

**Workers' Autonomy Under Siege: An Analysis of the Challenges Faced by Zimbabwe's Trade Unions in an Economy Under Stress and a Bipolarized Political Environment.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), a Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) backed political party in 1999, marked a new era in industrial relations, with the government accusing the ZCTU of negating its constituency, the workers, in pursuit of opposition politics. In response, the government took a proactive role in the formation of a rival union, the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU). Zones of autonomy were compromised. This study grapples with the net impact of the contestation between the ZCTU on one side and the ZFTU and the government on the other, on the capacity of unions towards executing their mandate.

**Keywords:** autonomy; polarized political environment; civil society; economic stress; collective bargaining.

**INTRODUCTION**

There has been a growing concern that labor movements in Sub-Saharan Africa are concentrating on politics at the expense of the workers they represent. In Zimbabwe, the main labor bodies have also drifted with the tide. The ZCTU-MDC alliance has been seen as mimicking Zambia's Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), which through the leadership of former trade unionist and former president Fredrick Chiluba, dislodged the country's founding president Kenneth Kaunda. The apparent association of a labor movement with political parties after independence is in extreme frankness, akin to what happened during the early years of the rise of African nationalism. The abuse of workers by settler employers galvanized workers into forming labor movements, which were precursors of nationalist parties. There was hardly any distinction between a trade union and a political movement, as the workers threw their weight behind nationalist politicians. Trade unionism thus nurtured nationalists and therefore unions have remained an important component of civil society, which forms the cornerstone in the development of democracy.

As components of civil society, trade unions should be granted their autonomy, an asset that has to be jealously guarded in the course of socio-economic and political struggles. In this bid to assert their autonomy, the unions have been bruised but in some cases have stood firm in the face of a myriad of legal constraints and governments' heavy handedness in dealing with labor actions.

This study examines the operational challenges faced by labor unions in Zimbabwe's bipolarized political environment. A shrewd analysis of the impact of both tension and marriages of convenience between labor movements and government on the unions' membership base, bargaining power and ability to mobilize is the focal concern of this production.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF TRADE UNIONISM IN ZIMBABWE**

At the dawn of independence, the labor movement in Zimbabwe was weak and divided. In the penultimate stages of the war of liberation, the labor movement had been systematically subordinated to the nationalist agenda, a position which was confirmed by its conspicuous absence in the transition talks to majority rule at the Lancaster House Conference in 1979. The fragmentation of the labor movement in both thought and action was expressed through 'wild cat' strikes between 1980 and 1987. The government in a bid to establish a strong regulatory framework for labor relations played a pro-active role in the formation of the ZCTU. Thus, the ZCTU was, for all purposes and intents, an extension of the ruling party. The union was construed as the 'labor wing' of the ruling party, just like the 'youth wing' or the 'women's league' (Sachikonye, 1996). The leadership of the budding ZCTU was pro-Zimbabwe African National Union -Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Its Secretary General Albert Mugabe was related to then Prime Minister of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe. Ironically, the state created a kind of solidarity with workers that both protected and suffocated workers. This solidarity resulted in a number of interventions, which included legislation, providing for minimum wages, restraining dismissals and retrenchments in the private sector. While these measures cushioned workers, the paternalistic attitude of the state had a disempowering effect on trade unions. The tacit pact or 'unholy alliance' of the state, labor and capital undermined the workers' struggles at the work place. Suppressing and discouraging shop floor action became the major preoccupation of the labor body. According to Saunders(2001), the labour movement's marriage with capital, poor administration, corruption and other irregularities undermined its functions and credibility. The tale in the immediate post independence period is that of an ineffective union, honeymooning with capital, crippled by the rhetoric of development and a political position, which condemned strikes and labor action as counter-revolutionary. Labor militancy was construed as a threat to nationalism and the gains of the nationalist struggle, much to the detriment of workers. The government expected trade unions to operate within the parameters of its socialist objectives. At the 1985 Congress, the ZCTU president bemoaned how the role of the union, as a mediator for workers, had been hijacked by the government. The ushering in of a new leadership in the labor center in 1985 marked a turning point in the history of the ZCTU. The labor movement became more radical, criticized the one party state and developed alliances with other civic groups and the student movement. By 1990, the labor movement had moved from being a 'pliant wing of the ruling party to a more autonomous critical force' broadening issues beyond economic dictates to governance. The labor movement demanded liberalization of the industrial relations sphere, particularly free collective bargaining and the right to strike.

As the euphoria of independence waned, coupled with pressure from new global neo-liberal hegemony after the collapse of Soviet socialism, the country started to experience some economic problems, which culminated in the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the early 1990s. ESAP was essentially anti-labor. Its effects included inflation, deindustrialization, company closures and a substantive decline in real wages and overall standards of living. The labor union had no option but to be militant. The militancy reached its zenith in 1997, which was dubbed 'the land mark

year' for industrial action in Zimbabwe. This again was partly because Mugabe had bought the loyalty of war veterans at the expense of the whole country. Thus 1998 was characterized by mass stay-aways and increased articulation of the linkage between the workers' problems and governance issues. This critical posture resulted in the National Working Peoples Convention in February, which culminated in the formation of the MDC in 1999. The formation of the MDC marked a new era in industrial relations with the government accusing the ZCTU of double standards and pursuing a political agenda.

### **THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN A POLARIZED POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

According to Saunders (2001) the tension between labor and government increased sharply at the end of the 1980s when it became clear that ZANU (PF) was moving away from the guiding principles of socialism towards market-oriented economic reforms. Soon after the 1995 elections, the relationship between the ZCTU and the government became very tense. Harare (the capital city of Zimbabwe) was rocked by demonstrations by workers, damaging and looting of property. Radicalization of the labor movement extended to commercial farms where in 1997, farm workers went collectively on strike for the first time in the history of Zimbabwe.

The formation of the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU) in 1998 raised eyebrows, amid wide speculation that it was launched to counter the effectiveness of the ZCTU. The political alliance between the ZFTU and the government could not be doubted because its proponents were ZANU (PF) activists in the likes of war veterans. News about the government's intention to de-register the ZCTU ran circles, while the ZCTU accused the government of funding a rival union in a bid to destroy it. The police raided offices of the ZCTU with the government also ordering the auditing of the union's financial books. These moves were tantamount to fault-finding missions and the adverse relationship had serious consequences for labor.

On the formation of the MDC, high-ranking ZCTU officials assumed active roles in politics, controlling the entire top leadership positions of the embryonic political party. Notable among them were Morgan Tsvangirai (President of the new party), Gibson Sibanda (Vice President), Gift Chimanihire, Isaac Matongo, and Lucia Matibenga. The significance of the founding of the MDC lay in that it was the first working class based political organization in independent Zimbabwe. Thus, in terms of leadership, the ZCTU could not be distinguished from the MDC. Precisely so, President Mugabe declared that his government regarded the ZCTU as an opposition political party.

The period under study was also characterized by severe economic hardships, which played havoc among workers. The liquidation of companies and retrenchments in the biting era of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and later the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST) constituted some of the unpopular features of the economic situation. By 2005, the unemployment level had reached 80% while inflation was hovering at a conservative figure of 500%. Workers fell into the predicament of continued and sustained erosion of their standard of living. The shift in economic policy by the government and the continual agitation of the labor movement was crucial in shaping the politics of the day. President Mugabe, who in May 1993 had vowed not to attend May Day rallies if the labor movement attacked government and continued to advance their hidden agendas, lambasted the role of the Western community and

international donors for sponsoring the labor movement to agitate against the government (Beckman & Sachikonye, 2001). Trade unions under the umbrella organization ZCTU found their strength compromised and unable to proactively push forward the interests and demands of workers in relation to wages and salaries. The negative developments further compromised the membership and financial bases of trade unions as well as their collective bargaining position whose strength is determined by the size of membership. The construction industry was forced to downsize operations; while the hotel and catering industry had its membership base eroded by retrenchments and increased casualization of labor due to an unfavorable macro-economic environment. Casual workers, it should be noted, do not normally join unions. The textile industry succumbed to the retrogressive impact of the influx of Chinese goods on the market. There was also a massive exodus of skilled professionals to South Africa, Botswana and Europe for greener pastures. The International Labour Organisation statistics indicate that by June 2005, three to four million Zimbabweans earned their living through informal sector employment while the formal sector employed one million three hundred thousand workers. A booming informal sector against a shrinking formal sector slashed the membership base of trade unions. The non-registration of informal sector operators and the small numbers they engage created for trade unions a daunting challenge of organizing the unorganized. Subscriptions (from affiliate unions), which made the financial backbone of trade union operations, dwindled as affiliate unions defaulted due to biting economic hardships. Workers questioned the logic in parting with subscriptions in a period when wages were being continuously eroded. A depleted financial base curtailed outreach programs, which could have galvanized the recruitment of more membership. Resultantly, the ZCTU had to source funds from cooperating partners to assist in areas such as HIV and AIDS information dissemination. Although the funds brought relief, the union found its autonomy on programs and projects limited, given the tendency by donors of dictating areas of interest. Generally, employers through the Employers Confederation of Zimbabwe (EMCOZ), until 1997, had worked harmoniously with labor on various issues. The food riots of 1997 were a clear testimony that the employers and workers combined against the government's stringent economic policies. Employers allowed employees to adhere to calls for a stay away. The conditionalities provided for by ESAP it should be stressed had an unprecedented impact on the economy. The economic challenges, which the country was facing, adversely affected production and productivity. Worker's plight could not be alleviated by constant salary increases to match the prices of products. Employers however took advantage of the vulnerability of the workers and exploited labor at will. Employees were retrenched, suspended or dismissed with little or no protection from the law. Some employers even went to bar employees from subscribing to unions. The ZCTU on the other hand argued that the standard of living for workers could not be improved because the employer was more powerful than the employee. Employers threatened to draw upon the wide pool of desperate job seekers in the event of strike action. Collective bargaining was so strained resulting in an increase in deadlock cases, which had to be resolved through arbitration. The increase in cases resolved through arbitration, reflects the sterility of the collective bargaining process. Concern was also raised with regards to the bureaucratic arbitration avenue, which was clogged with corrupt arbitrators who had a tendency of aligning with capital. The noble attempts to create an environment of serious and continuous dialogue between labor, government and employers appeared to have reached a dead end in 1998 when the ZCTU walked out of the negotiations in protest over unilateral midnight increases in the price of fuel and other basic commodities. Incidentally, it is the same year that the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU) was registered.

As alluded to earlier, the formation of the MDC and the active involvement of the ZCTU leadership in the opposition party, retarded, compromised, constrained, usurped and haunted the union's ability to organize collective job action. Meetings and genuine labor activities were construed as attempts to remove a duly and constitutionally elected government (Mugabe, 2001). Following the heavily contested year 2000 parliamentary elections in which the ruling ZANU (PF) party won 62 of the contested 120 seats against the MDC's 57, Mugabe remarked that the MDC was not to be judged or characterized by its black trade union face and its salaried black suburban junior professionals. Instead, it was 'much deeper, whiter and wider than these human superficialities, for it is immovably and implacably moored in the colonial yesteryear and embraces wittingly and unwittingly the repulsive ideologies of return to white settler rule' (*The Sunday Mail*, July 30, 2000) The MDC was viewed as a counter-revolutionary Trojan horse, whose power base, like that of the Rhodesian Front melted and designed itself as farming unions, the constituency which created and controlled the unionists-cum-politicians Morgan Tsvangirai and Gibson Sibanda. The government relished on the premise that the western community sponsored labor movement had formed a puppet political party to protect the small white community in Zimbabwe whose interests were being eroded with the expiry of the Lancaster House Constitution. The birth of the MDC was therefore not viewed as an achievement of the democratization process engineered by the labor movement but rather the penetration of the evils of neo-colonialism in a sovereign state. The celebrated political dimension ascribed to the genesis of the MDC by the government tended to overshadow the shift in economic policy as the catalyzing agent for the deterioration of the government-labor relations. As mistrust and suspicion mounted, the government intensified its interference in union activities. On September 13, 2006, the ZCTU leaders and members were brutally tortured after embarking on a demonstration demanding better working and living conditions. As such, all genuine labor gatherings came to be perceived as politically motivated. Some members of affiliate unions lamented the government's deliberate ignorance on differentiating between trade union business and MDC activities. It also emerged that some workers, for fear of political victimization opted to stay out of unions. Joining unions affiliated to the ZCTU was tantamount to joining the opposition party. The politicization of labor issues invited demonstrations from some disgruntled ZCTU affiliates in May 2005, who detested the hijacking of the labor union by the MDC. While the ZCTU saw the demonstrations as government sponsored strategies to divide the union, the Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Workers Union (ZCATWU), which associated itself with the disgruntled group, vehemently expressed the need for the ZCTU to guard autonomy from the MDC and separate politicians from unionists. Guarding zones of autonomy remained a challenge in a polarized political environment especially following the formation of the ZFTU in 1998. Raftopolous (2001) observed that, in a bid to dilute critical voices, the government established civic bodies such as the Zimbabwe Confederation of Students' Unions (ZICOSU) and the ZFTU. The government blatantly denied any links with the ZFTU, arguing that, its formation was more of the workers' initiative than government's in the face of the utter neglect of the worker by the ZCTU.

### **ENTER THE ZIMBABWE FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS (ZFTU)**

The ZFTU pledged to solve the problems bedeviling the Zimbabwean worker with vigor and determination. The union castigated the ZCTU for sacrificing the worker in pursuit of gaining political mileage for the opposition. Truly so, in June 2000, almost the entire ZCTU leadership took leave of absence to campaign for the MDC. The ZFTU lambasted companies, which retrenched workers under the guise of economic hardships and threatened the seizure of those companies by worker's

councils. Being forced to hold on to a workforce whose wage bill claimed a lion's share of marginal profits was payback time for industrialists whom the government accused of funding the opposition party. Such threats went in tandem with the government's attitude towards the industrialists whom the government labeled pro-West and thus blamed for economic sabotage. The ZFTU, started to negotiate directly with individual employers for wage increases for example, in the agriculture industry, where the minimum wage was raised from Z\$1 900-00 to Z\$4 000-00 per month. Factories were invaded between March and May 2001. To paralyze the efficiency of its competitor the ZCTU, the ZFTU took over pending labor issues without proper court procedures. The populist maneuvers by the ZFTU threw confusion into the ZCTU, resulting in non-participation or limited participation of workers in ZCTU initiated collective job action. Workers questioned how, when the world was crumbling under their feet, they would know whether to jump or to hold on when neither option looked good. The ZFTU condemned collective job action as retrogressive or unpatriotic. Battle lines were drawn between the two labor unions confirming the proverbial adage that when two elephants are fighting, it is the grass, which suffers most. The ZFTU no doubt posed a serious threat to the dominance of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions(ZCTU). Though it failed to unseat the ZCTU, it effectively divided the labor force and compromised the union's membership and financial bases. There were also contradictions in strategies to lobby capital for concessions.

While the multiplicity of trade unions encourages competition in representing workers for their general welfare; it should be noted that a deliberately sponsored multiplicity causes hostility and weakens the labor movement. What is interesting is the fact that most of the 13 inaugural affiliates of the ZFTU were registered soon after the union itself had just been registered, suggesting a top down approach. These trade unions had a ghost membership and as such were merely briefcase unions. The Commercial Workers Union of Zimbabwe(CWUZ), an affiliate of the ZCTU lost its members in the security sector to a ZFTU affiliate. As the ZFTU tried to intensify its membership drive, dissatisfied workers resigned from the ZCTU, accusing it and the National Employment Councils of conniving with employers to exploit them. Other unions defected soon after the June 2000 parliamentary elections on realizing that some ZCTU leaders had landed themselves parliamentary seats at their peril. Some affiliates called for the immediate resignation of the ZCTU president and his deputy, accusing them of dumping the workers to pursue political careers. Workers Day commemorations were now hosted separately in Harare, with the ZCTU being forced to shift its celebrations to Gwanzura Stadium with a smaller demographic holding capacity because the ruling party preferred to give the spacious Rufaro Stadium, (which the ZCTU had used for one and a half decades since independence) to its sidekick the ZFTU (*The Worker: Voice of the Labour Movement*, 2007). With the support of the ruling party, a lot of cash was splashed into the ZFTU celebrations and workers were enticed to attend the celebrations through soccer matches pitting big teams, just to give the impression that ZFTU had a lot of support (Matombo, 2007). Not to be outdone, the ZCTU would also line up entertainment activities to provide amusement and lighter moments away from the hectic schedules of the workplace. Both labor unions offered similar entertainment packages, which included dance, music, gymnastics, theatre, displays and soccer matches. The celebrations would also see the popular Malawian traditional dancers (*Zvinyau*) to cater for the diversity of workers, some of whom originated from Zambia and Malawi where the dance is very popular.

In this clash of titans, the government was seen to be supportive of the ZFTU programs. For instance, a prominent musician, who had been billed to perform at the ZCTU commemorations in Mutare city, withdrew, citing intimidation and threats from the state security agents. Instead, the same musician was commandeered to perform at Sakubva stadium, in the same city where the ZFTU was also holding its commemorations (*The Worker: Voice of the Labour Movement*, 2007). Musicians would confirm their participation but remain anonymous for fear of victimization by state security agents largely because ZCTU activities in the country were being perceived as political, hence the crackdown. In addition, the magnanimous coverage given to the ZFTU by both print and electronic state media was cited as government's attempts to popularize the ZFTU and marginalize the ZCTU. When the ZCTU called for mass stay away on April 2 and 3, 2007, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and the government owned newspaper *The Herald* would not say a word about the day, save to churn propaganda from the Minister of Labour who announced that the event was a flop. ZCTU flyers, were seized and destroyed. Groups of marauding hired youths moved in suburbs threatening any able-bodied person loitering in the streets during working hours. They were told in no uncertain terms that, if they failed to go to work, they would be made mince meat. In bars and clubs, patrons were being beaten on the eve of the action, for no apparent reason. Army helicopters, soldiers and police officers were on patrol all over Harare on the days of the stayaway (Matombo, 2007). In an indirect admission of the impact of the stayaway, the government, through the Ministry of Industry and Trade, issued a 24-hour ultimatum to all companies, which had not opened their doors to workers during the stayaway. The Minister threatened companies, which had deliberately locked out employees' with unspecified action. Meanwhile, the 'concerned affiliates' of the ZCTU, namely, the Commercial Workers' Union, Associated Mine Workers' Union, Zimbabwe Leather, Shoe and Allied Workers, Zimbabwe Construction Workers' Union, and the Transport and General Workers' Union in cahoots with the ZFTU, had the temerity to go on television, telling workers not to take heed of the ZCTU's call. They went on to print flyers deriding the ZCTU and roundly condemned political violence, confrontation with the government and the illegal sanctions, which the country was under (*The Herald*, March 29, 2007:4). The ZFTU apologists moved from one factory to another, threatening employers who dared close their companies with nationalization. As such, some companies operated with skeleton staff for fear of reprisals. Zimbabwean workers continued to bear the brunt of the political mudslinging between the rival labor unions as their plight remained unaddressed.

## **NARROWING CIVIC SPACE**

The emergence of a formidable labor-backed opposition party compelled the government to narrow civic space and have an inclination towards repression. The enactment of retrogressive and restrictive pieces of legislation did not spare trade unions. The Public Order and Security Act (POSA), more appropriately a reincarnation of the notorious colonial Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA), severely curtailed the operations of trade unions in that it became practically impossible to either organize meetings or embark on collective job action. Although Section 24 of POSA exempted trade unions from seeking permission to hold meetings, this Act was erroneously applied by the police to disrupt trade union meetings. The ability of both the ZCTU and the ZFTU to mobilize were crippled, for none of the unions had to be found operating above the law with impunity. Another piece of legislation Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) had a more damaging effect on the ZCTU than the ZFTU. The closure of *The Daily News* and *The Tribune* independent papers under the

Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) within the framework of AIPPA, blocked a reliable conduit of information to the ZCTU membership, given the tendency of the state media to bloat any information deemed unfavorable to the government. The Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Bill, whose future had been thrown into obscurity following President Mugabe's reluctance to sign it into law, again had a negative impact on the operations of unions. Though not passed into law, the Bill chilled the zeal of co-operating partners whose contributions to HIV and AIDS programs, health and safety, democracy, and human rights was vital. The move had detrimental consequences for the workers irrespective of their affiliation. It is however important to note that not all legislative pieces enacted after year 2000 were retrogressive. The Labour Relations Amendment Act No.17 of 2002 for example, provided among other things, protection against unfair dismissal, granted the right to strike in non-essential services and recognized trade union superiority over workers' committees. Members of both labor unions benefited perhaps as free riders.

The Zimbabwean government's hostile reaction to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)'s intended visit in 2007 further confirmed the bad blood between the ZCTU and the government. The ZFTU distanced itself from COSATU's show of solidarity with Zimbabwean workers whose household purchasing power had been eroded by inflation and whose government had enacted laws which restricted freedom of the press (Accessed on [www.allzimbabwe.com](http://www.allzimbabwe.com) January, 25, 2007:1). Following a joint communiqué issued by the Secretary Generals of the ZCTU and COSATU on the need to organize yet another COSATU fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe, the Minister of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare declared that the intended visit was political in nature and thus would not be entertained.

## **CONCLUSION**

The political dynamics of the period understudy, impacted negatively on the strength and influence of trade union operations. The formation of the MDC strained the relations between the ZCTU and the government. It increased mistrust and suspicion between the two actors with detrimental effects on tripartism, thereby negatively affecting the workers of the land. The intransigence, dithering and procrastination of other social partners in the Tripartite Negotiating Forum reduced the efforts towards cementing of relations between business, government and labor to a non-legislated talk show chamber. Resultantly, some businesses took advantage of the political situation by treating workers as chattels to be manipulated for profit making while the government also brutalized the same workers whenever they complained of ill-treatment. Zimbabwean workers continued to bear the brunt of economic woes in the existence of both the ZCTU and ZFTU. The government's interference in the business of unions through the establishment of the ZFTU as counterfeit, enactment of retrogressive and stifling pieces of legislation sapped unions of the capacity to mobilize. Although concerted efforts were made to muscle out the ZCTU from the limelight of labor movements, the ZFTU failed to sustain the momentum of competition, especially in the backdrop of mounting job loses, high cost of living, poverty wages and non-availability of essential basic commodities on most supermarket shelves in the country. The workers remained caught within the vicious circle of poverty irrespective of their being fully subscribed members of either the ZCTU or ZFTU.



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