Cutting “The Wire:”
Labor Control and Worker Resistance in Namibia
by Pippa Green

MAY DAY 1987 marked a milestone in Namibian labor history. For the first time, more than 20,000 Black workers throughout the country laid down their tools to celebrate International Labor Day. This action signaled the growing strength of the Black trade union movement. Throughout this territory on the southwestern coastline of Africa, illegally occupied by the South African army for over two decades, workers cried out for a living wage, an end to the migrant labor system, the withdrawal of South African troops and the implementation of a United Nations plan for elections and independence.

The May Day meetings were the first public sign that the fledgling trade union movement had found its feet. After a decade of near quiescence on the part of workers’ organizations, the past two years have witnessed the establishment of four militant unions under the wing of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the national labor federation affiliated with the South West Africa Peoples’ Organization (SWAPO), which is leading the struggle for Namibian independence. NUNW’s efforts have resulted in the unionization of over 50 percent of the African workforce in the mining, food and metal industries, as well as in the public sector. Additionally, workers’ committees have been set up in other industries as a first step toward amalgamating all workers into national industrial unions.

Recent trade union activism in Namibia marks a new chapter in the history of the labor movement in the territory. This history finds its roots in Namibia’s legacy of colonialism and the way in which political domination has shaped its economy.
"THE WIRE SYSTEM:"

CONTRACT LABOR IN NAMIBIA

Arguably, the single most important factor in Namibia’s political economy — one which has shaped the character of the national liberation movement, SWAPO, and has been both a heartfelt grievance of workers and the major obstacle to worker organization — has been the system of migrant contract labor.

Under the migrant contract system, workers are recruited from the northern reserves — a term which refers to those areas set aside for indigenous Namibians — separated from their families and in the past have been required to work for periods as long as thirty months. These men live in vast, single-sex compounds where no women or children are allowed to accompany them or to visit them.

Since 1926 the contract labor system has channeled labor into the country’s primary extractive export industries, mining, fishing and canning, and ranching. About two-thirds of the entire labor force is made up of contract workers — a higher proportion of migrant labor than anywhere else in the world. The United Nations Institute for Namibia has estimated that out of a total population of 1.6 million (of whom only 85,000 are classified “white” under South African-imposed race laws), about 500,000 are economically active. Of these, 110,000 are migrant workers.

The contract labor system is known among African workers as “odalaat” — a derivation of the Afrikaans word “draad” meaning “wire.” Some commentators interpret the epithet to refer to the tags which contract workers in single-sex compounds had to wear around their wrists for the duration of their employment contract; others say it is symbolic of the ties that bound a worker to his employer. A “contract” meant a labor contract of indenture, the breaking of which was a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment.

By far the majority of contract workers are from Ovamboland in northern Namibia. Ovamboland is the most densely populated and poorest reserve. The proportion of economically active men migrating from Ovamboland increased from less than 4 percent prior to World War II to over 67 percent in 1969 — an index of the increasing poverty of the area and one reason, suggests one observer, why the South Africans could afford to liberalize the contract labor system in the wake of the 1972 strike. Hunger, not criminal sanctions, now drove people to work.

The government’s central migrant labor recruiting agency was set up not only to recruit and police the labor supply, but also to allocate it across the economy. This guaranteed labor for the lower paying sectors, principally agriculture and domestic service.

As South Africa tightened its own pass legislation in 1945 and 1952, so it did in Namibia. Qualifications for permanent residence were made far more stringent. Africans who were not on a labor contract were not allowed to be in an urban area for more than 72 hours, and, in terms of administrative decrees, virtually no women outside the Police Zone were permitted to obtain jobs in the towns or where their husbands worked.

WORKER RESISTANCE AND TRADE UNIONS

For 28 years — until the general strike of 1971-2, the government controlled all aspects of contract workers’ lives. By then, contract workers totalled 43,000 — or 83 percent of the Black labor force. It wasn’t until 1978 that African workers were allowed to join government-registered trade unions. Additionally, within the confines of Namibian labor legislation, African workers were not allowed to legally strike. There is nevertheless a history of worker resistance in Namibia, ranging from acts of individual rebellion — like “desertion” and sabotage — to strikes and stoppages.

The first recorded strike in Namibian history was in 1893 at the Gross Otavi mine near Tsumeb. Between 1916 and the 1971-2 general strike, there were at least 24 recorded strikes on the mines, in the fisheries and even on a farm. [K. Gottschalk, “Focus on Namibia,” South African Labour Bulletin, Vols. 1&2, 1978] The actual figure is probably higher, as there is evidence to suggest 43 collective actions between 1950 and 1971. [H. Melber, “National Union of Namibian Workers,” Journal of Modern African Studies, 21, No. 1, 1983]

While trade unions had been suppressed, workers found an important channel through which to voice their grievances — SWAPO. Although SWAPO did not intervene in the day-to-day, bread-and-butter issues of workers’ lives, migrant workers played a central role in its founding and activities. It is this close relationship, nurtured over the years, that helps explain the political nature of the new generation of Namibian unions.

THE COMPOUND SYSTEM AND

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1971-2

If Jannie de Wet, then “Commissioner General for the Native People of South West Africa,” ever regretted making the statement which precipitated the largest-ever general strike in Namibia, he did not say so. Ovambos, de Wet had declared, were quite happy with the contract labor system. It was not a form of slavery because Ovambos signed contracts “voluntarily” without anyone forcing them to do so.

This statement confirmed the workers’ worst suspicions that “the Administration would not listen to reason.” The strike, which began on December 13, 1971, was more than a spontaneous outburst of anger and desperation. Hinananje Nehova, a contract worker at the time and SWAPO member explained: “We used [de Wet’s statement] to tell our fellow workers: ‘See the South Africans are saying that we are pleased with this system, so we should do something to show we don’t really want it. If we break this system with a strike, we could have the freedom to choose our jobs and move freely around the country; to take our families with us and to visit our friends, wherever they are.” [Gillian and Suzanne Cronje, The Workers of Namibia, 1979] On Monday morning December 13th, 6,000 contract workers
MINEWORKERS CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO

The re-emergence of the labor movement in 1986 has opened a new chapter of trade union history in Namibia — one that has been punctuated by a series of major strikes. In the largest labor action in over a decade, more than 4,000 Namibian mineworkers struck the Tsumeb Corporation, Ltd. on July 27, 1987. The strike followed a two month long consumer boycott of white owned shops in the mining town of Tsumeb by members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN). The miners constitute the majority of the town's population. The one month long strike, which reportedly cost Tsumeb approximately $3.6 million, affected the company's Tsumeb, Kombat and Ojihase copper mines.

Tsumeb is mainly owned (46%) by Britain's Consolidated Goldfields, via its South African subsidiary Goldfields of South Africa. The U.S. mining multinational, Newmont Mining Corporation, owns 30 percent of the company.

At the core of the strike were the desperately poor wages and working conditions at Tsumeb, which has the worst labor record among Namibia's large minehouses. The workers' demands included: a 120 percent wage increase (the miners reportedly receive only $100 per month); 60 days annual leave, plus provisions for “compassionate leave;” major improvements in the housing, the transport and the medical services provided by the company; an end to government and company repression of union members; recognition of the MUN; and an end to the migrant contract labor system. Significantly, the striking miners also demanded Tsumeb support for the implementation of UN Resolution 435, the United Nations plan for democratic elections and independence for Namibia, and the withdrawal of South Africa's occupation army from the territory. The workers' demands represented a merging of worker-oriented concerns with those of a broader political nature. According to Ben Uulenga, national organizer for the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) and general secretary of the MUN, it is “...is impossible to divide workers’ problems from the colonial oppression of [apartheid's illegal control].” South Africa illegally exercises control over the people, resources and territory of Namibia.

Throughout the strike, Tsumeb management refused to recognize the MUN as the genuine representative of the workers and their demands. Within four days of the beginning of the action, 3,000 workers had been dismissed. U.S. mining conglomerate Newmont Mining provided tacit support for these dismissals and refused to respond to pressure from solidarity organizations in the U.S. in support of the dismissed workers. During the course of the strike, management refused to budge from its original position as outlined in the terms of the existing contract between the workers and the corporation. Yet the workers sustained the strike for four weeks without wages, surrounded by troops and subjected to government and company repression.

Only after state intervention did Tsumeb succeed in breaking the strike. On August 19, a Windhoek judge granted the company permission to evict striking workers from Tsumeb-owned, single-sex hostels. According to the judge, the workers were rejecting the terms of a legally binding contract, and the company had the right to fire and evict the workers based on the existing contractual agreement. Four days later an appeal, filed by the MUN, was turned down and costs were awarded against the union. This judgement resulted in the eviction of more than 3,000 workers from their dwellings.

Repression by South African security forces against the workers increased during the course of the strike. The action was hampered by the detention of a number of key labor and SWAPO officials. Included in those arrested were: Uulenga, Asser Kapere, vice-chair of MUN; John Pandeni, general secretary of the Namibia Food and Allied Union (NAFAU); and Barnabus Tjizu, chair of the NUNW and the general secretary of the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU). Additionally, on August 7 police raided Nomtsuob township, near Tsumeb, arresting sixteen striking workers. Police also forced workers employed at the Ojihase mine to accept their final pay.

The arrests seemed designed to break the strike and weaken SWAPO on the eve of Namibia Day celebrations (observed on August 30 to commemorate SWAPO's first military action). Once Namibia Day had passed and the strike was broken, a Windhoek Supreme Court ruled that the government to release the detainees.

It is inevitable that many of the workers fired during the strike will permanently lose their jobs. During the action, more than 10,000 applications were received for the jobs of the striking miners. This points to the chronic conditions of unemployment and underemployment faced by many Namibians. It was reported that by the second week in September the majority of the miners had re-applied for their old jobs, but of the 3,010 who originally lost their jobs only one-third had been rehired. Sources inside the country report that shop stewards and strike activists have not been rehired and the company has taken repressive measures to guard against rehiring suspected union members. Many of those rehired have been demoted to lower paying jobs such as janitors, and wages for many have been cut drastically. Additionally, a number of the workers have been forced to work 12 hour shifts without overtime pay — marking a change from the past practice of paying workers overtime rates if they worked more than eight consecutive hours.

Nevertheless, in assessing the impact of the strike and the arrests, Ben Uulenga stressed that although the strike did not work out the way the union would have liked, the union is far from crushed. "The workers now have no illusions," he said, "they know that the law will always side with the mine owners and that means we have to work harder."
housed in the Katutura compound, located in the Namibian township outside of the country's capital Windhoek, refused to work. The strike quickly spread to the fisheries in Walvis Bay and the mines in Grootfontein, Rehoboth and Tsumeb. By the end of the month, there were reports that even farm laborers were walking off their jobs.

Two days after the Katutura workers had downed tools, their compound was surrounded by heavily armed police, who walked into workers' rooms, smashing their possessions and conducting searches. Workers who left to buy food were immediately arrested and forced to pay admission of guilt fines. Police reinforcements were flown into Walvis Bay from South Africa, strike meetings were violently broken up, eight were shot dead, three wounded, 267 detained without trial and 12 were charged with inciting the strike. Though the Government divided Namibians into 11 ethnic groups, each with their own reserve, support for the strike transcended ethnic divisions. In all, between 13,500 and 20,000 workers supported the effort.

The strikers' demands were for the freedom to negotiate the conditions for the sale of their labor, the abolition of the pass system, the right of workers to live with their families, equal pay for equal work, the abolition of job reservation, and, fundamentally, the abolition of the contract system of indentured labor.

The strikers had decided to return to the reserves if their demands were not met and, in mid-January, at least 13,500 were transported up, eight were shot dead, three wounded, 267 detained without trial and 12 were charged with inciting the strike. Though the Government divided Namibians into 11 ethnic groups, each with their own reserve, support for the strike transcended ethnic divisions. In all, between 13,500 and 20,000 workers supported the effort.

The NUNW's attempt to establish structures at the factory level coincided with the South African regime's plan to hold "internal elections" in Namibia. Workers were warned they would be charged if they struck illegally, and several NUNW organizers were detained under security legislation. Nevertheless, NUNW began mobilizing on a large scale and to put the national union formed some eight years earlier. The National Union of Namibian Workers was formed by SWAPO in 1970, but operated quietly until the labor reforms were announced.

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All told, six major strikes were reported between 1979 and 1983, involving workers in the diamond, copper, tin and uranium mines as well as in the fisheries. Most involved disputes over wages and working conditions.

Faced with these actions, the government took new steps in the early 1980s to tighten controls over workers. Employment was made contingent on possession of an identity document, which also facilitated recruitment of conscripts to apartheid's colonial army known as the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF). Failure to produce the document could result in a $450 fine or six months in jail.

Although many of the disputes involved workers' demands for higher pay and better working conditions, confrontation between workers and management in one 1983 strike at Consolidated Diamond Mines provided a striking example of the close links between labor and political organizing in Namibia. That confrontation developed after the security police arrested one worker and confiscated SWAPO insignia in the compound. Management was forced to
distance itself from the police and promised to intervene to retrieve both the worker and the confiscated material.

RECENT TRADE UNION ORGANIZING

The most recent push for organizing in Namibia came with the assistance of the Black South African National Union of Mineworkers. Fresh from victories in organizing in one of South Africa's most repressive industrial sectors, the South African unionists began organizing efforts in Namibian mines in 1984-5. South Africa, however, quickly issued a new decree making it illegal for unions outside the territory to operate in Namibia.

Nevertheless, organizing in the mines could not be halted. In October 1986, 3,000 workers at the country's largest diamond mine, Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM), organized a boycott of the company's 50th anniversary celebrations. "To us 50 years of celebration is a reminder of 50 years of exploitation, overmining and oppression of the Namibian people," the workers said at the time. The workers' conclusions are supported by some unusual sources, including the findings of the government's 1986 Thirion Commission which stated that CDM and other mining houses in Namibia were grossly overmining and using questionable financial practices to increase profits without paying proper taxes.

Workers' committees, which had been operating in all the mines, came together in November 1986 to form the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN). The inaugural congress of Namibia's first multi-racial, national mineworkers' union was held in Katutura, and it was attended by over 100 delegates from almost every mine in the country. At its launch, MUN pledged to campaign for higher wages, better living and working conditions and the implementation of Resolution 435, the United Nations plan for democratic elections and independence. The union, under the leadership of SWAPO activist and ex-Robben Island political prisoner Ben Uulenga, reports a significant breakthrough in the struggle for workers' rights in Namibia.

Three other unions have joined MUN in the Namibian trade union federation. The Namibia Food and Allied Union (NAFU), which organizes among Namibia's traditionally militant fishing industry workers, was launched in September 1986 under the leadership of Ivo Roob Volume. At its birth NAFU had approximately 6,000 members at 27 companies and it has continued to grow. Within two weeks of its launching, NAFU won two major disputes at the Luderitz chemical factory and the Okahandja meatpacking plant. The actions were overwhelmingly supported by Black workers, and the Okahandja strike was backed by a sympathy strike of meatpackers in the territorial capital, Windhoek.

In June 1987 a two week strike involving NAFU members at Swavleis, the territory's largest meatpacking company, was resolved in favor of the striking workers. Management agreed to reinstate about 600 meatworkers who were dismissed after a work stoppage over wages (just 31 cents per hour) and the victimization of a union official. Employers also agreed to further negotiations regarding pay scales.

Despite company attempts to break the strike, Swavleis was forced to concede because the action dramatically restricted the availability of red meat in the area. It also cost the company an estimated $90,000 per day in losses.

In May 1987 the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU) became the third member of the young trade union federation. With workers representing 31 workers' committees in the metal and allied industries, MANWU boasts a potential membership of between 10,000 and 15,000.

Namibia's labor organizers realized another victory with the December 1987 formation of the Namibian Public Workers' Union (NAPWU). Some 100 delegates from every major town in Namibia came together to launch this union which represents workers in all branches of the public sector. NAPWU has organized 8,000 workers and has a potential membership of 17,000 in Namibia's railways, municipalities, waterworks, post offices and hospitals.

Although the union represents a major coup in labor organization, its membership base includes some of the most conservative members of Namibia's labor force. Despite this handicap, NAPWU, unlike the other NUNW affiliates, could ultimately represent workers in every corner of the country. This factor gives it the potential to be the most powerful labor union in Namibia.

GOVERNMENT ATTACKS ON UNIONS

Throughout this most recent period of organizing, however, the South African government through its local authorities has engaged in a regular pattern of repression and intimidation of the young trade union movement.

In June 1987 the authorities launched the first in a series of attacks on the new unions involved in actions in the food and chemical industries, arresting Namibian Food and Allied Union chairperson Macdonald Ntlabathi and raiding NUNW offices in Windhoek.

Workers themselves have also been targeted by security forces in efforts to crush the labor movement. Early in June 1987, armored troop carriers sealed off access to Katutura's migrant worker hostel. In a seven hour siege, troops and police searched the hostel room-by-room. Many workers were assaulted. More than 75 workers were injured — some by rubber bullets — and eight were injured so seriously that they were hospitalized. During the siege 45 people were arrested. The hostel was later converted into a barracks for Black army troops, and the 4,000 migrant workers were evicted.

In July 1987 the army attacked a hostel in the fishing town of Luderitz where more than 1,500 workers were housed. This action appeared to be directed at striking workers. The raid lasted five hours.
and during the police action workers were beaten. After the raid blood was splattered on the walls and pools of blood were found in the stairwells. Eight people were shot. One worker later died in the hospital from "intra-cerebral bleeding." At least 50 others sustained injuries, and approximately 208 workers were eventually detained. In a similar incident, many workers were teargassed and 2,000 were detained in a raid at the municipal compound in Kuisebmond where 4,000 workers were housed. The raid appeared to be connected to a worker boycott of bars operated by the municipality.

This decade has also seen frequent raids on squatter camps, which migrant workers have established outside of the compounds in order to live with their families and on compounds themselves to evict and deport women and children to the reserves. The demand for the right to a family life, expressed so dramatically in 1971-2 has still not been won.

WAGES AND NAMIBIA'S ECONOMY

Namibia is one of the richest African regions in mineral resources. It also harbors one of the poorest populations. A 1986 British Oxfam survey found that Gross National Product per capita was $1,259 — but only 22 percent of that went to the Black population who comprise 84 percent of the total population. Namibia's economy is dominated by an extractive export sector which includes mining and fishing. Notably, the mining industry is entirely foreign owned and controlled with 95 percent of Namibia's mines controlled by four transnational corporations — South Africa's DeBeers, Britain's Rio Tinto Zinc and Consolidated Goldfields and U.S. based Newmont Mining. The territory imports approximately 85 percent of all its consumer goods, and its manufacturing sector is virtually non-existent.

In the northern Namibian reserves — principally Ovamboland — 99 percent of Black wage earners live below the subsistence level, while Black babies are seven times more likely to die before the age of one than white infants. A 1986 United Nations Institute for Namibia survey found that some urban households in Namibia "survive" on incomes between $12.50 and $22.50 a month. While whites earn an average annual income of $9,000, Black annual income is nearer $450.

Wages, especially on ranchers' farms and in domestic service, are notoriously low. In 1986 domestic servants in Katutura were found to earn an average of $27.00 a month, while in some areas, average wages ranged from $22.50 to $31.50 a month. In the early 1980s, minimum cash wages for farm workers were around $7.20 a month with the lowest recorded wage being $1.80. Historically the mines have paid the highest wages and mining jobs have thus been the most sought after by contract workers. In 1985, minimum monthly wages in the mining industry ranged from about $140 to $178.

Average wages in the Walvis Bay fishing industry in 1984 were between 25 and 33 cents an hour — less than half the subsistence hourly rate calculated by South Africa's University of Port Elizabeth. In early 1987 post office and municipal workers struck claiming they were paid monthly wages of $36 and $43.20 respectively. [note: all dollar figures have been converted from Rands to U.S. Dollars on a sliding scale to reflect fluctuations in exchange rates]

Workers have also experienced severe inflation. Namibia has suffered an inflation rate of 15 percent a year, and food prices have risen so dramatically that local newspapers showed in 1984 that the cost of living in urban areas in Namibia was much higher than in any urban area in South Africa. It is higher still in the northern Namibian reserves.

The drought of 1981, a fall in the world market prices of copper and diamonds, and the vulnerable nature of the distorted export economy have resulted in large numbers of workers being laid off. In 1986 unemployment was estimated as high as 55 percent in some areas, with a general level of around 30 percent. This is the economic environment in which Namibia's labor unions operate.

DEVELOPMENT AND RECOGNITION:
THE ROAD AHEAD

The recent resurgence of trade union activity in Namibia can be partially attributed to some of the resounding gains made by workers across the border in South Africa, where the Black trade union movement has become an established part of the political scene. This upsurge has also led to concerted attempts by management and government authorities to stifle or co-opt independent worker organizations. The government stated in 1983 that no industrial agreement would be enforceable if unions were not registered. The previously all-white South West Africa Mineworkers Union based in the Tsumeb copper mine managed to recruit 300 of the 5,000 Black workers in an organizing drive. There have also been attempts to set up two anti-SWAPO labor bodies, at least one with money from the African-American Labor Center (AALC) of the U.S. AFL-CIO labor federation.

The NUNW has gained international recognition. It is now recognized by, among others, the International Labor Organization, the Organization of African Trade Union Unity and the Commonwealth Trades Union Council. International trade union secretariats associated with the International Council of Free Trade Unions have also begun supporting the NUNW affiliates, the MUN and NAFAU.

The development of Namibia's trade union movement reflects its environment. Unions have emerged out of a national — and politically active — federation. In a society where the political issues of the day are national independence from colonial domination and an end to contract labor, the unions have had to confront political questions directly. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that while unions are an integral part of the national liberation movement, they nevertheless have specific and independent tasks to perform. The union movement is at once a focus for internal political organization, and a serious attempt to deal with some of the stark economic inequalities in the territory.

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