

# INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (ISA)

## LABOUR MOVEMENTS

### Research Committee (RC) 44

May 1999

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President of RC44

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#### Mission

To encourage international research on Labour Movements, with a focus on their role both in industrial relations and in the political arena. Membership is open to any person engaged in research into Labour Movements or in Labour Movement Activities

We are very grateful to the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) for the grant they have given us to produce this Newsletter over the next three years. This has enabled me to give Anthea Metcalfe, our Newsletter and Membership Co-ordinator, an honorarium to perform these tasks. As from July, she will be located in Cape Town. e-mail: [antheam@yebo.co.za](mailto:antheam@yebo.co.za)

We are especially keen to recruit members into RC44 from Africa, Asia and Latin America. As Richard Hyman argues in this edition, these countries continue to be under-represented in RC44 and in many cases, these are the parts of the world where labour movements have been most innovative over the last decade. One problem is the difficulty scholars from these countries face in obtaining the necessary foreign exchange for ISA activities. If the ISA is to become genuinely representative of world sociology, this problem urgently needs to be addressed.

In Richard Hyman's last newsletter before the Montreal Congress (June 1998), he said that we should devise a communications strategy for the new millennium. He suggested that we could achieve 'considerable economies' if we simply distributed the Newsletter electronically, via the Internet on the ISA and SWOP websites or an e-mail attachment in html format. We will try to make this possible in a user friendly way with minimum effort on your part. We will continue to send a hard copy to those who do not have access to the World Wide Web. This is the last copy that all members will receive by post. Anthea will contact those members with e-mail to explain the new system.

The founders of RC44 were concerned to encourage research which recognised that trade unions have political as well as economic functions. I have noticed that a number of other research committees cover issues that concern the labour movement - RC10 (Participation and Self-management), RC30 (Sociology of Work), RC47(Social Classes and Social Movements), RC48 (Social movements, Collective Action and Social Change). Perhaps we could explore shared sessions with some of these Research Committees in Brisbane in 2002. If you have any suggestions, let us know.

We hope the article by Rob Lambert, on a meeting of Southern Labour Movements, with an invitation to RC44 to participate in the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) in South Africa in October this year, generates interest from those members active in labour movements. Please feel free to write to us and encourage members to subscribe to this Newsletter as well as join RC44 and the ISA. We have used a Southern African focus to kickstart the Newsletter but are serious about covering issues wherever our members may be.

Until September

Eddie Webster

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# Update

## Trade Unions in Zimbabwe

Lucien van der Walt  
Sociology of Work Unit

Send updates on  
trade union  
struggles in your  
regions

In March 1999, the powerful Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) announced plans to launch a workers' party to contest the 2000 elections. This followed a decision to launch a mass political movement for change by the National Working Peoples Convention of 400 delegates from 30 civic organisations, convened by the ZCTU in Harare in February.

The context is the ongoing confrontation between the organised working class and the repressive regime of Robert Mugabe, which took power in the 1980 Independence elections. The proposed workers' party could sweep urban constituencies clear of the de facto one-party rule of Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front). The popularity of the ZCTU, and its General Secretary, Morgan Tsvangirai, is at an all-time high due to its militant opposition to the devastating effects of the government neo-liberal Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) adopted in 1991, its opposition to Zimbabwean involvement in the Congo war, and calls for political reform. Average real wages are at their lowest levels since the early 1970s, spending in primary education is at its lowest levels since Independence, and health care spending has been cut in half. There have been mass retrenchments (30,000 jobs in 1998), a crisis on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange in November 1997, rapid price increases due to inflation, the weakening of the Zimbabwe dollar, and increasing taxation (around 40% of income).

Despite repression, the ZCTU held an overwhelmingly successful general strike against price and tax increases in December 1997, repeating the performance on 3rd and 4th March, and 11th and 18th November 1998. Faced with strike action, the government removed a range of taxes and froze basic goods' prices in September 1998. It also invited the ZCTU to join a corporatist National Economic Consultative Forum and a Constitutional Review Commission. In

November 1998, government changed tack: pressured by business, it removed price controls, leading to fuel price riots (reminiscent of food riots in January '98) and ZCTU strikes. Government's response was to ban stay-aways, reject labour's demands, investigate the ZCTU, and torture independent journalists.

The regime attributes social unrest to a conspiracy of imperialists and homosexuals against land reform despite the fact that the current land reform programme has proved to be a rhetorical exercise like its predecessors, which have resettled only 5% of peasants in 20 years. In this context, the ZCTU withdrew from negotiations to initiate the workers' party. Of critical importance is the party's programme: the present aim is electoral participation and the policy is moderate. A 1996 ZCTU policy document, 'Beyond ESAP', is instructive: it argued that structural adjustment was necessary, albeit badly planned.

The National Working Peoples Convention's Declaration also accommodated capitalist restructuring, arguing the State's role in production systems must be redefined towards facilitation rather than interference and that the nation should be made to compete in the global market in the next millennium. Some Convention delegates favoured a broad popular front including business and other opposition groups, rather than a workers' party. In the worst scenario, Zimbabwe could replicate Zambia, where a union-backed (but business-dominated) Movement for Multi-party Democracy took power in 1991 only to implement an accelerated and devastating Structural Adjustment Programme.

However, the full manifesto and form of the Workers' Party, and its link to ZCTU, remain to be settled.

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