party has been able to exploit such weaknesses in order to extend the life span of its authoritarian regime. In this article I stress that informalization of labour since the mid-1990s has severed the organic relationship between labour and unions, which in turn has stood to serve the authoritarian motives of the ruling party. Undemocratic governance therefore stands in the way of informal workers mobilising for a more robust trade union movement.

Globally, as of 2019, it was estimated that there were around 2.5 billion workers involved in the informal economy (ILO 2019a). While such a number of informal workers could have a significant impact influencing the trajectory of unionism at a global scale, this sector remains fragmented and unable to mobilise. Globally, the common trend is that legal regulatory frameworks and social protection for the informal sector remain non-existent or partial in relatively progressive countries. Informal workers lack job security, income security, and representation security (Schurman et al. 2012).

Informality and the Zimbabwean economy

The response by trade unions to cater for the special needs of workers in the informal sector remains tepid. Orthodox trade unionism has historically dealt more efficiently with workers who are part of registered or formal enterprises. In order to effectively cater for the informal sector, trade unions need to 'alter their internal structures, review their allocation of resources and develop new strategies in order to organize the un-organized, represent the interests of all workers, and establish coalitions with groups that share common social interests' (ILO 2019b). In the Zimbabwean case, the slow

responsiveness of trade unions has allowed the government to exploit the informal sector for largely political reasons.

All over the world, authoritarian regimes have become associated with improper governance and economic crisis. Zimbabwe has been known to fit this description with its government responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths and abductions of its citizenry as well as an economic crisis that lasted for a decade from 1998 to 2008. Massive deindustrialization, caused by a combination of neoliberal policies and misgovernance during the mid-1990s, led to an unprecedented number of unemployed citizens. Massive unemployment led to an overspill of skilled workers into the informal sector. Since then, the informal sector has become a significant pillar of the Zimbabwean economy, contributing 40% of the GDP as of 2020 (Kubatana 2021).

Challenges between informality and unionism

This notwithstanding, the informalized nature of the labour market has made it difficult for labour unions such as the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions to mobilize from among informal workers. Street vendors, backyard manufacturers, and small-scale miners, among many other working groups, have found themselves not meaningfully represented since independence. Especially in urban areas, informal workers have been subjected to countless episodes of abuse by council officials and law enforcement agents. In 2005, for instance, the government launched a ‘clean-up’ campaign dubbed Operation Murambatsvina under the guise of removing informal and illegal structures from the central business district. The justification for this campaign by the government was that the informal sector was harbouring the black market, hence the need to tear down structures of the informal sector.

However, analysts pointed out that the real motive behind this campaign was retribution for the support for the opposition party by members of the informal sector in the 2002 presidential elections (Vambe 2008). The antipathy between the state and the informal sector has thus manifested in an unwillingness by the government to provide legislation to support and protect the informal sector, which on the other hand has prolonged ZANU-PF’s stay in power by depriving its opposition of a support base in the informal sector.

Ever since the mid-1990s, the relationship between trade unions such as the ZCTU and informalized workers appears inorganic. The accepted orthodox approach to unionism for a long time has been that unions represent workers in formal sectors and organizations, the main reason being that

such membership is easier to organize because of the presence of accessible employment records. Although others have argued that the ZCTU has made strides in representing informal workers, representation remains scant. The failure by organizations such as the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe to cover a larger base of farmworkers and facilitate better working conditions and a minimum wage is indicative of the waning influence of unions in Zimbabwe. Workers in agriculture and mining are at the lowest ranks on the production chain and, without representation, they receive the lowest remuneration and operate in the harshest working conditions without protective clothing. In the past years, there have been an unprecedented number of deaths of small scale miners operating in unsafe working conditions, yet the government's response to their plight remains ambivalent (Mupanedemo 2020). Attempts to form cooperatives in order to protect their interests and bargain for fair better wages and better living conditions have been less successful. In most cases, cooperatives have not been on a sound footing owing much to lack of organization and external influence from political figureheads. The politicization of cooperatives has led them to become an extension of party interests instead of being independent bodies representing the interests of small-scale miners. In such scenarios party affiliates alone have stood to benefit from mechanization schemes and other forms of technical and financial support. Non-party affiliates have thus become victims of violence and intimidation forcing them out of cooperatives or forcing them to accept unacceptable prices for their produce.¹ The phenomenon of party affiliation is not only peculiar to small-scale mining but prevalent across the informal sector. Certain sections of the informal sector have continued to benefit from state patronage in exchange for votes. Therefore, on another level, the informal sector has been used to extend the authoritarian agenda of the ruling party.

The informalized nature of the labour market in Zimbabwe has created a huge gulf between labour and labour unions. Labour representative bodies have an insurmountable task reaching out to millions of informalized workers who are seldom organized in any way. In turn, the government has on occasion manipulated the informal sector to extend its authoritarian agenda by employing a delicate balance of violence and intimidation on the one hand and patronage on the other. Therefore it would seem in the best interests of the government not to pass legislation for the protection of informal workers. The major conclusion on informalization and authoritarianism drawn from the Zimbabwean case is that informalization of the working class can serve to extend the life span of authoritarian regimes by

<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783957104090-67>, am 08.09.2024, 10:09:14

1 See Chiwawa (1990) and Bush  <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/abg>

severing the organic ties between workers and labour unions, which offer a more systematic platform for airing out grievances and initiating a change in political attitudes.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the democratic space in Zimbabwe needs to be expanded. Trade unions need to expedite the process of registering informal workers and more broadly facilitate processes of regional as well as global solidarity among informal workers.

At the grassroots, informal workers may benefit from the formation of cooperatives or guilds. Such small groupings may join to form clusters from the community level up to the national level to form larger groups representing various segments of the informal sector which may be easier for trade unions to pick up.

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