

## **The Views of the Chairman of the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions**

An interview with Mr. G.U.S. Matlhabaphiri, Chairman of the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU).

### **Background**

**Q:** What is the background of the trade union movement in Botswana and which unions are currently in existence?

**A:** The trade union movement in Botswana has really only got off the ground since the early 1970s, following the Trade Union Act of 1969 and the setting up of the Trade Union Education Centre in 1971. There are presently thirteen unions in Botswana. Their names and membership, actual and potential, are as follows:

	Actual Membership	Approx. No. of Potential Members
1. National Union of Govt. Manual Workers	4 000	8 000
2. Botswana Bank Employees Union	550	550
3. Botswana Commercial & General Workers Union	655	10 000
4. Botswana Construction Workers Union	7 000	20 000
5. Botswana Railway Workers Union	600	600
6. Botswana Mining Workers Union	2 000	4 000
7. The Meat Industry Workers Union	650	650
8. Botswana Non-Academic Staff Union (at University College of Botswana)	?	?
9. Botswana Diamond Sorters Valuers Union	45	45
10. Botswana Local Government Workers' Union	600	850

All the ten unions above were registered during the 1971 to 1976 period. Since 1977 three more have been registered:

11. Central Bank Workers Union	?	?
12. Botswana Railways Staff & Artisans Union	100	100
13. Botswana Cooperative Managers Union	?	?

**Q:** Why are there two unions for bank employees and two unions for railway employees?

**A:** In the case of the railway employee this is because the 1974 amendment to the Trade Union Act stipulates that no employee in a supervisory role may be in the same union as the workers under him. Thus the Railways Staff and Artisans Union represents mainly white collar employees. In the case of the bank employees, part of the problem was the difference in job categories between the central bank and the commercial banks; also, the central bank is a parastatal organisation and there has been some disagreement over whether the white collar workers in it should legally be able to form a union at all, or only a staff association.

### **The Organisation of the Unions**

**Q:** Which of the above list of unions are mainly white collar employees?

**A:** Nos. 2, 9, 11, 12 and 13.

**Q:** How well organised are the trade unions? In a speech to a conference of the Botswana Local Government Workers Union, the Minister of Education, the Hon. K.P. Morake, said: "looking at the way in which trade union leaders ignore their own constitutions, fail to hold annual conferences, act unilaterally without consulting their members, it would appear to me that some of you have really failed to learn the fundamentals of Trade Unionism." Is this true of the entire trade union movement in Botswana?

**A:** It applies to some unions but not to others. The unions which are presently suffering from considerable administrative problems are Construction, Commercial and General and the Local Government Workers Union. In addition, two others, the Botswana Cooperative Managers Union and the union of Non-academic staff at the university college, are more or less dormant at present.

**Q:** What are the reasons for the weakness of some unions?

**A:** The main reason has been weak leadership. This has been caused both by the lack of education of trade union members and leaders and by the exclusion of 'supervisory' personnel from being members of the same union as other workers in the industry, thereby excluding the most able leaders from the movement. This is a real stumbling block. A leader can be removed from the trade union ranks by 'pseudo-promotion' by the employer. The very least that is required here is an adequate definition of 'supervisor' in order to prevent this clause being exploited by employers in the manner described. Another factor is the present policy

on National Incomes, which restricts wage increases according to job categories: the only way that an able employee can raise his income is by accepting promotion - and then he's lost to the union. Yet another reason is communications. The serious organisational difficulties experienced by the Commercial and General Workers Union is in part due to the great number of work places involved and the distances between them. By comparison, the railways unions are among the best organised because all their members are along the railway line.

**Q:** You've mentioned the problems stemming from the restriction of 'supervisory' employees in regard to union membership. Do other aspects of the laws help or hinder effective organisation of trade unions?

**A:** The provision of the Trade Union Act that an employer is forced to recognise and bargain with the trade union once it has 25% of eligible employees registered is in itself very helpful, since it gives unions the legal backing they need in order to secure recognition from employers. But 'recognising' the union can have many meanings: there has to be some definition of what is negotiable and what is not negotiable. At the present time several of the unions' leaderships have been too weak to negotiate a strong agreement regarding recognition - just accepting the standard contract offered by employers (which has been drawn up by the Botswana Employers Federation).

In the Trade Disputes Act the clause stating that both parties to a dispute must agree to it being put forward for arbitration to an industrial tribunal is another obstacle. What this means is that a dispute can remain unresolved because of the unwillingness of one party to refer the matter for arbitration. This is the reason why there hasn't been a single **legal** strike in Botswana - because it is only legal to strike after the dispute has been arbitrated.

I've already mentioned how the National Incomes Policy weakens trade unions leadership. It also restricts collective bargaining between unions and employers. All the negotiated agreements between unions and employers regarding pay, have to be approved by the Government's Wage Policy Committee. In terms of the National Incomes Policy, this committee must try to ensure parity between state sector and private sector wages by rank of employee. This leads to comparisons, often very unrealistic, between public sector and private sector jobs and has the effect of keeping some private sector wages and salaries down.

**Q:** What about the provisions of the Trade Union Act encouraging industrial unions (rather than craft unions or general unions) and the pre-

vention of expatriates from being office bearers in the unions?

A: We feel industrial unions facilitate collective bargaining and that the legislation is therefore correct in this respect. Regarding expatriates as office bearers: this prohibition hasn't been a disadvantage. We feel that trade union leaders need to have an intimate knowledge of standards and conditions in Botswana, and thus citizens are most suitable.

Q: Is there any chance that the restrictive clauses in the labour legislation, as you've identified them, will be amended or removed?

A: We are currently appealing for this and have already obtained some significant support in the Government. Therefore we are quite hopeful.

Q: How much cooperation do unions get from employers?

A: It varies widely from active opposition to active support by way of running a 'check-off' system for union dues from members pay packets.

Q: Is cooperation generally better from larger or from smaller employers?

A: Again, it varies widely - but not according to size of employer. Very often, the reason why an employer might appear uncooperative (e.g. no 'check-off' system) is because the union hasn't even approached the employer about the matter.

Q: How much support do the unions get from the Labour Department?

A: Generally very good support - with the exception of course, of the occasional uncooperative individual. In fact, I would say that often the Labour Department ends up carrying out tasks which individual unions should have carried out but have failed to.

Q: Do any of the unions run benefit schemes for their members?

A: Yes. Credit unions are run by the Railway Workers and the Mining Workers. The Railway Workers Union also run a funeral insurance scheme. The Bank employees are starting a child day-care centre. The BFTU plans to open a lunch counter for workers at the industrial site in Broadhurst. The Diamond Sorters and Valuers and Bank Employees plan to start credit unions.

### **The Botswana Federation of Trade Unions [BFTU]**

Q: As early as 1971 the President called for the formation of a trade union federation. Why was it only formed in 1977?

A: As I mentioned earlier, the trade union movement in Botswana really only got underway in the early 1970s. In the early years, the individual unions were concentrating on building up their membership and organisation rather than on forming a federation. It was after repeated appeals by the government and after the bringing in of assistance from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation to help set up the Federation, that it was

begun in 1977.

**Q:** Are all of the thirteen registered unions affiliated to the BFTU?

**A:** So far only eight are affiliated. We expect the remaining five to affiliate once they've held the necessary ballot among their members.

**Q:** What is the structure of control of the BFTU?

**A:** The supreme authority is the delegates' congress, held every two years. In between delegates congresses the General Council is in command. Under the General Council is the Executive Committee, the Finance and General Purposes Committee, the Education Committee, the Industrial Relations Committee and the Labour & Wages Advisory Committee.

**Q:** How is the BFTU funded?

**A:** There is an affiliation fee of P50, and affiliated unions pay 15 thebe per member per month to the Federation. While the running costs of the Federation could be covered in this way, there would be no funds available for projects. So at the moment we are still heavily dependent on the donations of our two 'friendly organisations' - the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Afro-American Labour Centre.

**Q:** From which unions are the members of the present Executive Committee of the BFTU drawn?

**A:** The Chairman is from the Diamond Sorters and Valuers; the Vice Chairman from the Government Manual Workers; the General Secretary from the Bank Employees; the Treasurer and the Assistant General Secretary are from the Railways Staff and Artisans. The five additional members are from Bank Employees Union, National Union of Government Manual Workers, Botswana Meat Industry Workers Union, Botswana Commercial and General Workers Union and Bank Employees Union.

**Q:** Are all the positions on the Executive Committee unpaid and voluntary?

**A:** Yes. We also have a full time Education Secretary and Administrative Secretary.

**Q:** In recent months there have been rumours of an internal quarrel within the BFTU. Is this the case? If so, what were the reasons and has the quarrel now been resolved?

**A:** Yes, there was disagreement within BFTU which effectively prevented it from operating for the first eighteen months of its existence -- that is, until recently. The main issue was over whether office bearers in the BFTU should be allowed to have any party political affiliation in their personal capacities. The Trade Union Act doesn't bar union office bearers from being members of political parties or from holding posts in political parties: it simply prohibits union offices from being used to

serve party political purposes, in order to ensure the independence of the trade union movement. However, there were some who felt that BFTU office bearers should have no party political connections at all. The issue has now been resolved along the lines laid down in the Act. Thus even though I myself, as Chairman, am an active member of the Botswana Democratic Party (being General Secretary of the BDP Youth) this has nothing to do with my activities as a trade unionist. On the BFTU 'executive Committee at present, the Chairman and the General Secretary are both BDP members, but the Vice Chairman is BPP (Botswana Peoples Party), and we all work together to further the aims of the trade union movement, independently of our party political affiliations. Also there was a question of donor organisations. There was evidence that some of the previous leaders preferred certain donors to others, which, of course, was dangerous to our movement. This lost the system its non-alignment which this country encourages.

### **Migrant Workers**

**Q:** The 30 000 to 50 000 Batswana migrant workers at present in South Africa amount to the largest single group of workers in Botswana. Does the BFTU intend to make any attempt to unionise them?

**A:** This is a very difficult matter because it involves an agreement between the governments of Botswana and South Africa. We would like to unionise them. But what could we offer them? We recently held a seminar on the subject of migrant labour and forwarded our recommendations to the Labour Department. But so far we've had no response on the matter. Here is a copy of our recommendation (attached).

### **Role of the 'friendly organisations'**

**Q:** Finally, could you please comment on the role that the two 'friendly organisations' (the Afro-American Labour Centre and the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation) have played in building up the trade union movement in Botswana?

**A:** In a nut-shell, I feel both organisations have played the major role in our new labour movement, both financially and technically. BFTU urges the organisations to work harmoniously with us by fulfilling what has been laid out in their contracts and this, I assume, they will not fail to do.