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Trade Unionism in Zimbabwe under conditions of autocratic neoliberalism, 2014 to 2024: Challenges and Possibilities for Revival and Transformation

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the severe crisis affecting Zimbabwe's trade union movement from 2014 to 2024 under neoliberal globalization. It explores the compounded external and internal challenges weakening unionism, shown by declining membership, diminished activism, job insecurity, and a drastic wage fall. Externally, union struggles stem from Zimbabwe's repressive political environment and neoliberal economic policies, leading to informal work conditions and labour casualisation—a trend originating with the 1991 Economic Structural Adjustment Programme. Internally, the paper highlights fragmentation within unions, a disempowered membership base, and a corrupt, elitist leadership that stifles democratic union processes and aligns ideologically with neoliberalism. This leadership is reinforced by support from employers, political elites, and international allies. Despite these formidable challenges, the paper argues that the trade union movement remains an essential and indispensable platform for the working class to challenge and confront the hegemony of the capitalist ruling class and for a more humane, just and egalitarian society based on socialist ethos and foundations.

KEYWORDS

Trade Unionism
External and Internal Challenges
Neoliberal-globalization crisis
Political and Legal Repression

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the shift towards neoliberal economic policies have profoundly impacted trade unions worldwide. The shift from manufacturing to service-oriented economies has decreased union membership, as service sector jobs are often less unionized. Deregulation and changes in labour laws in some have made it more difficult for unions to organize workers and negotiate collective agreements, alongside a growing trend of employer resistance to unionization. Privatization and market liberalization, particularly during economic downturns, have contributed to precarious forms of employment and an increasing prevalence of informal work arrangements. As a result, global union membership, known as union density, has declined, weakening unions' bargaining power and effectiveness in advocating for workers' rights and benefits and as agencies of radical reformist or revolutionary change in society.

Edward Webster, a prominent scholar on labour and trade unions, has extensively analysed the weakening of trade unions globally, focusing on the impacts of globalization, technological changes, and the informalization of work.

Zimbabwean trade unions have not been immune to these trends. The last decade (2014–2024) has been particularly challenging for trade unionism in Zimbabwe amid a growing and debilitating economic crisis. Unions have faced a multi-faceted neoliberal offensive from employers and the state, legal and state threats, ideological and social pressures, as well as internal challenges such as splits. Indeed, it is not far off to argue that, more than ever since independence in 1980, unions today face an existential threat unless urgent measures are taken to stem the tide. The state of unions is genuinely dire. The reasons for this are both external and internal to the union movement, as this article will further elaborate.

Externally or objectively, factors centred on an autocratic, repressive political and legal superstructure and the impact of globalization and neoliberal economic policies. The latter has resulted in acute informalization of the economy and casualisation of labour. The neoliberal policies are traceable to the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (EASP) in 1991.

Internal factors include fragmentation and multiplicity of unions, a weak, disempowered rank-and-file, and a corrupt, elitist labour aristocracy dominating the unions. This elite leadership layer has suffocated internal union democracy and an independent rank-and-file. It is characterised by ideological subservience to the dominant capitalist and neoliberal narrative of the bourgeois ruling class.

This paper acknowledges the importance of what has been written on the challenges faced by trade unions by academics such as Raftopoulos, Kanyenze and Sachikonye (2018: 145 & 151), identifying the challenges as "economic crisis and decline in membership, politicization, factionalism and fragmentation". The authors highlighted how de-industrialization, job cuts, precarity of employment and repression by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic-Front (ZANU-PF) government have affected unions. In this paper, we argue for an analysis that deeply integrates the external and internal factors, exploring the dialectical relationship between the different factors.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research. It was important for the researchers to see the world through the participants' eyes to "understand how people experience and interpret events in their lives" (Whitley, 2002: 34). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, gathering rank-and-file union members' views of four selected unions. Semi-structured interviews are adjustable, allowing the participants to convey themselves in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher (Blee and Taylor 2002: 92). Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of representative unions in the teaching, mining, food manufacturing and bank and finance industries. Industries that the researchers felt still played an important role in the country's economy and political setup. Interviewees include union rank-and-file leaders, workers committee leaders and union officials. Substitute names are used to protect the identity of interviewees. Existing literature, such as works by Raftopoulos, Sachikonye and Kanyenze, was used to supplement the semi-structured interviews.

The first section defines a trade union and outlines its roles and objectives to provide context for understanding the challenges faced by trade unions in Zimbabwe in mobilizing workers against continued austerity measures. This is followed by analyzing the external threats to unions and examine the internal challenges these unions face. The last part explores the potential for the revival and transformation of the union movement in Zimbabwe and its role in the class struggle between labour and capital under capitalism.

UNIONS AND THEIR ROLES AND OBJECTIVES

Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb (1920: 1) provide a good working definition of trade unions: "A trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives." This definition sets the context for why workers join unions. Workers' various needs drive them to join unions, which successful unions strive to meet. According to Finnemore (2000: 71), these needs can be categorized as economic, job security, political, social, and self-fulfillment. Economic and job security are the most crucial in present-day Zimbabwe.

Unions primarily exist to satisfy their members' economic needs, particularly attaining a living wage. This is acknowledged in section 65 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which guarantees the right to a fair and reasonable wage. Finnemore (2000: 71) notes that in Britain in 1989, 80 percent of workers cited economic reasons as important for joining a union. Engels (1881) argued that trade unions emerged as a necessity in 19th-century Britain to provide workers with a collective instrument to ensure fair wages and reasonable working hours.

The second major need is employment security. Interviews conducted by this research revealed that job insecurity has increased in Zimbabwe due to retrenchments and company closures over the past two decades. Finnemore (2000: 72) states that insecurity drives unionization, as members expect protection from retrenchment, dismissal, and unilateral management actions.

The decline of trade unionism in Zimbabwe and globally is largely due to unions' inability to adequately protect and advance these key employee needs, exacerbated by external challenges.

EXTERNAL THREATS

This section examines the external threats faced by labour unions in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the discussion will focus on the economic threats that arise from employer tactics and state intervention and the legal constraints imposed by government policies and laws. Understanding these threats is crucial for assessing the possibilities for the revival of the labour movement in Zimbabwe.

ECONOMIC THREATS AND THE EMPLOYER-STATE NEOLIBERAL OFFENSIVE

The primary external threat to Zimbabwean trade unionism today is economic. Kanyenze (2018: 75) notes that Zimbabwe has faced a deepening economic crisis since the early 2000s, prompting the government and employers to adopt neoliberal austerity policies. This economic turmoil, combined with neoliberal globalization, has disrupted Zimbabwe's productive forces and relations. Historically, Zimbabwe was one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most industrialized nations after South Africa, with a semi-industrial economy developed under settler colonialism (Mlambo 2017: 99). Until the 1980s, its manufacturing sector produced a diverse range of goods, including consumer and capital goods, particularly in engineering, chemicals, metals, and transport (Gwisai 2002: 221). Manufacturing accounted for 24.9 percent of GDP, while agriculture employed 14 percent of the workforce (Kanyenze 2021: 23), supporting a strong and militant trade union movement that contributed significantly to the anti-colonial nationalist movement and the industrial and political upheavals post-1996.

However, globalization and neo-liberalism had a huge impact on the economy after 1990, which in turn created serious structural challenges for the union movement.

Faced with economic stagnation from the late 1980s, the government adopted an International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank inspired neoliberal economic framework, Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). ESAP's policies were marked by trade liberalization, devaluation of the local currency, fiscal and monetary policy reforms, public enterprise reforms, and de-regulation of investment, labour and pricing markets, including more relaxed retrenchment and dismissal laws (Kanyenze 2021: 91).

ESAP was supposed to stimulate economic growth on the basis of free-market liberalism. However, this did not happen and was disastrous for a hitherto protected small, national industrial base like Zimbabwe's. The local, protected industries were unable to match or compete with the onslaught of globalized, advanced industries from the Global North and major emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil. Sutcliffe (2013: 6) points out that adopting the IMF-sponsored neoliberal policies under ESAP prompted a near collapse of Zimbabwe's industrial base. The neoliberal shift of the economy in the context of globalization led

to de-industrialization and significant job losses. Labour Force Survey Report (LFSR) for the Fourth Quarter (Q4) of 2023 produced by the Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency revealed that informalization grew sharply such that by 2023, the IMF estimated that Zimbabwe had the third most informalized economy in the world, with workers in the informal economy constituting over 85.5 percent of the working population.

De-regulation under the neoliberal policies led to increasing casualization of work, with a growing shift from permanent, secure jobs to fixed-term contract employment marked by precarious employment security.

The adverse effects of neoliberal globalization in Zimbabwe have been exacerbated by a severe economic crisis, deepening since 2000. This crisis, compounded by heightened political turmoil and international isolation, followed the ZANU-PF government's adoption of the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). Although seen as a necessary redistributive reform benefiting black peasantry and middle classes (Moyo, 2011), the FTLRP caused short- to medium-term economic disruption and displaced a significant number of commercial farm workers. A 2004 Refugees International report estimated that 78 percent lost their jobs due to land seizures and redistribution; before the reform, farm workers numbered between 325,000 and 450,000, supporting 1.5 to 2 million people. The General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) was heavily impacted, with its membership and financial base decimated, leading to operational challenges in supporting affected members.

Critically, as a result of FTLRP in December 2001, the president of the USA signed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) into law, imposing severe economic sanctions on the country (Moyo and Chambati 2013). This study contends that, although ZIDERA sanctions are often described as targeted specifically at the ruling ZANU-PF, they have, in effect restricted Zimbabwe's access to international credit and financial markets. This has had an impact on the workers and the labour movement. The international isolation accelerated the economic crisis from the 1990s, resulting in the collapse of the Zimbabwe Dollar in 2008. Hyperinflation reached an unprecedented historic 231 million in 2008, the second-highest inflation in history (Chagonda 2012: 84). Factories, farms and businesses closed. Unemployment soared. This led to unprecedented levels of unemployment, attacks on wages and employment security and casualisation of labour (Munangagwa 2009: 120). By 2014 less than 900,000 of the 13 million population were formally employed, and 84 percent were informally employed (Bhebhe and Mahapa 2014:72).

This hostile economic environment marked by de-industrialization and the collapse of commercial agriculture has severely undermined trade unionism. The drastic fall in formal employment has led to a massive fall in unionization. This is reflected in the fall of members of the country's largest trade union federation, the ZCTU, whose membership dropped from 244,622 (25.7 percent) in 2007 to 89,818 (7.5 percent) in 2017 (Raftopoulos et al. 2018: 146). Not only have unionization rates fallen because of the massive job losses and unprecedented economic informalisation, but unions' bargaining power and service delivery have been seriously undermined.

Even under the normal dynamics of political economy, the capacity of unions to push wages above the average dictated by the law of wages is constrained by what Engels (1881) referred to as the “industrial reserve army of the unemployed.” Under capitalism, there is generally never a state of full employment, even during an economic boom. This reserve army of the unemployed is a powerful whip in the hands of the employers against employees and unions. Engels states that:

The application of mechanical power and machinery to new trades, and the extension and improvements of machinery in trades already subjected to it, keep turning out of work more and more “hands”, and they do so at a far quicker rate than that at which these superseded “hands” can be absorbed by, and find employment in, the manufactures of the country. These superseded “hands” form a real industrial army of reserve for the use of Capital. If trade is terrible, they may starve, beg, steal, or go to the workhouse; if trade is good, they are ready at hand to expand production; and until the very last man, woman, or child of this army of reserve shall have found work — which happens in times of frantic over-production alone — until then will its competition keep down wages, and by its existence alone strengthen the power of Capital in its struggle with Labour. In the race with Capital, Labour is not only handicapped, it has to drag a cannon-ball riveted to its foot. Yet that is fair according to Capitalist political economy (Engels: 1881).

In the context of massive levels of formal unemployment, with 86.8 percent of the working population by 2023 in the informal economy (LFSR 2023: Q4), this was a massive cannonball riveted to the Zimbabwean trade union movement. The situation was made worse by an increasingly authoritarian and repressive state (Raftopoulous *et al.*, 2018).

Sensing their unrivalled economic advantage arising from this huge reserve army of the unemployed, and in response to the continuing domestic financial and economic crisis and pressures of globalization, employers, supported by the state and judiciary, have pushed for a fundamental re-configuration of the labour relations landscape. A re-configuration that evokes memories of the era of primitive accumulation of establishment of capitalism in Zimbabwe in the early 20th century, *chibharo*¹ (Gwisai 2006 and Madhuku 2015). This has involved a race to the bottom characterised by a three-pronged neoliberal attack on the working class and unions. This offensive firstly involves substantial job cuts through retrenchments and casualisation of labour. An interview with Mary from the food manufacturing industry highlighted that older, permanent, and often unionized workers are replaced with younger, un-unionised contract workers, especially female workers, earning much lower wages without job security, pensions, or medical aid. Women are the latest entrants to the job market. However, in a patriarchal society, they still retain traditional social and biological roles, which seriously impedes their active involvement in trade unions.

The second arm of the offensive involved significant cuts in wages and benefits. ECONET Wireless Zimbabwe, the second biggest counter on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange, called this a

“war on deflation” or internal devaluation (Mhlanga: 2017). The idea was to drive wages to historic low levels, with ECONET 2015 cutting wages by 20 percent. This was nothing but a thinly disguised war on workers and unions designed to force slave wages on workers. The dominant political elites in the country now support this war. The ruling ZANU-PF styles it the “Zimbabwe is Open for Business”.

The third prong of the neo-liberal offensive was the smashing of industry-wide collective bargaining and trade unions so that employers set wages with a non-unionised casualized labour force with wages linked to productivity – a version of *chibharo*. In April 2018, doctors and nurses went on strike. When nurses went on strike in April 2018, the retired army general and now vice president, Constantino Chiwenga, who led the coup to remove Mugabe, fired more than 15,000 nurses without even hearing or addressing their grievances. In a revealing Herald newspaper article in April 2018 titled “Time for labour market reform”, Nicky Mangwana, a leading ideologue of ZANU-PF based in the UK and its Presidential Elections deputy spokesperson and now the Permanent Secretary for the Information Ministry, laid this out graphically. He argued that the summary dismissal in April 2018 of the 15,000 striking nurses was part of a broader neoliberal anti-union agenda. He wrote:

The moment President Mnangagwa said, “Our system of economic organisation will incorporate elements of market economy in which enterprise is encouraged, protected and allowed just and merited rewards,” was defining. From that moment, the power and strength of the unions had to be reduced. This is because capital was being offered space to flourish. As neoliberal as it may sound, unionism struggles to co-exist with free-market economics. There is just not enough space for both. This is exactly what Margaret Thatcher found out. So, the nurses’ strike came at a time when a clear message needed to be sent that unions would never be allowed to have a stranglehold over the economy again. This ideological position aligns with the “Zimbabwe is open for business” mantra. The labour market cannot stay unreformed when the political and economic systems are being reformed. The free market does not operate in an environment of labour market rigidity. The new dispensation should reform the labour laws and practices to re-orient them towards a free-market economy attractive to investment.

The firing of the nurses was a warning that there will never be more of the same in the market. ZANU-PF is very likely to adjust its constitution because its government’s claims of socialism are beginning to sound hollow when it is running a free market economy.

If reducing union power increases employment, let us all embrace it. The ZCTU used to have much power... If the Zimbabwe economy is going to improve, there is a need to reform the labour market. That includes reducing the powers of the unions... The wage level should be linked to how a company is performing. Both unions and governmental influence on the labour market is too much.

¹ Chibharo was used by the locals when capitalism was introduced in Zimbabwe to refer to forced labour and slave like treatment at work.

In all major countries, unionism is in serious decline. In Zimbabwe, there is only one way for it to go down (*The Herald*, 21 April 2018).

The above-outlined economic factors, employers' and states' neoliberal offensive, are external challenges that have seriously compromised the attraction of unions to recruit new members or maintain current ones, contributing to the drastic fall in unionization rates. Indeed, they constitute unprecedented existential threats to unionism, which can only be dealt with by a collective mobilization of the working class and the poor to confront the ruinous neoliberal austerity policies now being followed and supported by the State, business, judicial and political elites.

LEGAL AND STATE THREATS

The above ruling class neoliberal offensive has been facilitated and enabled by hostile neoliberal anti-worker and anti-union legislation and judgments by the courts, which have virtually removed the employees' right to protection from unfair dismissal and retrenchment (Gwisai 2006).

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the threats in judicial form was the 17 July 2015 Supreme Court decision of *Nyamande and Another v Zuva Petroleum (Pvt) Ltd* (2015) 'the Zuva decision.' The *Zuva* decision upheld the employers' common law power to dismiss employees on notice, massacring over 20,000 jobs in firms like ECONET, Steward Bank, GMB and NRZ (Mtintema 2018: 221).

Threats have also emanated from the legislative arm. The Labour Relations Amendment Act, 2015 (No. 5 of 2015) was ostensibly enacted to address the adverse effects of the *Zuva* decision. Still, it ended up being a dagger drawn to workers' hearts. Section 12C of the new enactment completely overhauled the previous protective retrenchment laws under the Labour Relations Amendment Act, 2002, replacing it with a new framework that has made retrenchment automatic and easier. Employers now have to pay a maximum retrenchment package of not less than one month's salary for every year of service. If they can prove incapacity, they may be exempted from paying anything at all. Section 13 of Act 5 of 2015 amended section 74 of the Labour Act to specifically require collective bargaining to promote "high levels of productivity, economic competitiveness and sustainability." This is likely inspired by the neoliberal sweatshops copied from China.

There has also been a battery of the High Court and Supreme Court decisions designed to support employers' casualisation and anti-union agenda. In *Magodora and Others v CARE International Zimbabwe* (2014), the Supreme Court ruled that an employer could employ workers on continuously renewed fixed-term contracts indefinitely, and such employees had no legitimate expectation of being turned permanent employees. In the case of *Innsco Africa (Pvt) Ltd v Chimoto* (2012), the Supreme Court put a nail to Section 12B (4) of the Labour Act. The court held that despite section 12B (4) stipulating that the Labour Court could consider mitigation factors like the employees' service history, disciplinary record and personal circumstances in ordering a penalty less than dismissal, the ultimate discretion of the appropriate penalty lay with the employer. Hence, the Court reversed the decision of the Labour Court not to dismiss an

employee found guilty of negligence in preparing an invoice for a pizza and prejudicing the employer for \$4-00.

A cursory survey of recent decisions handed down by the Supreme Court in the last decades shows that employers win seven to eight of every ten cases before the court. The judiciary has become a true bastion of the neoliberal offensive against workers.

Added to the above has been an increasingly hostile and authoritarian state. The trade union movement led by the ZCTU has played a significant role in the struggle for political democracy and, consequently, has been at the receiving end of this repression. This was particularly so from the period after 1997, which eventually led to the formation of the ZCTU-backed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC posed the most potent threat to the post-colonial authoritarian state, defeating Mugabe in the March 2008 presidential elections but stopped from assuming power.

Therefore, the ZANU-PF-led state has regarded the ZCTU and its affiliates as adversarial forces, responding with repressive measures. Under legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (Chapter 11:17), IndustriALL (2018) noted that trade union leaders have faced detention, torture, and the suppression of meetings for exercising their rights to freedom of association and assembly. Yeros (2002:180) traced the government's efforts to curb workers' militancy associated with the ZCTU to its facilitation of the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU) in October 1997, officially registered in July 1998. This strategy intensified following the formation of the MDC, with state policy shifting toward promoting union fragmentation by endorsing ZFTU-aligned unions. This approach has resulted in the Ministry of Labour registering numerous groups claiming to represent unions, leading to an unprecedented proliferation of registered unions and a weakened labour movement.

INTERNAL THREATS

The external threats detailed in the preceding section have been devastating because of internal and subjective factors that have bedeviled the union movement in Zimbabwe. These internal challenges include membership dwindling, fragmentation, a leadership crisis characterised by a lack of internal union democracy, ideological subservience and class collaborationism, especially in National Employment Councils (NECs) and increasing disillusionment among workers. This section delves into these challenges, which ultimately undermine the unions' capacity to effectively represent and advocate for their members, ultimately weakening the broader labour movement in the country.

CLASS COLLABORATIONISM: IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL THREATS AND UNION DEPENDENCY ON NECs AND NGOS

A key subjective weakness of the union movement has been that of class collaborationism by the union leadership with employers, especially in NECs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This threat is ideological and social, namely the class capture of many union leaders in embracing the prevailing ruling

class neo-liberal ideology and class collaborationist strategies.

This ideological class capture arises primarily from the relationships developed by the labour leaderships with external players, particularly NECs and international NGOs, characterized by dependency and corruption. The 2015 ZCTU Report highlights that many unions and federations rely heavily on NECs, global trade unions, and international NGOs for their sustenance. Corrupt relationships have been built between officials of international organizations and officials of local unions. A ZCTU report of October 2015, as reported by Makoshori in the *Financial Gazette* on 14 April 2016, revealed that the ZCTU gets over 85 percent of its revenue from donors and only 15 percent from subscriptions. Between 2011 and 2015, such donors provided US\$5,7 million against US\$1 million from affiliates.

During interviews, the NECs were pointed out as having a poisonous impact on trade unions. NECs have become the graveyards of unions. In an interview, Tapiwa a mining union member stated:

It appears that the union leaders have diverted their attention away from the development of the unions. Instead, their focus is now on obtaining allowances and loans from the NEC. These resources are used to acquire extravagant vehicles, operate personal enterprises, and indulge in a lavish lifestyle, all while attending meetings at luxurious hotels.

Most respondents indicated that NEC funds primarily drive leadership conflicts and union splits. Corrupt alliances have emerged between bosses and NEC officials, with some previously radical union leaders forming joint ventures with them to secure NEC tenders. Consequently, these leaders have repeatedly accepted zero-percent wage increases.

WAGE THEFT AND DWINDLING UNION MEMBERSHIP

The economic situation in Zimbabwe is dire. The Labour Force Survey Report (LFSR: Q4) of 2023 revealed that 42 percent of employed individuals earned less than ZWL\$800,000 (approximately US\$138) per month, significantly below the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe's (CCZ) low-income urban monthly basket for December 2023, which was ZWL\$3,628,994.20 (around US\$616.12). This disparity underscores the severe inadequacy of wages to cover basic living expenses.

Compounding this issue, a relentless wave of price increases at the end of 2023 and into 2024 further eroded the purchasing power of these insufficient wages. The official inflation rate surged from 26.5 percent in December 2023 to 34.8 percent in January 2024, while the Total Consumption Poverty Line (TCPL) increased by 41.9 percent, from ZWL\$40,252.59 to ZWL\$198,981.37 over the same period (LFSR 2024: Q1). These figures underscore the deepening economic instability and rising living costs

In a 2015 report, the ZCTU highlighted that over 120,000 workers were affected by wage theft, characterised by employers' failure or systematic delay in paying wages. This issue is compounded by continued job cuts, with estimates indicating that over 300,000 jobs have been lost in the formal sector over the past decade. Kanyenze (2018: 108) detailed that 227,369 work-

ers lost their jobs between June 2011 and May 2014, underscoring the persistent challenges faced by the labour market.

The trend towards informalisation has been alarmingly prevalent in Zimbabwe. The LFSR (2023: Q2) indicated that only 28.8 percent of workers were employed in the formal sector (excluding agriculture). In contrast, the informal economy accounted for 43.7 percent of the employed population (non-agricultural) and a staggering 86.8 percent overall. Of those formally employed, only 36.8 percent were permanent employees (LFSR 2023: Q4). This shift towards informal employment reflects the shrinking formal economy and the growing reliance on less secure, often low-paying informal jobs. This shrinks the pool from which to build unions.

UNION FRAGMENTATION – MOTU!

Instead of merging in the face of dwindling numbers due to job cuts and casualization, unions have exploded. As discussed earlier, ZANU-PF supported the war veterans in establishing a separate labour body, the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU), marking the origins of fragmentation within the labour movement. Raftopoulos (2018: 67) noted that the formation of ZFTU was a strategic move by the ZANU-PF government to counterbalance the influence of the increasingly independent ZCTU. Following the creation of ZFTU, unions led by individuals sympathetic to the ruling ZANU-PF aligned with it. Subsequently, trade unions had to choose between aligning with ZCTU or ZFTU, resulting in workers' interests being often neglected, as noted by Mudyawabikwa (2004).

The Labour Force Survey Report (2020: Q1) notes that between 2014 and 2024, several new unions were registered annually. These splinter unions emerged due to conflicts over leadership positions, leaders' refusal to step down, and interference by employers and political parties. Workers indicated that unions have become big business. In an interview for this research, Tendekai, a teacher in Harare, expressed concern about how the unions have become business entities and are now primarily focused on competing against each other to offer benefit schemes such as housing and car loans or schemes, as well as setting up medical insurance, retirement, and bereavement support undermining the core duties of trade unionism. This research introduces the term 'MOTU'—'My Own Trade Union!' to describe the formation of splint unions. Two sectors with high numbers of trade unions, the teaching and mining sectors, serve as prominent examples of this trend.

According to an online checking platform, ZimFact 2022, there are approximately 135,000 public school teachers across Zimbabwe. In a country where less than 20 percent of the workforce is unionised, the teaching sector currently has more than ten unions in existence. Uzhenyu (2018: 263) cites a labour expert who noted, 'After independence, there was only one teacher association, the Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA), representing all teachers. However, today, there are many teachers' unions, each with its own distinct vision and mandate. This paper noted that some of these unions have relatively small membership, typically fewer than 500 members. In the case of Zimbabwe's teachers, the existence of more than ten different unions, many with small memberships, means that their collective voice is weaker. On March 27, 2024, *The Zimbabwean* cited the lack of unity among teachers as a contributing factor to their inability to

collectively strike in response to a meagre US\$20 increment in their salaries, bringing them to US\$300 instead of their requested living wage of US\$540. This fragmentation of the union in the teaching sector makes it easier for the government to dismiss or downplay teachers' demands.

In the second example of the mining sector, LFSR (2023: Q2) recorded 200,878 people formally employed in the mining industry. The statistics obtained by this research indicate nine active trade unions in the mining sector. This fragmentation has resulted in the unions being financially less viable and incapable of leading effective actions against the bosses or the state. Furthermore, the fragmentation complicates reaching a consensus, as these groups often compete to outmaneuver one another. The divisions have led to a lack of cohesive action, reducing the overall impact of collective actions such as strikes.

CORRUPTION, LACK OF INTERNAL UNION DEMOCRACY AND WORKERS' DISILLUSIONMENT

This research also established that there is a leadership crisis in most unions. The money coming from the NEC mentioned earlier has corrupted the union leaders and killed internal union democracy. Leaders refuse to leave when their terms expire. NEC funds are used to rig union elections. Congresses are postponed indefinitely or manipulated, elections are rigged, rivals are disqualified, and some positions are not even contested. Interviewees highlighted the role of corrupt lawyers who help union leaders amend constitutions and use courts to remain in power forever. They are assisted by lawyers and NEC officials whom they have entered into unholy alliances. Many leaders now use unions as springboards to advance political careers, especially in the opposition and end up subordinating the union agenda to their party's agenda. They oppose independent, united, militant class actions across unions and federations.

There are no audited financial reports or holding of constitutional meetings and labour forums. Labour union members highlighted that cliques of leaders do collective bargaining without a mandate from members. Opponents are expelled outside constitutional provisions. In the 2015 ZCTU Report, the secretary-general, Japhet Moyo, stated that many of the federation's 25 affiliates refused ZCTU officials access into their offices, thereby "raising fear of fraud, financial mismanagement and corruption." Moyo lambasted affiliates for driving ZCTU into "insolvency and extinction" due to non-payment of subscriptions. The report stated:

Some unions had no information such as bank statements, income and expenditure statements, or membership registers. Large amounts were being spent on leadership monthly allowances and travel and subsistence costs, yet nothing was being paid to ZCTU.

As discussed, the above has been compounded by the corrupt influence of funds from NECs, international trade unions, and NGOs. In a shrinking economy, unionism has become a zero-sum game, a winner-takes-all game. This is more so because there are no pensions for retiring leaders, and many union leaders lack the education, skills, and qualifications to get alternative jobs that will maintain their current lifestyles.

The issues outlined above have led to a notable social divide between labour leaders and ordinary members across most unions, with only a few exceptions. These problems are undermining the trust between union leadership and members, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement among the rank-and-file. In an interview that this study had with Kariwo, she shared that she decided to terminate her membership with one of the prominent teachers' unions after feeling that its union leaders were not effectively representing her interests and were engaged in corrupt practices. She emphasized that:

I got demoralized when the union started venturing into business activities offering services that the government, as the employer, is supposed to offer as benefits. Instead of representing workers, they were becoming more concerned about offering benefit schemes such as housing and car loans or schemes and setting up medical insurance, retirement, and bereavement support. When I questioned this move, I was informed that it was a separate initiative, run independently, yet targeting the union members. I was further disheartened to realize that the union officials' primary focus had shifted towards generating revenue through these initiatives, competing with other unions, and undermining the potential of solidarity with other unions in the teaching sector. I withdrew my membership and am currently not unionised.

Due to the aforementioned factors, significant disillusionment has taken hold among the regular members, contributing to the drastic decline in union membership. Unions need to address these internal issues to rejuvenate the weakening labour movement.

UNIONS ARE STILL NECESSARY FOR THE WORKING CLASS.

However, it has not all been gloomy. In the face of ongoing economic challenges and political instability, there have been significant moments of resistance and solidarity among Zimbabwean workers. This section will explore the key events and strikes that exemplify the resilience and determination of Zimbabwe's rank-and-file workers. From spontaneous strikes by sugar cane and council workers to organised protests by healthcare professionals and railway employees, these actions underscore a growing sense of unity and empowerment among the working class.

The period 2016 – 2018 was notable, as the economic crisis worsened and the ruling elites politically imploded. From the beginning of 2016, there was a wave of spontaneous strikes. These included strikes by Chiredzi sugar cane workers, Chitungwiza council workers and Mutare nurses. In February 2016, there was a 32-day sleep-in protest by state grain parastatal Grain Marketing Board (GMB) workers against non-payment of wages. Then, protests were made against banks by the banking union, ZIBAWU. This was followed in April 2016 by the 80-day sleep-in strike by over 3,000 National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) workers in a strike against non-payment of wages. The strike was organised by rank-and-file workers drawn from the four unions in the industry but without the union leaders. Although over 50 strikers were eventually fired, the strike was largely successful. The strike was settled when the NRZ bosses were forced to agree to pay employees regularly even if at 50 per centum of their monthly salaries – still much better than the

up to 15 months arrears in salaries that had until then prevailed. The strike history is well captured in *Railways of Zimbabwe v Jeremiah Muzangwa and 1 357 Others* (2016). In November 2016, junior doctors organised under the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association (ZHDA) went on an illegal strike for several days, protesting low salaries. A graphic example of the potential power of workers united in unions was demonstrated in the opening half of 2018. Following the 40 percent decline of the Zimbabwe de facto currency on 22 September 2017 and the consequent rise of prices of essential goods by over 50 percent, workers suffered a sharp erosion of the purchasing power of their salaries. In March 2018, thousands of doctors and nurses led by the doctors' union, ZHDA, and nurses' union, went on an illegal strike for nearly one-month, demanding cost-of-living adjustments. The state was forced to concede increments of salaries and allowances over 50 percent to the doctors and a lower one for the nurses (*Herald*, March 2018). When the nurses pressed on with their strike, demanding further concessions, the government responded in the usual style, with the new Vice-President General Chiwenga announcing the summary dismissal of over 5,000 striking nurses (*Herald*, 21 April 2018). However, in the end, the government was forced to reinstate the striking nurses.

In February 2022, a united strike by teachers' unions led by the radical Federation of Zimbabwe Educators' Union, protesting the decimation of teachers' salaries after the February 2019 monetary changes restoring the ZW Dollar at a rate of 1:1. According to the ZIMTA (2022) the changes had resulted in teachers' salaries collapsing from US\$540 in October 2018 to a ZWL Dollar salary equivalent to about US\$100 by February 2022, in an economy that was rapidly dollarizing. The strike was widespread, with the government suspending 135,000 of the roughly 140,000 employed in public schools for participating in the strike. The strike won some major gains, with the Government forced to give its workers a US\$100-00 cost of living adjustment in US Dollars (International Worker Organizer: 2022).

An important factor is that the strike actions of the last decade saw solidarity with the striking workers by other unions and workers. During the 32-day GMB workers' sleep-in, there were offered food and cash donations by radical unions such as the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Energy Workers Union, and College Lecturers Association of Zimbabwe. When the Zimbabwe Banks and Allied Workers Union (ZIBAWU) organised a demonstration against ECONET Wireless-owned Steward Bank for cutting jobs, over 50 GMB strikers joined them. The solidarity with the railway strike by radical unions such as ZIBAWU and socialist organisations, led by the International Socialist Organization, led to the formation of an anti-austerity united front, the People's Assembly Against Poverty.

CONCLUSION

The above examples of workers' struggle over the past decade show the resilience and potential for resistance despite occurring in a challenging environment. While many union leaders have failed workers, committed activists and leaders still fight for meaningful change. Yet, without unified, large-scale, and coordinated efforts, isolated actions often end in limited success or

defeat. Strikes within the public sector, primarily led by radical unions, indicate that organized labour can still drive significant movements. Through collective action and class solidarity, a renewed union leadership rooted in working-class consciousness and unity could emerge, enabling unions to undertake stronger, more impactful actions.

Historically, unions have been crucial in defending workers' rights, leading powerful and effective struggles against capitalist exploitation. To maintain their influence, workers must not abandon unions or create splinter groups, as this weakens the collective power essential for confronting the capitalist establishment. Instead, unions need to undergo transformative changes to become effective vehicles for worker struggles. At the heart of this transformation is the restoration of internal union democracy, which includes holding regular forums, ensuring democratic elections, and instituting term limits for union leaders. Corrupt leaders must be removed to retain workers' trust, as a transparent, democratic union structure is vital for worker engagement and effectiveness.

A significant threat to union democracy has been the misuse of NECs. Although NECs offer a platform for resources and collective bargaining, they often facilitate corruption and authoritarianism within unions. Advanced workers need to implement mechanisms that democratize and monitor NEC resources, such as rotating NEC representation and channeling allowances back into union funds. By doing so, unions can establish strike funds, provide solidarity to other workers, and host educational programmes that promote ideological awareness and skill-building among the rank-and-file.

Additionally, unions can strengthen their movement by leveraging social media tools, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, which have been instrumental in organising recent strikes. To counter union fragmentation, smaller unions should consider merging to create more cohesive and powerful organisations. Unions must also actively recruit marginalised workers, including youth, women, and contract workers, who have often been excluded from union protections yet are increasingly central in today's workplaces. A united working class is essential to withstand the neoliberal attacks of the capitalist ruling class.

A more militant strategy is necessary, moving beyond the past decade's strategies of legal action and class collaboration toward direct mass actions like sit-ins, go-slows, pickets, and protests. The railway strike demonstrated how rank-and-file workers can mobilize even when union leaders are unresponsive or compromised. Mass action, uniting both permanent and contract workers, will enable unions to defend jobs and wages more effectively.

Zimbabwean workers have a history of militant action, such as the 1996–1997 strikes, culminating in the ZCTU-led general strike on December 9, 1997. This collective action illustrated the potential for organised labour to challenge neoliberal policies. Rebuilding unions on principles of class solidarity, unity, and direct action can empower workers to resist the exploitation of the capitalist system and revitalise the labour movement.

In the long term, it is essential for workers to recognise the root causes of attacks on unions and the working class in Zimbabwe

and beyond: the inherent crisis within late capitalism. This crisis stems from the contradiction between the highly advanced global economy and the outdated production relations of the nation-state, private property, and profit-driven production. To sustain profit margins, the capitalist class increasingly imposes austerity, enacts neoliberal policies, and wages wars over global markets and resources, intensifying pressure on workers and unions.

Trade unions are a critical tool in building the resistance of the working class, but on an increasingly regional and international basis if they are to be effective as a precursor to ultimately develop a class-based and international movement of working people for the overthrow of capitalism, globally, and to bring the wealth of society under the democratic control of working people, and the construction of socialism at a global level as the only sustainable way out of the fundamental contradictions that today face the capitalist mode of production ■

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