

Namibian workers and national independence

As the mineworkers' resolution on the next page shows, the implementation of Resolution 435 does not mean that the struggle in Namibia is over. The current period of transition from colonialism to an independent nation is opening up new struggles under different conditions, as a range of forces strive to shape independence to suit their interests. HARALD HARVEY and ALANA DAVE report.*

For many years the majority of Namibians have supported SWAPO as their national liberation movement. But since 1986 there have been important developments. Since that year, Namibian workers have been building industrial unions, like MUN, which fall under the umbrella body of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW). NUNW sees itself as part and parcel of the national liberation movement led by SWAPO, and it is

therefore actively mobilising people to support SWAPO in the forthcoming elections. The unions, as mass organisations organising workers around the day-to-day issues which affect them, have given important political and organisational direction to the struggle for national liberation.

At the same time, the unions are having to take responsibility for receiving the huge number of Namibian refugees and exiles, and reintegrating

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**Resolution passed at congress of
Mineworkers' Union of Namibia (MUN),
January 1989**

This congress, noting that

- 1. Namibian workers have suffered brutal exploitation and oppression during the entire colonial period;
- 2. Namibian workers have formed part and parcel of the forces for national liberation led by SWAPO;

Is convinced that

- 1. national independence and freedom for Namibia, as struggled for by SWAPO, will create a more favourable climate for workers to fight exploitation;
- 2. South Africa and its puppets will try to abort independence and create a neo-colonial dispensation in Namibia;
- 3. exploitation of workers can only be ended in a socialist dispensation where the means of production belong to the workers;

Therefore resolve to

- 1. render all support to the national liberation organisation, SWAPO of Namibia, in the coming elections;
- 2. step up political mobilisation of workers, in co-operation with other unions;
- 3. maintain vigilance, and together with other workers fight attempts by the racist regime, its puppets and capitalist employers to abort independence by (i) taking protest industrial action against continuing political oppression, (ii) creating relevant ad hoc structures for monitoring and countering reactionary activities on the side of the colonial racist regime and its tools;
- 4. negotiate with the employers to get time off work for the purposes of political mobilisation in view of the forthcoming elections;
- 5. continue with the workers struggle against capitalist exploitation, and continue until victory in this regard is achieved.

them into Namibian society. Almost every member of NUNW has a relative who is a refugee or exile.

In recognition of the many tasks facing them now, the unions have accelerated the process of forming a national federation with local, regional and national structures. NUNW was revived in the mid-1980s as a structure to establish and stimulate the growth of industrial trade unions, but it was clear that once the unions had established themselves a proper federation with strong structures would have to be formed.

The stayaway on 20/21 June last year put the formation of a federation on the agenda (see *Labour Bulletin* 13.6, Sept 1988). Workers and organisers felt a strong federation would improve co-ordination and, by establishing local structures, build unity between unions on the ground. In the words of a NAFAU shopsteward: "NUNW is the mother who has produced many children. Now it is time to build the home for the children to live in, and formalise the relationship between the children."

The launching congress of the new federation is to take place on the weekend of 15 April, two weeks after the UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) formally took over control of the territory.

The tasks of the new federation will be to improve co-ordination, strengthen the relationship between affiliates at local and regional level, develop workers' control over the



federation from the grassroots up, and most importantly, give workers a political voice in the national liberation movement. There is a strong feeling that the federation will make the

unions more effective in mobilising for the elections.

The new federation will give workers a more powerful weapon with which to wage the struggles ahead. And they will need all the weapons they can get. It is

clear to everyone that SWAPO will win at least a simple 50% majority in the November elections. The colonial regime and big capital are moving as fast as possible to shape conditions so that a SWAPO government finds its hands tied.

Unions mobilise against privatisation

One of the key strategies of the colonial regime is to privatise state enterprises and services before the elections. SA Transport Services has already transferred its operations in Namibia to the SWA administration, which immediately sold it to the National Transport Commission (NTC). NTC is controlled by a big business consortium. Hospital catering services have been sold to Fedics. There is talk of privatising health services, water supply, SWA Broadcasting Corporation, municipal services and even education: Rossing Mine is reported to be buying at least one school!

This rape of the resources of Namibia has outraged the people. Posters

are stuck all over Windhoek, with the slogan: 'Protect people's property - reject privatisation'. The unions have printed pamphlets depicting the South African administrator, Pienaar, as an auctioneer. It is clear that privatisation is designed to limit a SWAPO government's ability to exert control over the economy and society, and its ability to redistribute resources towards the masses. Before SWAPO can even think about nationalising key sectors of the economy, it will have to struggle to regain control over basic government services!

Who gets the cash?

At the same time, people are questioning where the cash from these sales will go. They expect that South Africa will pocket the cash from selling resources that have been built up through the taxes and profits produced by the labour of Namibians. Thus SWAPO will inherit a bankrupt country. Workers are also objecting

that many of the services are being sold to South African companies.

Workers have also expressed fears that privatisation will mean retrenchments, as happened to SATS employees when the railways were sold to

NTC. They believe the cost of health care, education and other services will rise steeply as the new owners intend to make a profit.

The unions are spear-heading the campaign against selling the national resources. On 1 April, the day UNTAG formally took over control of Namibia, 50,000 protes-

tors, led by the unions, marched from Katutura to Windhoek. They intended demanding that Pienaar and UN special representative Martti Ahtisaari immediately halt the programme of privatisation, and reverse any privatisation that had already taken place.

But the marchers were stopped by a roadblock just outside Windhoek. The roadblock was manned by some 300 former members of Koevoet, who adopted an extremely aggressive attitude. It was an explosive situation, but

**PROTECT
PEOPLE'S
PROPERTY
REJECT
PRIVATISATION**

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VOTE FOR FREEDOM VOTE SWAPO!!!

eventually the marchers turned back.

However, some 3,000 protesters managed to gather in front of the hotel where UNTAG has established its headquarters. Everyone was wearing SWAPO colours, singing and dancing. South West African Police (SWAPOL) were everywhere. UNTAG was nowhere in sight. At one stage Gen. Prem Chand, commander of the UN troops, walked out of the front door of the hotel, ignoring the demonstrators, got into his car and drove off.

This incident reinforced people's general disappointment with the role played by UNTAG. The only time they see UNTAG is when its members are being trained or briefed by the South Africans, the SADF or the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF). Whenever there is a tense situation, UNTAG is nowhere to be



seen. SWAPOL has the real power to enforce "law and order", while UNTAG are simply observers. The armed clashes in the north of Namibia, when UNTAG authorised SWATF attacks on SWAPO guerrillas who

were intending to hand themselves over to UNTAG, will only increase this suspicion and bitterness. The Namibian peace agreement states that SWATF will be disbanded, because it is the army of the oppressor.

Building a nation

Privatisation is not the only tactic South Africa is using to sabotage Namibian independence. The South Africans are using every possible means to increase the divisions and fragmentation in the country, so as to make SWAPO's task of building a national government as tough as

Parties fighting the independence election

- **SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation)** - the main national liberation movement of Namibia.
- **NNF (The Namibian National Front)** - a front of small progressive parties which have tactical and ideological disagreements with SWAPO. Say they are willing to co-operate with SWAPO, but that SWAPO is ignoring them.
- **UDF (United Democratic Front)** - ethnically based parties that participated in the interim government for a while and in the second tier of colonial administration. Says SWAPO is communist inspired, a "wolf in sheep clothes."
- **DTA (Democratic Turnhalle Alliance)** - the grouping that South Africa hoped to be able to install in power. Composed of various ethnic and other parties. Support base in the ethnic administrations, chiefs, wealthy petty bourgeois and bourgeois blacks, local white business. Have adopted much of SWAPO'S slogans and rhetoric. Argue for minority rights. Portray SWAPO as an Owambo organisation.

possible. At the most destructive level, SWATF troops are reported to be leaving concealed caches of weapons in the bush before they report to the UNTAG-controlled bases where they are supposed to be disarmed and demobilised. The concealed weapons will be available for the several ethnic armies that were created under the second-tier of the colonial government. The ethnic armies could easily become the MNR bandits of Namibia.

At another level, SWA Television (SWATV) has proclaimed its new 'neutrality', and is giving equal air time to all 43 political parties in the territory. This is part of a general emphasis on fragmentation and division in the country, and efforts to bolster ethnic and minority parties.

The immediate task facing a SWAPO government will be to build one united nation. Ethnic divisions in Namibia are far more significant than in South Africa. Namibia is much less urbanised and industrialised than SA, and it is in the towns that divisions are usually broken down and national unity created. Even those who live in the towns have strong links in the countryside. These features have been exacerbated by the deliberate divide-and-rule strategy of the German and South African colonial regimes.

Socialism and national liberation

As the MUN resolution shows, NUNW unions are committed to strug-

gling for a socialist Namibia. They support the liberation struggle waged by SWAPO because it will bring them significantly closer to this goal.

But clearly independence will usher in a period of struggle, during which the unions will have to protect and advance the interests of their members at the same time as they support the objectives of the broader struggle. This will raise the question of the relationship between the unions and SWAPO - one of the issues which is to be discussed at the launch of the new federation.

NUNW has a very close working relation with the Namibia National Students Organisation. Apart from working in the student sector, NANSO is organising seminars on the issues of transition, especially the need to develop popular control over the economy.

SWAPO, in its political programme, has committed itself to building a socialist society. But it argues that in the initial post-independence phase a realistic approach is necessary given the dependence of the economy on the skills of whites and on foreign capital. SWAPO's position is that, where nationalisation is necessary, the government will fully compensate the owners.

The real possibilities and limitations that will face SWAPO and the people of an independent Namibia will only become clear after the elections. The options open to SWAPO will be crucially determined by the





Swapo supporters dance as a policeman ponders the future

Photo: John Liebenberg/Afrapix

size of its majority, by the degree of mobilisation and consciousness among the masses, by the extent of privatisation, and by how much damage South Africa is able to inflict before the elections.

Trade union struggle

Workers have confidence in SWAPO. In interviews conducted from Luderitz in the south to Tsumeb in the north, workers said that a SWAPO government's first priority would be to address their needs. For example, workers in Luderitz who are living in ramshackle shacks said that SWAPO would provide housing.

Workers also believe that SWAPO will give them legal space and backing to advance their struggle. The fact that there are only around five recognition agreements in the whole country

(mainly at bigger companies like Rossing and CDM mines, and at Lalandii fishing factory) shows how important this is. In fact, the major union issue at present is the struggle to win recognition.

Apart from this, workers face the battle to increase their wages. The average monthly wage for organised workers is R200-300. For unorganised workers it is much less. Prices are very high, because virtually all commodities are imported. For example, a tin of tuna costs R6.12 in Tsumeb. The tuna is caught and tinned in Namibia, exported to South Africa, and then re-imported back into Namibia! This shows how tightly the Namibian economy is linked to South Africa. It is factors like these that will seriously limit Namibia's options for independent development. ☆