

ITUC-AFRICA AND TWN-AFRICA:

Consultative meeting on Employment, Structural Transformation and Equitable Economic Development in Africa: towards an African trade union response to three decades of neo-liberalism in Africa.

Session 10: Politics and Struggle in Structural Transformation and Employment Creation.

TOPIC: POLITICAL MOBILISATION, ALLIANCE BUILDING AND THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT (the role of trade unions)

INTRODUCTION

This Paper is a product of some readings and personal experiences from 10 years in the trade union movement frontline, and twenty-one years in trade union and labour education in South Africa and the continent, with the past few years of experiences in community education. Whilst the paper critically looks at political mobilisation and alliance building, it also raises some questions that would hopefully influence the research agenda that this erstwhile gathering seeks to shape.

Political mobilisation and alliance building must be seen in the context of what the trade union movement aims to achieve, what is its particular ideological, policy engagement or strategic intervention outcome? The difficulty is that, as researchers and educators, we are dealing with a myriad of approaches and practices of trade unionism on the one hand, and a range of realities such as war, starvation and just gross oppression and exploitation in various African countries, on the other hand. How do we arrive at a common, or at least a flexible, approach to political mobilisation and alliance building?

Before reflecting on the issues of political mobilisation and alliance building, let me quickly reflect on some 'contradictions' that exist in this work that we do, and which, sometimes, we tend to 'accept' rather than engage with.

Some Contradictions

This is an attempt at a mixture of critical self-reflection and understanding of why we must not continue to take things for granted. Our work as trade union activists, as leaders, as intellectuals, as people with a conscience, spans, in many instances, decades of work. In this process of our work, some of the glaring

contradictions that should be taken into account to determine where we are going and how we are going to get there, get taken for granted or skimmed over.

Trade union members, the workers or the working class, have little understanding of the discourses we engage in, or particularly, the language we speak. Their reality is one of survival from day to day, whether trying to eke a living, find a job, or even how to feed their families. So if they were present here to listen to the discussions we are having, they would be lost! These workers, unemployed, marginalised communities, will have extreme difficulty even understanding the theme 'Employment, Structural Transformation and Equitable Economic Development in Africa'. So who do we speak for, do we have a mandate, and how do we translate our discussions, findings into a body of knowledge, research work that is understood by workers and the broader 'excluded' society? Remember the critique we have of political decisions is that they do not represent the voice of the masses but rather that of an elite!

The three decades of neo-liberalism must also reflect our own inadequacies in challenging these exploitative practices. Was it our failure to respond to them because of a lack of an agenda, inadequate analysis of the 'scourge', inability to organise ourselves, disunity. Have unions become co-opted further into the system, or did we not anticipate that this is a fight for our existence?

POLITICAL MOBILISATION

“The very design of neoliberal principles is a direct attack on democracy.”
– Noam Chomsky, *Hopes and Prospects*

The difficulty is, how do we perceive neo-liberalism?

Is it a political agenda of capital, and if it is then it must be seen as an attack on workers, the working class, their organisations, and then broadly, an attack on the peoples of our countries, not only in Africa but all over the world. Greece currently is discovering that the capitalist elite, formed by big corporations, banks, international finance institutions, powerful western political elite, and their various networks, punish you if you dare challenge the system!

If we see it as an attack, then it is a sustained onslaught, by capital and its formations, on the vast majority of peoples, predominantly in the South, but also turning on their own when the profit margins and greed are threatened, to extract from people and the environment, at any expense. This then is class warfare, where an elite, capitalist class will continue to exploit the poorer,

'weaker' classes, even to the extent of initiating military warfare in the name of resource protection and extraction.

Or we could look at neo-liberalism as the wrong policies being implemented and that we need to fight to change such policies, so that the policies which are more humane and which consider people before profits are implemented. The various international institutions and forums such as the ILO, UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, should be convinced that such policies are not sustainable. The various multinational corporations should be convinced that social responsibility must come first and that the exploitation of people and resources is not sustainable. Our national governments should be convinced that their people, who put them in power, must be their only priority, and that they must resist becoming part of failed policies and practices!

So, there are two options to respond to neo-liberalism, class warfare or policy change - are they mutually exclusive, do they present a divergence of ideological approach and understanding, or is there space for the two to exist side by side? Does this not constitute the way in which our organisations have positioned themselves, the way in which we describe what is left, centre and right? Has this and many other depictions and understandings caused us not to have a common approach, or rather caused us not to be united? How do we mobilise, politically or otherwise, or form alliances for that matter, if this critical understanding of how we see neo-liberalism and how we then mobilise against it has not been resolved? In other words what are we mobilising for, what is the alternative, or rather what is our common ideology, objective, goal, and agenda?

Who and how do we mobilise?

Political mobilisation suggests that the agenda is political and the outcome is political. We want to bring about political change. Again, is it that we do not believe in the current political system, or we do not believe in the current political elite, or is it that we do not believe in the current political policies? Whichever it is, will determine who and how we mobilise.

But we also need to realise that the nation-state is under attack and that the independence of a country making its own policies, taking its own decisions, serving its people before anything else, is under severe threat - Greece a case in point? So the political mobilisation needs to be understood in a broader context that it is not about State power, policies or candidates alone, but rather the interpretation of politics and political mobilisation in the current context of three decades of unfettered neo-liberalism?

The form of political democracy is also in need of scrutiny. Participation in political elections needs money and resources - 'he who pays the piper calls the tune!' The tremendous amount of money and resources that are poured into political campaigns, political elections, political institutions and infrastructure could probably go a long way in resolving most of the issues that political parties and individuals campaign about. But who provides this money, and therefore who has greater influence over the political agenda and outcome?

Against this background, who do we mobilise and how do we mobilise? Do we as trade unions have the capacity to mobilise? Do we see it as a priority or even part of our work as trade unions to engage in political mobilisation? Do we broaden the agenda of the union, and therefore recruit members on a political basis, using an approach that they are not joining a union to fight for better wages, to seek protection against unfairness at the workplace only, but also to advance a political agenda?

There are various 'levels of mobilisation'. The mobilisation of members, non-members, the casualised working force, the informalised workers, the unemployed, the broader community, the social movements and community organisations involved in challenging neo-liberalism.

Mobilisation can take the form of organising, educating or conscientising, lobbying, campaigning, and forming alliances.

ALLIANCE BUILDING

“Similar things are happening in Africa, here, and in Europe. The indignados in southern Europe and the Occupy movements here are in a sense similar, even if that are from different worlds. The protests are not against dictatorships but against the shredding of democratic systems and the consequences of the Western version of the neoliberal system, which has had structurally consistent effects for the past thirty years: a very narrow concentration of wealth in a fraction of 1 percent of the population, stagnation for a large part of the rest, deregulation, and repeated financial crises, each one harsher than the last.”

– Noam Chomsky, *Power Systems: Conversations on Global Democratic Uprisings and the New Challenges to U.S. Empire*

The question is whether as trade unions should we form alliances with those who have power and how do we determine what power is? What is the reason for such alliance? Is it because we share a common understanding of what neo-liberalism is, or a common outcome in specific situations, or is the alliance necessary because we are weak? What has happened to the international Anti-

Globalisation Movement, the World Social Forum, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement? Were these campaigns and movements too amorphous, whilst they may have had a common 'enemy'? Were their agendas different or did they not have the power to move the neo-liberalist capitalist structure? And what can we learn from the Arab Spring- was it a mobilisation against a common tyranny, but did not have a complete strategy with an alternative to the system?

Too often our alliances are more with those in power or those who have resources, rather than with those who are at the wrong end of neo-liberalism. Just think of how much time and resources are spent speaking to those who have power, resources, positions - political parties, government officials, employers, international organisations, funders, etc., rather than spending time with our members in the workplaces, communities, displaced people, the marginalised, excluded, informalised, and organisations that organise them.

Most of the experiences of trade unions on the continent with regard to forming alliances have been with political parties which eventually come into power and then shed the alliance at the door of such power. Such lessons are still to be learnt today primarily because we believe that State power is the ultimate power, and that if you can capture the State or at least influence it then our agenda will be advanced or at the very least, prioritised! We do this time and again despite the innumerable lessons of failure of such approach.

We need to form alliances with the broader society, the broader working class, the unemployed and excluded. The presence of unions in communities where the devastation is taking place is vital, not for the sake of being seen but for the sake of identifying with the broader communities and uniting the struggles of the workplace with that of the community.

TRADE UNIONISM (its role in the fight against neo-liberalism)

“The trade union is not a predetermined institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that defines it.” Antonio Gramsci, Unions and Councils, 12 June 1920

The sustained three decades of neo-liberal, extractive 'attack' on society has had a devastating effect on workers, the working class, their communities, their livelihoods, their organisations and their environment. This devastation is well documented, but the manner in which trade unions have responded suggests that the effects have been lasting and that recovery is either slow, disconnected or they will never be the force they were in the 80s.

The various calls for the unions to change their organising strategies so that marginalised, casualised, informalised workers be properly organised, represented and be part of the trade union movement, has not happened; the ability of trade unions to respond to the neo-liberalist agenda at various levels and forums have proved ineffective in the long run. Part of the neo-liberalist agenda is to weaken any opposition to it, which is a given with any system that is threatened. Therefore, the trade unions must realise that the casualisation, informalisation, and marginalisation of the working class and their organisations, was a neo-liberalist strategy to weaken them and render them ineffective against the tide!

Sites of engagement

So how do trade unions respond and has their role been re-defined? Their capacity to mobilise is unquestionable but their capacity to adapt in a modernised, technological, changing form of capitalist extraction and wealth generation, has left them lacking. Bureaucratisation, hierarchical forms of organisation, business unionism, are some negative forms of practices that undermine the true nature of mass-based, democratic organisations.

It is necessary for trade unions to identify their sites of engagement, where they should be ploughing their energies, resources, and strategies. This requires that trade unions must understand what neo-liberalism is, that is, its political, social, cultural and economic effects; the various forms it takes; how it impacts on the workers, communities and the broader society; what recourse do they have in fighting against it. On this basis, the trade unions must develop an agenda that is all encompassing, that deals with neo-liberalism in every form, at every site, and initiates various strategies, policies, tools and tactics to engage with it and defeat it.

The first site of engagement is the workplace. This is where the neo-liberal agenda manifests itself in its crudest form and where trade unions have their power, the workers. As the neo-liberal agenda unfolds itself at the workplace, the workers, if organised and conscientised, if clear about their dignity and self-worth, if true participation and democracy really exist, then there will be no opportunity to use the workplace for gross exploitation and blatant violations of human rights and dignity!

The second site of engagement has to be the institutions that purport to promote collective bargaining, and in the process tie up trade unions in the

belief that voluntary negotiations about wages and working conditions will bring about improvement for workers whilst the neo-liberal agenda undermines workers' rights and benefits. Do unions become accomplices in the consistent reduction of their interests? Have they been co-opted into believing that their participation in the system will bring about improvements whilst casualisation, increased unemployment, and insecurity of employment are the order of the day? Do unions become a labour aristocracy that only looks after their own whilst the vast majority of the workers and the broader working class are marginalised, excluded and finally destroyed?

There are many other sites of engagement which include:

- The various institutions of industrial relations, such as the dispute resolution institutions, which purport to resolve disputes but in actual fact apply a set of rules and practices that favour the employer and the capitalist agenda; the institutions that promote the skilling of the labour force for the sake of exploitation and turning the capitalist machinery;

- The consultative tri-partite institutions where policy & labour legislation is discussed.

It must be noted that the power, influence and "rights" of capital in the country is so immense that they can change economic and industrial policy, such as securing concessions and exemptions and favourable subsidies; influence legislation that promotes neo-liberalism such as the flexibility and casualisation of labour.

Conclusion: The Research Agenda

In conclusion, the brief was also to present some ideas around a research agenda. The vast body of quality labour and trade union research conducted by African scholars and researchers remain on the shelves. This wealth of information needs to be revived and translated into strategic action, alternative policies and effective education material.

The following are some additional areas that could be considered for a research agenda over the next five years.

1. **The nature & forms of, and responses to neo-liberalism in workplaces and communities in Africa**

- How have unions responded, what strategies and tactics have been employed and are there case studies that could provide important lessons?
- Are workers and their representatives equipped, knowledgeable, and skilled in engaging with the realities of neo-liberalism at the workplace and in their communities? If not, what kind of education and capacity do they need to strengthen them?
- Are there any lessons to be learnt from case studies of social movements, community organisations and community struggles which have identified and responded creatively and successfully to neo-liberal programmes imposed on them?
- What community struggles are linked to worker struggles so that there could be a sharing of strategies, ideas, tactics and a coming together as a broader front?
- What are some of the lessons to be drawn from the successes and failures of the global responses to neo-liberalism - the Anti-Globalisation Movement, the World Social Forum, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, and others? How can some of these lessons be integrated into effective trade unions responses?

2. Worker participation and workplace democracy

- How do trade union representatives and workers change the agenda and power relations in their workplaces so that their fundamental rights to participation, democracy, human dignity are protected, advanced and translated into meaningful, fundamental change of their working realities? This could be a research project that adopts a participatory action research approach; [The African Worker Participation and Development Programme (APADEP) which existed for well over twenty years in the late 1980s, was a research & education programme which conducted case studies and surveys in workplaces in many African countries, looking at the nature of worker participation and conditions of employment, and then converting such research into education workbooks];
- Have the trade unions adopted an approach of moving towards proper worker participation and workplace democracy as an agenda to changing power relations and decision-making in the workplaces?
- What community struggles are linked to worker struggles so that there could be a sharing of strategies, ideas, tactics and a coming together as a broader front, rather than separate and divided entities, each looking after their "own" interests, even though the interests are the same?

3. Education for liberation!

- What is the nature of trade union education, and does it equip workers and their representatives to fight against neo-liberal practices?
- Is it possible to embark on a mass education and conscientising campaign so that the discourse of neo-liberalism, or the policies and strategies that are needed to fight it, are a shared vision and that true mandated positions come from a conscientised, informed membership and communities rather than from just a small group of leaders, intellectuals, researchers and educators?

4. Collective Bargaining

- The issues that are researched and tabled at collective bargaining forums need to be critically looked at to determine whether they represent a move to engage with and change the neo-liberal agenda
- There also needs to be a critical look at whether such collective bargaining is really changing the conditions of workers or maintaining the status quo, or actually resulting in aggravating their situation;
- A similar critical study must be conducted with regard to the tri-partite structures that may exist in our countries - labour, business, and government consultative forums; do they make meaningful change?

5. Legislation

- Are there national and international legislative precedents, cases and provisions that exist which may be used to arm us with weapons to challenge or highlight the neo-liberal erosion of fundamental human rights and dignity?
- Is it possible to embark on class actions that can challenge this neo-liberal hegemony?

Selected Readings

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