

ASPECTS OF THE FORMATION OF A NAMIBIAN TRADE UNION:
BACKGROUND TO THE NATIONAL UNION OF NAMIBIAN WORKERS (NUNW)

Paper presented to "Namibia, Africa's Last Colony: Problems for Freedom and Development". Conference to be held at the University of Vermont, April 4&5, 1982, Burlington, Vermont.

At a branch meeting in 1977, contract workers from Windhoek expressed the view of all working-class activists in Namibia in advancing the case for a nation-wide general union of all black workers.

I want to tell our fellow-workers that the weak point we have (to remedy) in order to change the system is unity and co-operation. And we must not distinguish whether some workers are sleeping in a compound and some are staying in the single quarters and some in the so-called locations. All of us who are exploited, we blacks, we must know that we are all workers. We workers want to be in unity. We workers in Namibia, we want to unite. It doesn't matter what kind of work he is doing, each and every worker should come into that union. After such unity and co-operation have been established, it is only then that it will be possible to campaign for better working conditions, for higher wages and to embark on any other action which will change the working conditions.

Once workers have organised and united, they will be able to form a union, they will try to make other workers aware of the conditions in which they are working. In such a union of workers, we are going to teach one another how people should respect one another and regard themselves as human beings. We know that if a person is starving he will become wise, he will learn something from that starvation. Because we are quite aware that we are being oppressed here in Namibia. It is only through a union that we will be able to force the Government to change the conditions under which we are working, and it is only through the union that we will be able to make an end to the exploitation of man by man.

Because we know that we can only force the Government if we are united. We, the workers of Namibia, we have to unite - all the workers in the country have to unite, then we will be able to embark on the kind of action that will force the Government to attend to our problems. If we cannot unite, then we will just continue to be exploited and oppressed.

We also want to teach other workers that the capitalists are busy robbing our country of its resources. All the workers should know that foreign investors are taking what we are producing to their countries overseas. Because when those foreign investors - monopolies - came to our country, they didn't come with anything. The wealth they are taking they found here in Namibia.

Copy sent to LAU

We are dissatisfied with the fact that our mineral resources and other wealth are being exported. They are squeezing our country dry. Because it is a fact that this country is our country. We are in the majority in this country and we are the very people who are suffering, while the foreigners who have come from somewhere in our country are the ones who are giving orders and getting all the wealth of our country. Therefore we workers feel that we have to unite so that we can take action to end the exploitation of man by man. (SWAPO of Namibia 1981, pp. 271 f.

The quotation has originally been published in the South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 4, 1978, No. 1&2, pp. 42 ff.)

1. Introduction

Basic modifications for the organisation of labour interests are emerging in the Namibian situation. They are not simply similar to those in other countries of the so-called Third World, but are peculiarly shaped by specific characteristics of Namibia's underdeveloped and deformed socio-economic set-up. The dominant factor in the social relations of Namibia is still the direct determination of the economic, social and political structures by foreign interests. These are of course primarily South African, but they are abetted by allies both international and within Namibia, who seek a neo-colonial "solution".

Namibia is presently facing the final phase of formal decolonisation. The perspectives of future national development and its orientation are part of the political and military battle between the national liberation movement SWAPO of Namibia and the South African occupation-regime with its local agencies. In this present process of transformation to either genuine independence or more sophisticated perpetuation of foreign domination the legal superstructure is an object of continual modifications. These juridical changes also affect the legally tolerated or - as it has continuously been the case in the past - suppressed means of organisation of the black labour force.

Given the present phase of transition, this short contribution concentrates on a summary description and characterisation of the most important features of the organisation of black labour interests in historical perspective. Accordingly, trade union

like forms of organisation within the white settler community are neglected here. Some professional interest groups now tolerate membership by blacks. Historically, however, they were created exclusively for whites. Indeed, they always saw their interests in strict opposition to tendencies to demand emancipation for the black labour force and used their influence consistently in that direction. Their membership remains overwhelmingly white and still sees to it that the roles of black members are kept to a minimum (Cronje/Cronje 1979, pp. 75 f.). Therefore, the specific forms of organisation and the ambitions represented - both an expression and integral part of the dominating power structures - will have no legitimacy for existence within a more than formally independent nation-state.

2. Social determinants for the organisation of the black working class

Namibia's population is presently - in spite of lower official data given by the South African administration - estimated to number at least 1.2 million people. In a study undertaken for the United Nations Institute for Namibia, Green presents for consideration his own demographic guesstimates for the pattern and structures of occupational distribution of the black Namibians (at the end of the 1970's). On his calculations, there were about 241.500 black workers integrated into the colonial-capitalist economy either periodically (by contract- or seasonal work) or permanently by performance of wage-labour. The occupational patterns reflect the colonial structure: the highest employment-rate is in the services in white households (75.000 domestic servants) and the agricultural sector in the possession of whites (50.000 farm labourers). In the primary sector apart from agriculture workers are employed in the mining (about 19.000) and in the fishing industries (at the time of the report about 7.000; this number certainly has declined because of the plunder of the natural resources of Namibia's coastal waters, which has forced major parts of this industry to dramatic reductions in their operations). The secondary sector absorbed a total of only 23.500 black workers. In the tertiary sector are

employed altogether 142.000 blacks (including the 75.000 domestic servants). The white labour force altogether amounts to 36.500 persons, according to this study. An additional 240.000 Africans are estimated to be active within the sector of agricultural subsistence production in the reserve (all data from United Nations Institute for Namibia 1978, pp. 60 ff.). The use of such a high proportion - 50 per cent - of the black labour force for white interests has of course necessitated a loosening of the legal restrictions on the freedom of movement for blacks. Even so, only a minority of blacks is allowed legal entitlement and is in a position to reside permanently outside the reserves. The territory of the southern and central part of the country, still defined in the German colonial term "Police Zone" remains reserved mainly for whites. Nevertheless, the paradox is that the whites need so much black labour that at any given moment the black work force outnumbered the white settled population of approximately 100.000 people by two and a half to one. Most of these blacks are part of tribal communities, whose reserves are situated within this "Police Zone" (Damara, Nama and Herero), while more than two third of the total population of blacks is estimated to live in the northern reserves (Kaokoland, Ovambo, Kavango and Caprivi), among who the Ovambo alone represent more than the half of Namibia's total population. These inhabitants of the reserves are subject of strict legal measures, drastically reducing their freedom of movement within and outside of their assigned 'homelands', as the reserves are called according to the dominant ideology of the colonial rulers. From the Northern parts of Namibia the majority of the contract labour force is recruited (estimated for 1977 at being around 110.000 men; United Nations Institute for Namibia 1978, p.59). If the about 20.000 migrants from Southern Angola are excluded, half of the black Namibian labour force is composed of contract-workers. Of these, about 60 % come from the Northern reserves, while 40% are from reserves in the 'Police Zone'. Migrants are nowadays employed in nearly every productive sector of the economy. They are estimated to comprise over 95% of black workers in mining, 65% in fishing and 50% in farming (see SWAPO of Namibia 1981, p. 68). By administrative authorities these

workers get assigned for a limited period to a working place within the 'Police Zone'. There they are accommodated without their family in collective quarters and have to return to their reserves after the contract is expired. From there they can be recruited anew. (For an impressive description of the mechanisms and the consequences of the regulations and the results on the humans subject to these humiliating measures see Ndadi 1974. Although it has to be mentioned that in the meantime the procedures have been slightly changed, the basic nature of this system is nevertheless still valid).

The low formal qualification of the black workers corresponds with the requirements of the informally existing (i.e. not explicitly legally rooted) "job reservation": in 1975 in the whole of Namibia only 16 blacks had positions in management or the higher administration, while 2.164 whites were identified to occupy such posts. Altogether 5.303 black employees, who were registered in the mid-1970s in occupations requiring professional training, consisted nearly exclusively of teaching staff at schools (around 3.700) and nurses at hospitals (about 1.600) (Cronje/Cronje 1979, p. 27). As a consequence of this, teacher associations organised along particular racial categories represented until recently the only kind of trade union like organisations among the colonised population (see for their specific aims and initiatives Melber 1979, pp. 154 ff. and pp. 216 ff.). In the meantime, as the need for modifications to the rigid system is a burning issue for both economic and political interests for the perpetuation of foreign global domination, more sophisticated measures are introduced. They allow the creation of a constant, more qualified labour force with some more permeability concerning professional and corresponding social careers for members of the black community, while at the same time the marginalisation of the overwhelming majority of black Namibians is continually increasing and taking drastic forms.

In spite of all reforms and the attempts to integrate at least a minority of the colonised population into the dominating power-structure, the right of free organisation in trade unions has constantly and rigidly been denied to the black workers. The basis of the legal structures operating against any initiatives of blacks for independent trade unions is still found in the South African 'Wage and Industrial Conciliation Ordinance No. 35 of 1952'. According to this legal monster of Apartheid-machinery, the majority of workers has no right to go on strike. If they do in spite of the legal regulations, they face deportation to the reserves and are subject to penal sanctions (Cronje/Cronje 1979, pp. 106 ff.). Nevertheless, the following passages make it clear that, despite such regulations, a long tradition can be traced of maintaining proletarian interests in the course of the liberation struggle.

3. The Historic Development of African Labour-Struggle

The first conventional form of organised resistance by black wage-labourers is recorded already at the end of the last century. Under German colonial rule in December 1893 at the Groß Otavi mine of the South West Africa Company workers went on strike for higher wages (Gordon 1975, p. 8). Since the beginning of this century black workers have continually made use of collective strike-action in spite of the institutionalised repression applied by the system all the time. Gottschalk (1978, pp. 90 f.) registered from personal archive-studies for the period between 1916 and 1972 a total of 24 open and public strikes. Their actual number is definitely much higher. Gordon (1975, p. 14) identified for the period between 1950 and 1971, through evaluating reports in the local newspapers alone, 43 collective actions (and in this case too, a much higher number can be assumed, given the selective information-policy practised in the news media under white control). But open confrontation has always been hampered by the strictness of the regime. Isolation of the workers on strike as well as psychological and physical forms of repression mostly resulted in the ending of the collective resistance without any results or a surrender by the workers with at best the gain of minimal com-

promises concerning some of their less important demands. The basic character of the labour conditions and their institutionalised form has until now survived all actions by workers, who have not been in the position to force the system in to far-reaching alterations.

The totalitarian character of institutionalised repression from the beginning therefore compelled a concentration of workers' activities on more informal acts of resistance and protest often as the only possibility left for counteraction (e.g. breaking of the contract, sabotage or passive refusal at the working-place; for an illustrative account of the strategies of survival practised among mine-workers see Gordon 1977, pp. 120-142). Such actions also bear witness to the structural difficulties of effective resistance in institutionalised ways: the high turnover rate necessitated by the contract-system and the consequent low continuity in working places were factors militating against long-term organisational effectiveness. Individual forms of resistance emanating from this situation nevertheless were based on a common basis of solidarity and the existence of an intact, country-wide net of communication within the (contract-) labour force (see Moorsom 1977, p. 76). Gordon (1978, p. 121) for instance, talks of a 'Brotherhood Network', which equals an effective informal trade union organisation (see also Gordon 1977 with regard to the mines; many examples referred to in this work argue in the same direction). The concept of a strict separation and control of the black labourers and their accommodation in townships (and for the contract-workers even their stocking in so-called 'compounds') worked in opposition to the aims of the rulers and reinforced this solidarity, thereby counteracting the desired effects of both separating contract labour from the ordinary civil population and splitting the men into particular ethnic groups.

The increase of activities in the mining sector and the creation of a fish-industry in the course of the discovery of new resources following World War II, considerably contributed to the expansion of wage labour among the colonised majority. The

process was accelerated, as the conditions for the autonomous reproduction of the subsistence economy in the reserves became increasingly difficult. Therefore, since the early 1950s the formation of a black proletariat with corresponding particular class-interests and -consciousness emerged (see Hubrich/Melber 1977, pp. 93 ff.). Specific demands of workers and their actions were at the same time defined by a close relationship to the development of the liberation struggle on a national basis.

The first global initiative for the establishment of a national workers' organisation took place among Ovambo contract labourers in South Africa. In 1957 they founded the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC), which in 1958 was re-named the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO). The primary aim of the OPO was the abolition of contract-labour (see Hamutenya/Geingob 1972, pp. 89 ff.). Based on the contract-workers from the North of Namibia, the global aim soon articulated the demand for national independence. OPO finally changed in 1960 to the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), which as national liberation movement since the mid-1960s gained world-wide acceptance and recognition as authentic representative of the Namibian people. In the course of this relationship between workers and the other strata of the colonised majority in their efforts for independence, a continually increasing identity and convergence between workers' interests on the one side and demands for national independence on the other side became visible. These circumstances effected that the anticolonial movement at the same time represented the interests of the workers and was influenced by them. Therefore, a separate organisational entity of the black labour-force outside of SWAPO did not exist before the end of the 1970s.

4. The Organised Labour Movement and the National Liberation Struggle

According to this development the specific articulation of workers' interests happened independently of the activities of SWAPO only

in few cases (the interdependence of the organisation of workers and the establishment of the national liberation movement is described in Ndadi 1974). Special attention has been attracted to resistance in the field of labour since December/January, 1971/72. Then some 15-20.000 contract-workers all over Namibia, to the surprise and unpreparedness of the colonial authorities, went on indefinite strike and paralysed the entire economy for several weeks. This countrywide action, although conducted in close personal and organisational ties with the SWAPO, took place rather spontaneously and has been another indicator for the existence of the 'Brotherhood Network' (see the descriptions given in Nehova 1978; a detailed account on the general strike and its background is found in SWAPO of Namibia 1981, pp. 188 ff.; for a profound analysis see also Moorsom 1978). Part of the general demands of the striking workers were: free choice in working places with a wage/income according to qualifications and abilities; the right to terminate an unwanted and too low paid assignment as well as the right to free search for new working possibilities without action by the police; permission to take family members to the place of work and the unconditional right for visits respectively; (see The Strikers' Manifesto, as documented in the South African Labour Bulletin, Nos. 1&2 1978, pp. 188 f.; and SWAPO of Namibia 1981, pp. 200 f., attached to this article as appendix A.) This strike forced the authorities to reorganise the contract labour system by integrating the local power structures of Apartheid in the reserves into the recruitment process as agencies with partial control and thereby conceding access to a bigger slice of the profits. Still, from the point of view of the workers, these changes were cosmetic. They did not alter the basic relations, restrictions and inequalities of contract-labour (see Kane-Berman 1972 and Cronje/Cronje 1979, pp. 77-89). Nevertheless the impressive protest launched by the contract-workers managed to demonstrate persuasively the economically powerful position of the (contract-) labour force. As a result, this nation-wide strike strengthened confidence and self-reliance in the colonised majority. Since the mid-1970s, partly as a repercussion of this strike, the establishment of a specific

organisation closely associated with SWAPO but representing particular interests of the workers alone, has been discussed and finally realised.

The appreciation of the necessity for a separate trade union organisation, sharing the aims and content of the national liberation movement and operating in close relation with the broader struggle for independence, led to the foundation of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), also known as Namibian Workers Union (NAWU) (background to and profile of this organisation is given in SWAPO of Namibia 1981, pp. 268 ff.) during 1977 . The programme of the NUNW demonstrates the still dominant general political goals, which by far transcend an improvement of labour conditions under the existing system (see the draft constitution of the NUNW as reprinted in Cronje/Cronje 1979, pp. 122 ff. and SWAPO of Namibia 1981, p. 269; included as appendix B in this paper). Along with demands more or less in line with those typical for trade unions all over the world, the catalogue of tasks included in the NUNW programme articulates the following claims: protection from exploitation; creation of unity and solidarity; preparation for the participation of workers in the government of an independent Namibia; participation in the complete transformation of the existing social, economic and political conditions; resistance against tribalism and ethnic particularism as well as any kind of discrimination and the struggle for the abolition of all mechanisms of alienation. Membership in the NUNW is open to all workers in Namibia independent of their professional position and occupation, their race, religion or sex. The practical organisation at the place of work is guaranteed through the creation of local cells at the level of firms, farms or mines. These local grass-root groups are unified under regional branches, through which a central executive committee operates and coordinates activities.

Until now, the work of the NUNW has to a large extent been determined by the needs of the phase of establishment under the presently given repressive conditions. At present times it is not

possible to judge, whether and how far this organisation is the nucleus of a national trade union unifying all workers of an independent Namibian nation-state in its ranks, but the NUNW already can be taken as organisational expression of the overwhelming majority of black workers in Namibia. They see their fate directly linked to the success of the overall struggle for human emancipation and national independence of a more than formal character, influencing and changing the whole economic set-up of Namibia's colonial structures on the way to genuine self-determination with the participation of the workers. By demanding this and taking appropriate action, they contribute their share to the battle for a better future of a liberated Namibia and her people.

LITERATURE

Cronje, Gillian/ Cronje, Suzanne, The Workers of Namibia, London: International Defence and Aid Fund 1979.

Gordon, Robert, A Note on the History of Labour Action in Namibia. In: South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 1, 1975, No. 10, pp. 7 - 17.

Gordon, Robert, Mines, Masters and Migrants. Life in a Namibian compound. Johannesburg: Ravan Press 1977.

Gordon, Robert, Some Organisational Aspects of Labour Protest Among Contract Workers in Namibia. In: South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 4, 1978, No. 1&2, pp. 116 - 123.

Gottschalk, Keith, South African Labour Policy in Namibia 1915 - 1975. In: South African Labour Bulletin, Vol. 4, 1978, No. 1&2, pp. 75 - 106.

Hamutenya, Hidipo/ Geingob, Hage, African Nationalism in Namibia. In: Christian Potholm/Richard Dale (eds.), Southern Africa in Perspective - Essays in Regional Politics, New York and London: The Free Press 1972, pp. 85 - 94.

Hubrich, Heinrich-Georg/ Melber, Henning, Namibia - Geschichte und Gegenwart. Zur Frage der Dekolonisation einer Siedlerkolonie. Bonn: Informationsstelle Südliches Afrika 1977.

Kane-Berman, John, Contract Labour in South West Africa. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations 1972.

Melber, Henning, Schule und Kolonialismus: Das formale Erziehungs-
wesen Namibias. Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde 1979.

Moorsom, Richard, Underdevelopment, Contract Labour and Worker
Consciousness in Namibia 1915 - 72. In: Journal of Southern
African Studies, Vol. 4, 1977, No. 1, pp. 52 - 87.

Moorsom, Richard, Workers' Consciousness and the 1971-72
Contract Workers Strike. In: South African Labour Bulletin,
Vol. 4, 1978, No. 1&2, pp. 124 - 139.

Nehova, Hinananje Shafodino, The Price of Liberation. Recorded
by Ole Gjerstad. In: Liberation Support Movement (ed.), Namibia:
SWAPO Fights For Freedom. Oakland: LSM Press 1978, pp. 70 - 87.

Ndadi, Vinnia, Breaking Contract. Recorded and edited by Dennis
Mercer. Richmond: LSM Press 1974.

SWAPO of Namibia/Department of Information and Publicity, To Be
Born A Nation. The Liberation Struggle for Namibia. London:
Zed Press 1981.

United Nations Institute for Namibia, Manpower Estimates and
Development Implications for Namibia, based on the work of
R.H. Green, Lusaka 1978.

Note: This paper is based in major parts on an article contributed
to Siegfried Mielke (ed.), Internationales Gewerkschafts-
handbuch, Leverkusen: Leske & Budrich 1982. I feel obliged
to John Oxenham, who polished up the English text.

Evils of the Contract System

- a. This system makes use of forced labour such that a person has no right to do a job of his choice;
- b. It has meagre wages, and because of these our people are forced to leave a job with the intention of getting better paid jobs;
- c. It breaks up the family life and spoils the upbringing of the children;
- d. Because of this system the employee and his family have no right to visit each other;
- e. This system caused the Ovambos to be looked down upon by the other Africans in Namibia and is causing hatred among the blacks of Namibia;
- f. What is the purpose of the anal examinations for blacks when they are going on contract? Do the whites also undergo this anal examination when they come to Ovamboland on contract? . . .
- g. Because of this evil system the employer values the work done by an Ovambo instead of the person who does the work;
- h. Because of this system an Ovambo is not under the protection of the law.

The Contract System is a Form of Slavery

- a. All people irrespective of race and colour are created by God with the same human dignity and are equal before him. This system undermines the God-given human dignity of an Ovambo worker;
- b. The so-called homelands have become the trading markets where blacks are bought and in this trade SWANLA has become richer and richer and the blacks poorer and poorer;
- c. This slavery brought about the erection of the compounds with surrounding walls on top of which sharp pieces of glass were built. In compounds workers sleep on hard beds made of cement and bricks which cause lameness and death . . .;
- d. This system brings ill-treatment throughout the contract period.

The Favourable System of Looking for Labour

- a. We Ovambos do not want any improvement of or new name for wire. But we want to do away with wire, and to have a contract in the true meaning of the word.
- b. We totally reject any form of buying and selling people because of their colour.
- c. We want an agreement with the following rights:
 - i) freedom to do a job of his choice with the corresponding salary according to his skill;
 - ii) freedom to leave an unwanted and low-paid job, and to look for another job of his choice without police interference;
 - iii) freedom to have his family with him, and to visit or be visited by his family;
 - iv) his salary must be according to the work done regardless of his colour, irrespective of where he is working in Namibia.

[A series of detailed demands followed.]

Extracts from the minutes of the mass meeting of striking contract workers at Oluno-Ondengwa, 10 January 1972.

Glossary:

SWANLA - S.W.A. Native Labour Association, the recruiting agency for contract workers.

wire - also referred to as "draad" (the Afrikaans term) is synonymous to contract work, as the workers are marked with a code or registration number tied to their wrist.

Appendix B

The National Union of Namibian Workers -- Aims and Objectives

- a. Generally to organise and protect from exploitation and look after the interests of all workers in various job categories in Namibia.
- b. To create unity and solidarity among all workers in Namibia.
- c. To pave the way and prepare for a participation by the workers of Namibia in the government of an independent Namibia.
- d. To make the workers of Namibia conscious of the present system of labour and do everything in their power to strive for better and equal working and living conditions.
- e. Insofar as this is compatible with a Workers' Union to take part and contribute to a complete change in the present social, economic and political order, and do everything in their power to achieve this.
- f. To oppose all tribalism and ethnic grouping as well as types of discrimination among Namibian workers, and fight for the abolishment of all barriers of estrangement presently existing.
- g. To make a study in depth of all problems of the workers and find ways of solving them.
- h. To fight for the dignity of all workers.
- i. To do everything in its power to achieve economic equality in any future government of Namibia.
- j. To co-operate with other Workers' Unions having basically the same aims and objects.
- k. To fight for just wages, good working conditions and to protect the interests of all workers.
- l. To regulate relations, negotiate and settle disputes between workers and employers.
- m. To provide advice and/or obtain legal assistance where necessary for workers on matters affecting their employment.

Extract from draft constitution, Windhoek, 1977

(Source: SWAPO of Namibia 1981, p. 269)