

# 'This is class warfare'

*the struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe*

On 3 and 4 March, more than 90% of Zimbabwe's 1,2 million formal sector workers supported a general strike called by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) to protest the policies of the government of Robert Mugabe.

The strikers were demanding the dropping of a 2,5% increase in Value Added Tax (VAT), and a special 5% 'development levy' on wage earners. On May Day, workers gathered at rallies throughout the country to demand a minimum wage of R590 per month. They threatened to embark on a five-day stayaway.

The March action went ahead despite threats by Mugabe that 'we have many degrees in violence' and that he would 'let them have it'. Meanwhile, officials in the Ministry of Public Services, Labour and Social Affairs were ordered to work out a means to deregister the ZCTU. Two days after the strike, the ZCTU office in Bulawayo was gutted in what appeared to be an arson attack.

The government has maintained its hardline position. In July, it announced that it would remove neither the development levy nor the VAT increase. Towards the end of July, riot police were sent out against striking farmworkers, who had blockaded a road east of the capital, Harare. The workers were demanding a 50% wage increase to cope with the rapidly rising cost of living.

*Zimbabwe has been hit by waves of strike action, which show no signs of abating.*

**Lucien van der Walt** *examines the potential of the trade union movement to force real political and economic change.*

Pleas for dialogue have fallen on deaf ears. Union leaders emerged from an August meeting with Mugabe extremely dissatisfied. The president has lashed out at the unions through the state-controlled media and used provisions in the Emergency Powers Act - by most accounts, unconstitutionally - to declare the finance, commercial, and industrial sectors 'essential services'. Strikes in these sectors are now illegal. Regulations restricting public gatherings have also been tightened up. A request for a second meeting with government officials has been snubbed. It now seems almost certain that the stayaway - potentially the biggest in Zimbabwe's history - will go ahead.

## **Background**

The current events are simply the latest in an ongoing series of confrontations between organised labour and the

Zimbabwe government. The latest dispute has its roots in protests by veterans of the country's liberation war, which erupted in June 1997.

The protests began after pay outs from the War Victims Compensation Fund were suspended, following revelations that senior officials had plundered the Fund of millions of rands. The veterans, who were already dissatisfied with the slow pace of land reform nearly 20 years after independence, camped out at Mugabe's official residence, disrupted a number of government functions, and stormed the ZANU-PF headquarters. A two-week ban was slapped on all strikes and unlawful gatherings which interrupted 'essential services' and compromised 'public safety'.

In August 1997, the government managed to pacify the veterans with a promise of a one-off payment of pension arrears, a monthly stipend of Z\$2 000 a head as from January 1998, and free healthcare and education to their families.

### Protest

The government decided that the payments to the veterans would be financed by means of a 5% 'development levy' on wages and company profits, a 2,5% hike in VAT and higher prices for petrol and electricity. For workers, who already faced low wages, a 30% inflation rate and taxes which consume up to 42% of income, this was the last straw. A general strike paralysed the major cities of Zimbabwe in December 1997. Despite court permission for a rally in Harare, riot police attempted to disperse the crowd, who tried to defend themselves with barricades of rubbish bins, wood, and street signs. Two days later, seven unidentified assailants beat ZCTU general secretary, Morgan Tsvangirai, unconscious in his office. Tsvangirai's response was: 'You can remove leaders, but not the

cause. This is class warfare.'

Food riots broke out in the towns and cities on 19 January. The trigger was dramatic price rises, with a the prices of flour, rice and cooking oil rising up to 25%. Although this was partly the result of the weakening of the Zimbabwe dollar, it was also due to the increase in VAT. Independent sources in Zimbabwe have reported that nine people were shot dead by security forces. At least four have subsequently died in prison.

The growing confidence and size of the workers' movement in Zimbabwe is remarkable. In the early 1980s, these developments would have seemed unlikely. Following the 1980 independence elections, Zimbabwe was shaken by a wave of industrial action on a scale unprecedented since the general strike in 1948. Workers came out against management racism and poor conditions and wages.

However, strikers who expected sympathy from ZANU-PF were soon to be disappointed. The police and army were sent out to arrest strikers, protect scabs and enable the victimisation of activists. Kumbirai Kangai, the new Labour Minister, insisted that workers make use of the established procedures and threatened to 'crack my whip if they do not get back to work'.

### 'Reform'

Repression was accompanied by attempts to neutralise further labour unrest. The Minimum Wage Act empowered the Minister of Labour to set wages and ban retrenchments (where these were not 'economically necessary'). Social spending was increased. The unions' role in industrial relations was substantially reduced. The government also passed laws to restrict the role of workers' committees, which had emerged during

the strikes, to matters of occupational safety and productivity improvements. In 1981, ZANU-PF initiated a process to amalgamate the fragmented union movement into one centre, the ZCTU. This was a direct attempt to control labour via an undemocratically-elected, pro-ZANU-PF union leadership.

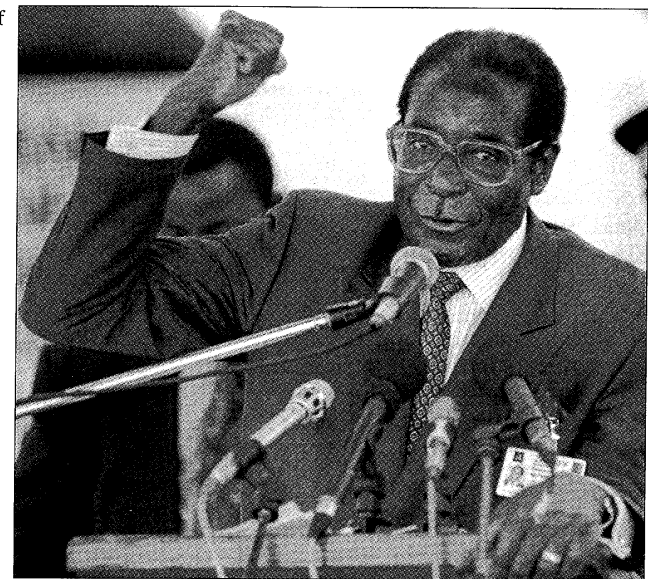
In 1985, a new LRA was passed. While granting some rights, it preserved colonial-era arbitration and grievance procedures, prohibited strikes in

most of the economy, and gave the Minister of Labour extensive powers to intervene in union affairs and negotiations.

At the same time, prominent ZANU-PF leaders began to acquire business interests. The party itself also entered into commercial activities: by 1988, ZANU-PF had established the Zimbabwe National Holdings Corporation to group its myriad investments. These processes have helped lay the basis for an objective convergence of interest between white capital and the rising black bourgeoisie.

### Economic policy

In 1991, ZANU-PF shifted its economic policy from the state-led developmentalism of the 1980s to an International Monetary Fund/World Bank designed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) whose neo-liberal prescriptions have slowed economic growth, devastated local industry, slashed jobs, depressed wages and cut social spending on the poor. Price control



Robert Mugabe.

relaxation resulted in dramatic rises in inflation and a fall in consumer demand. Average real wages fell to their lowest levels since the early 1970s. At least 55 000 jobs were lost up to 1995, particularly in the civil service where 22 000 workers have been retrenched. Fewer than 20% of school-leavers are able to enter the formal sector each year. Health spending fell by 39% in 1994/95. The government's Social Development Fund, which was supposed to cushion the impact of economic liberalisation, is inadequate and has also been characterised by poor planning and implementation.

As the relative strength of the economy at this point attests, Zimbabwe's ESAP was not imposed on an ailing economy. Rather, the policy shift was engineered by a local coalition of big business and influential ZANU-PF technocrats.

### The party

ZANU-PF has consistently manifested a strong tendency towards authoritarian

rule. From 1982 onwards, the party moved against its main rival – the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) – with dismissals from the cabinet and a bloody counter-insurgency campaign in Matabeleland. Ostensibly a peace-keeping operation, the campaign devastated ZAPU, undermined the 1985 general elections, and set the stage for the 1987 merger of ZAPU and ZANU.

Dominating parliament, and controlling cabinet and provincial government, ZANU-PF represents a formidable edifice of power. While formal one-party rule was never achieved, a battery of regulations and practices undermining free political activity have helped lay the basis for a *de facto* one party state. The State of Emergency inherited at independence was maintained up until 1990, whilst the colonial-era Law and Order (Maintenance) Act, which prohibits gatherings of more than 200 people without police permission, remains in force. State resources have been used to bolster the position of the party. During the 1995 election campaign, the air force ferried Mugabe and government vehicles drove people to rallies.

### The public sector

Although the public sector was excluded from these reforms, there has been widespread unionisation and industrial action. A four-week general strike in the public sector in August 1996 brought out nurses, teachers and other workers for higher wages. The strikers were joined by students protesting cuts in their grants. The government finally agreed to examine the workers' grievances in September 1996. Dissatisfaction with the government's response sparked a further two-month strike by nurses and doctors.

In November 1996, the ZCTU, then based largely in the private sector, tried to launch a

### Opposition

It is this formidable force that the nascent Zimbabwean opposition seeks to challenge. Drawing upon an older tradition of political dissidence in the 1980s, the opposition has been rooted in two main constituencies:

#### □ *Disgruntled politicians both within and outside ZANU-PF*

This group has sought to challenge ZANU-PF in elections. Its efforts have been hampered both by the repressive practices of ZANU-PF and the structure of parliament: at least 30 seats in parliament are personally appointed by Mugabe, while the polling arrangements systematically undermine support for small parties. These parties tend to be poorly organised, lacking in clear policies and hampered by a low profile and a lack of resources. They lack dynamic leadership. Combined with high levels of voter apathy and restrictions and harassment, this makes for limited change in the parliamentary arena.

#### □ *The working class and peasantry.*

It is outside of the sphere of formal political activity that the most effective opposition is to be found. It is these

two-day general strike in solidarity, although this failed due to large-scale police intimidation and the weak grassroots structures of the ZCTU unions. In 1997, the government backed down, awarding public sector workers a wage increase of 36%. In July 1997, workers in both the private and public sectors came out on strike. In many cases, workers were demanding wage increases of 40%.

One particularly important event in the wake of the 1996 strikes was the decision by the Public Servants' Association (PSA) to forge a new relationship with, and subsequently affiliate to, the ZCTU.



Police fire teargas at demonstrators, 1997.

constituencies which have taken to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with political and economic conditions. In the process, they have been able to win a few gains. Students have been at the forefront of the struggle. In 1988 and 1989 there were clashes between student protesters and police at the University of Zimbabwe. Both ended in wide-spread arrests. Protests have also occurred in the townships. In 1993, soaring bread prices led to a two week bread boycott and running battles with police.

### The ZCTU

A more sustained challenge has come from the trade union movement. In 1985, the old leadership was ousted and the ZCTU adopted a more critical attitude to ZANU-PF policies and restrictions on free collective bargaining.

With the onset of ESAP, tensions grew. Workers saw the few material gains of independence – welfare and job security – eroded. Ironically, ESAP also strengthened the unions, as it was associated with the reintroduction of free collective

bargaining in the private sector, although substantial restrictions on free union activity remain. The unions have begun to play a more active role in bargaining. The ZCTU has begun to raise political and social demands.

### Corporatism?

The ZCTU did not throw its support behind any political party. Instead, it has tried to strengthen its own organisation and to build links with other popular sectors.

The federation has also sought to intervene in economic policy: its 1996 policy statement, *Beyond ESAP: a framework for a long-term development strategy in Zimbabwe*, represents an attempt to democratise the economic sphere by proposing a corporatist body modelled on South Africa's Nedlac. Although it accepts the need for some economic restructuring, the document argues that all interest groups should have a voice in economic policy-making, and calls for a greater role for the state in the economy.

The prospects for corporatism in Zimbabwe seem poor. Although the social and economic crisis places pressure on

the elite to consider greater consultation with labour, there is little evidence that either capital, the state or foreign donors favour such a strategy.

Leaving aside its tendency to bureaucratise unions and divide leadership from rank-and-file, questions must also be raised about the ability of corporatism to deliver material gains in the context of economic crisis in the capitalist periphery of a globalised world. As for the state, the record of progressive and labour parties in parliaments worldwide is most uneven (particularly in the 1990s) and all too often an unhappy one. There is little indication that the state can serve as a tool for redistribution or social equity, election promises notwithstanding. This suggests an agenda for Zimbabwe's union movement that does not limit itself to demands for either corporatism or parliamentarism.

### Weaknesses

The unions' impact on political and economic policy is limited by their historic and continuing weaknesses. Before independence, they faced restrictions on black worker organisation, factional divisions and the limited involvement of unions in the anti-colonial struggle. After independence, these problems were exacerbated by repression, co-optation, and the assault on workers by the neo-liberal policies of ESAP.

The political impact of the unions has tended to centre around defensive struggles aimed at maintaining (rather than expanding) existing rights. The ZCTU has shown a consistent tendency towards bread and butter unionism.

### Strengths

There is no doubt that the unions have been progressively strengthening their position and gaining in confidence.

There are several steps which could

further strengthen union power:

- Greater rank-and-file presence and control over the unions. Grassroots workplace structures have historically been weak.
- Links with the peasantry. Shared grievances and social ties through the movement of migrant labour could aid this process. A class-based united front holds the additional advantage of excluding power-hungry bourgeois democrats from hijacking the movement for their own purposes.

A consistent defence of the interests of poor and working people requires a clear political outlook that systematically links the struggle for reforms to a challenge to the structures of domination and exploitation in Zimbabwe, and a careful assessment of the potential of both corporatist and parliamentary forms of rule. ★

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