

Abstract

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Title: Trade Unions and the Changing character of working classes in Zambia

This paper interrogates outcomes of neoliberal policies on trade unionism and transformation of the working class. A Marxist definition of a worker is someone who sell their labour in exchange for their subsistence. Neoliberal policies entailed downsizing of public sector employees resulting in job losses and subsequent effect on union membership. Job losses also meant many people joining the informal sector which has no proper income earnings and union representations. It also introduced contractual job arrangements in the public sector creating a cadre of employees that may not have job security. In addition government in the amended Industrial Relations Act has permitted liberal formation of trade unions. This has an effect on class consciousness and streamlining of interests according to worker category. The argument advanced in this paper is that neoliberal policies have the potency of making trade unions lose their vigilance in representing their member's interests and that a pre-neoliberal 'working class' is different from a neoliberal 'working class'. Neoliberal working class and trade unions have been found to have lost the union power in public policy making. This affects the advancement of working class interests. Job losses resulting from privatization and other structural adjustment programs has resulted in shrinking numbers of the working class and consequently affecting the Union strength to fight for their interests. Related to this aspect is enactment of the industrial labour law when government embraced neoliberal policies. The law permitted liberal formation of trade unions which also had a negative effect on their strength as it result in small, weak and interest varied unions to be formed.

Key Words: Working class, Trade Unions, neoliberal policies, Zamb

1. Introduction

Conceptualizing the Working Class

Traditionally the working class concept is understood using Marxist conception of a capitalist society in which two classes exist: owners of the means of production and those who sell their labor power (Marx, 1887). For Marx, society in particular a capitalist one is characterized by class conflict in which the owners of means production exploit those who sell their labor power to earn a living. Exploitation defined as the appropriation of 'surplus value' is the key principle in the struggle between the two major classes (Wright, 1980). Exploitative situation come about as workers without means for subsistence enter into a relationship with capitalists who are the owners of the means of production. The workers with their labor power engage in production of commodities which are above the value of their wage. The surplus is appropriated by the owners of the means of production and this become the source of conflict and antagonism (Velesco, 2023). In modern society, the owners of the means of production will include government and private institutions, non-governmental organisations and multinational companies.

Wright, a Marxist theorists has defined class as "common positions within social relations of production" (Wright, ND p326). In Marxist tradition, social relations of production is the determining factor for the two major classes: proletariat and the bourgeoisie. However, this conception of the working class has evolved. For Marx, the working class was only made of producers of the product or the labourer. Grab (1980) has further categorized the two classes into four groups. Apart from the capitalists who own the means of production, there is also a group of workers who neither own the means of production nor purchase labor from others. These are the proletariat who are in constant contradiction with the owners of the means of production. Third group is the petty bourgeoisie who own their means of production but do not purchase the labor power of others and fourthly is those who do not own the means of production but do purchase labor. Petty bourgeoisies would represent many of self- employed individuals in the informal sector without proper union representation. Velesco (2023, p 18) has expanded this group to include workers who have been redundant due to mechanization, those migrating from the country side to urban areas and those involved in marginal jobs or livelihoods and whose income is not decent enough to sustain them. Managers represent the fourth category as they neither own the

means of production nor purchase labor (Grab, 1980). Equally Shijvi (2017) uses the term ‘working people’ to expand Marxist framework to represent working class, peasants and lower petty bourgeoisie. Though he creates a hierarchy of these classes (working class, working people, worker-peasant alliance), his conclusion is that a working class is “a class against capitalists” (ibid, p 12). Selwyn (2013, p 50) has used the term ‘labouring class’ to refer to “the growing numbers...who now depend – directly and indirectly – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction”. Wright has defined workers as all employees not part of the ownership and control of capital used in production. (Wright, 2000, p 961).

In this paper, a working class is a conscious and united class which sells its labor power to the owners of the means of production in exchange for their means of subsistence. We are making an argument that with the advent of neoliberal policies, this class undergoes some transformation divergent from Marxists way of conceptualizing the working class. Similar views have been expressed by Selwyn (2013) when it is asserted that under globalization, capital and labour have been dispersed and functionally integrated. It is further argued that capital has the potential to establish global networks for production and global wage hierarchies which demobilize labour and facilitate exploitation and affect labour solidarity. In Zambia since the introduction of neoliberal policies, the working class and the labour movement has gone through some changes. In the next section we give a brief background of the socio-economy situation at independence and the emergence of the working. This is also the period before adoption of the neoliberal policies. This is followed by the discussion on the transformations that have taken place since adoption of the neoliberal policies. Lastly the conclusion is given.

2. Trade Unionism and the working class before neo-liberalisation policies - the first and second Republic: 1964 to 1990

At independence, Zambia’s population was estimated at 3.5 million. Her socio-economic life was driven by the mining sector and few white dominated commercial farming designated mostly along the line of rail. Zambia’s copper industry attracted European settlements in the late 19th century and by 1960s, there population increased to 75,000. The British colonial government which took over administrative role of managing the affairs of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in 1924, operated on discriminatory policies in education, employment and other social services. Consequently at independence, Zambia had limited population with skills to take up professional jobs. The country

could only boast of having had 100 graduates and 1,121 secondary school leavers (Mwanakatwe, 2013). Managerial and professional jobs were occupied by Europeans. With this socio-economic background, there were very few African petty bourgeoisie who owned shops or worked as wage earners.

The uneven development was further perpetuated by the mining industry. The mining sector was controlled by two foreign companies: Anglo- American Corporation Group and the Roan Selection Trust Group (Tordoff, 1980). The mining sector purely served the interests of the colonial government. For example the construction of a railway line from the mining province Copperbelt through Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to port Beira was for the sole purpose of transporting copper. Infrastructure in other parts of the country with the exception of Copperbelt and Lusaka remained underdeveloped. In urban areas commercial activities like shops and other trading activities were carried out by South Africans and Asian origin nationals. However a small class of proletariat was emerging in the mining and agricultural sectors. With dissatisfaction of the racist nature of working conditions in the mines, the African workers established the African Mine Workers Union in 1949 for advancing of their interests (Tordoff, 1980). African Trade Unions are said to have been in constant conflict with successive colonial government in their fight for better working conditions for their member. With attainment of independence, government enacted the Trade Union and Trade Disputes Ordinance (amendment) Act of 1964 which created the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). The ZCTU of 1974 to 1990 is described as one which was militant in nature and spear headed workers social and economic interests (Samungole, 2020)

3. Trade Unionism and the working class under neoliberalisation - Third Republic of Zambia 1990 to date

The Third Republic of Zambia started in December 1990 when the republican constitution was amended to permit multiparty politics (Chiluba, 1995). This change in the political system was followed by the liberalisation of the economy. In turn, these political and economic changes induced changes in the character of trade unions and the working class in the country. These changes included loss of union power in public policy-making, informalisation of work, loss of union membership and emergence of new forms of unionism. The details of these changes are discussed below.

3.1 Loss of union power in public policy-making

When the republican constitution was amended in December 1990 to permit multiparty politics, opposition political parties started to be formed which made trade unions to lose the political power they had in the second republic. The first opposition party to be formed and registered at that time was the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). This was followed by the registration of other political parties such as Democratic Party and National Democratic Alliance (Chiluba, 1995). After the 1991 general elections where the United National Independence Party (UNIP) lost the elections to MMD, several political parties continued to be formed. By 2001, there were 24 registered parties in Zambia (Burnell, 2001). These parties began competing for political power and influence in public policy-making processes. Through this competition, the country has seen several ruling parties being replaced. For instance, in 2011, MMD was replaced by Patriotic Front (PF). In 2021, PF was replaced by the United Party for National Development. This kind of party competition has made trade unions to lose the influence they had in public policy-making before the emergence of the third republic. For instance, in the 1980s, the labour movement, through the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, was able to successfully organise nation-wide strikes against structural adjustment policies. These strikes forced the UNIP government to abandon economic and administrative reforms in the late 1980s (Larmer, 2006; Rakner, 2003). However, in the 1990s, the unions failed to prevent the MMD government from implementing the same structural adjustment policies despite protests being held against their implementation (Mulenga, 2011).

Another example of the loss of union power in public policy-making involves threats given to the labour movement by the Minister of Labour, Youth and Sports in 2011 when the unions rejected government's intention to increase the retirement age from 55 to 65 years (Lusaka Times, 2011). With little or no resistance from the unions, the government managed to revise the normal retirement age in 2015 from 55 to 60 years with options for early retirement at 55 years and late retirement at 65 years (Lusaka Times, 2016).

3.2 Informalisation of work

When the MMD formed government, it decided to liberalise the economy by implementing structural adjustment policies spearheaded by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This entailed decontrol of prices of goods and services, decontrol of exchange rates, free trade and downsizing of the public sector, among others (Simutanyi, 1996). Downsizing of the public sector was done through the implementation of two programmes, namely, privatisation and

public service reform programmes. The implementation of these programmes resulted in job losses in the public sector which had guaranteed workers formal jobs. For instance, the number of workers in state-owned enterprises reduced from more than 100,000 in the 1980s to 58,581 in 2014 (Central Statistical Office, 2015; Simutanyi, 2011). For central and local governments, their combined workforce reduced from 180,000 in 1993 to 104,000 in 2000 (Republic of Zambia, 2005). Because of these job losses, the informal sector became the major employer in the country. In 2014, only 0.6 million out of the total labour force of 6.3 million (i.e. 10 percent) were formally employed while the majority (i.e. 90 percent) were either informally employed or unemployed (Central Statistical Office, 2015). Due to the high levels of unemployment and informalisation of work, most of the workers in the country are subjected to poor conditions of service such as low pay, job insecurity, and poor health and safety standards (Fraser and Lungu, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

3.3 Loss of union membership

Because of job losses resulting from the implementation of the privatisation and public service reform programmes, trade unions lost their membership. For instance, the membership of the Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia reduced from 65,000 in 1995 to 17,000 in 2010. During the same period, the membership of the National Union of Public Service Workers reduced from 34,000 to 13,000. Another union that lost membership during the same period is the Zambia United Local Authorities Workers Union whose membership reduced from 22,000 to 14,500 (Koyi, 2010). Trade unions have continued losing membership due to the shrinkage of the formal sector and increased growth of the informal sector where workers are unrepresented. Because of membership loss, the unions have become so weak that they cannot fight for better working conditions even for workers in formal employment (see Madimutsa, 2022; Madimutsa et al., 2021).

3.4 Emergence of new forms of unionism

The liberalisation of the Zambian economy in the 1990s was accompanied by amendment of labour laws to permit formation of multiple trade unions within organisations and industries. This process started in 1990 when the UNIP government amended the Industrial Relations Act to permit liberal formation of trade unions in the country. The labour movement tried to oppose this amendment but the UNIP government ignored it. Nevertheless, after forming government, the MMD reacted to the concerns of the unions by replacing the 1990 Act with the Industrial and Labour Relations Act of 1993. The 1993 Act restricted formation of unions in industries that already had unions but

allowed formation of unions that would represent professions that were not represented by existing unions. In 1997, the MMD government amended the 1993 Act to allow formation of several federations of trade unions. The amendment of the labour laws has resulted in the formation of several small and weak splinter unions (Sumaili, 2012). For instance, there are now two trade unions organising workers in local councils in Zambia. These are Zambia United Local Authorities Workers Union and Fire Services Union of Zambia. Other sectors and industries are also characterised by union splits. For example, the unions that organise workers in the mining sector include Mineworkers Union of Zambia, and National Union of Miners and Allied Workers. In the education sector, there are unions such as Zambia National Union of Teachers, Basic Education Teachers Union of Zambia, Secondary School Teachers Union of Zambia, Professional Teachers Union of Zambia, National Union of Public and Private Educators of Zambia, and National Union of Technical Education Lecturers and Allied Workers, among others.

Like other sectors, the health sector is also characterised by splinter unionism. The unions operating in this sector include Health Workers Union of Zambia, Zambia National Union of Health and Allied Workers, Zambia Union of Nurses Organisation, and Biomedical Union of Zambia. The practice of splinter unionism is also found at the level of federation of trade unions. The federations of trade unions found in Zambia include Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, Federation of Free Trade Unions of Zambia and Confederation of Trade Unions of Zambia. Because of these divisions, the labour movement in Zambia is fragmented and weak (Madimutsa and Pretorius, 2021). This is the opposite of what obtained in the second republic when the labour movement was united and strong under the control of one federation, the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (Larmer, 2006; Mulenga, 2011; Rakner, 2003).

In an attempt to increase their membership and bargaining power, a number of trade unions in Zambia have embraced the structure of open and expansive unionism. This means that their membership recruitment is no longer restricted to workers with a particular skill or workers in a particular institution but cuts across occupational and institutional boundaries (Hyman, 1975). One union that has adopted this structure is the Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia (CSAWUZ). When this union was formed in 1976, it was called Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ) and its focus was to organise civil servants only. Nonetheless, after losing membership

following the implementation of the Public Service Reform Programme, it decided to extend its membership to allied workers. These included workers related to civil servants such as those employed by semi-autonomous government institutions and non-governmental organisations (CSAWUZ, 2002). To signify this expanded approach to membership recruitment, it changed its name from CSUZ to CSAWUZ in 2002.

Other unions that have decided to extend membership recruitment to allied workers include National Union of Miners and Allied Workers, National Union of Technical Education Lecturers and Allied Workers, Zambia National Union of Health and Allied Workers, and University of Zambia and Allied Workers Union, among others. However, this approach to unionism has resulted in inter-union conflict due to membership poaching. This kind of conflict has been experienced between CSAWUZ and Zambia National Union of Health and Allied Workers. When the Zambia National Union of Health and Allied Workers was formed, its primary focus was to organise workers employed by health boards. Nevertheless, it began extending its recruitment to health workers employed by the central government, a territory claimed by CSAWUZ. Because of entering each other's territory, hostilities between the two unions emerged (Madimutsa, 2016)

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Marxist conception of the working class which is characterized with unity in purpose and vigilant in pursuing its interests in an exploitative capitalist society. This framework has been used to understand the transformations that has taken place among the Zambian working class and their trade unions under the influence of neoliberal policies. The paper has found that the working class under pre-neoliberal era was militant in nature and this is evident in the industrial conflicts they used to have with government. On the other hand the working class of the neoliberal period was found not have the vigilance they has before. For example the current Trade Unions no longer have power in public policy making which is a forum they can advance socio-economic policies that can benefit their members. Secondly, implementation of the Structural Adjustment programs led to massive job losses and thereby reducing the union membership. Reduced Union membership translates in Trade Union weakness and this affects their bargaining abilities. Lastly the amendment of the Industrial Relations Act in the 1990

permitted liberal formation of Trade Unions in the country. This has resulted in the formation of several small and weak trade unions which are not only represent workers from similar profession but several. This can make it difficult for one union to fight for several interests of their members.

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