

# Trade Unions in Namibia

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The British-based NAMIBIA SUPPORT COMMITTEE compiled the following profiles of Namibia's trade unions

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**W**hile Namibian workers have a long and proud history, the trade union movement in its current form is very young. The initial organising was done by SWAPO members released in 1985 from Robben Island, who were keen to build new unions in the style of the independent trade union unions in South Africa. In some companies, workers' committees were already in existence. The ex-prisoners held secret (and illegal) on-site meetings in dozens of firms, building up a network of workplace committees before the first union was launched in September 1986.

There are now seven unions affiliated to the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), and a farmworkers union is in the process of being formed. The NUNW unions are all non-racial and industrially based, with a total membership of over 60 000.

Outside the NUNW, there are ethnically-based and/or pro-employer associations. There is also the Namibia Trade Union (NTU), which claims to have 56 000 members in eight affiliates. Of these, only the building and construction union NABWU appears to have a real existence.

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## **The NUNW and affiliates**

### **The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW)**

**General secretary:**

**John ya Otto**

**P.O.Box 50034**

**Windhoek 9000**

**Tel: 61-62876**

The NUNW was established as a federation of Namibian trade unions at a Consolidation Conference in June 1989. During the years since

1986, it functioned as a steering committee co-ordinating the newly forming trade unions, and organised mass action.

The NUNW had two previous phases of mass organising. It was first established by SWAPO in April 1970, and helped the SWAPO Youth League to organise the great contract workers strike of 1971/2. After disappearing from the scene, it re-emerged in 1978

as a general union, with particular strength in the miners' compounds, before being crushed in 1980.

The NUNW also existed in exile as the trade union wing of SWAPO. The 1989 Congress merged the internal and external wings, and expressed the new unions' strong support for SWAPO. Exiled NUNW members were integrated into the new structure and John ya Otto, who headed the NUNW in

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exile, was elected general secretary at the Congress.

The new industrial unions inside Namibia developed powerful principles of independence, worker control, worker democracy and accountability during their few years of existence. The precise relations between the NUNW and its affiliates, SWAPO as a political party, and SWAPO as the majority power in government, are not fixed, and will depend on the progress that is made in meeting workers' expectations.

Tensions emerged during preparations for the 1990 May Day celebrations, when the new Deputy Labour Minister, Haidono Hishongwa, announced plans to convert May Day into a tri-partite celebration of the state, employers and unions, in line with the SWAPO policy of 'national reconciliation'. NUNW general secretary John ya Otto initially welcomed the participation of employers, but a few days later NUNW president John Shaetonhodi called the employers "hypocrites" for intensifying exploitation in the name of reconciliation; "workers therefore do not see how they could reconcile with employers". John ya Otto later condemned the participation of employers.

Nevertheless, the plan went ahead, causing key unionists to pull out of the organising committee. A rally was held during the day, with a state banquet in the evening for businessmen and foreign guests. Under 3 000



*Ben Ulenga, leader of the miners: 'true reconciliation will come with workers' control of the products of their labour, its distribution and consumption.'*

*Photo: John Liebenberg/Afrapix*

people attended the rally, which was a muted event compared to previous years.

In the opinion of miners' leader Ben Ulenga, "true reconciliation would come with workers' control of the products of their labour, its distribution and consumption." But socialism is clearly not on the agenda in Namibia. Information Minister Hidipo Hamutenya told a NANSO (students) congress in January 1990 that students and workers should not ex-

pect the new SWAPO government to implement socialism in the next ten to twenty years.

The NUNW's newspaper, *The Namibian Worker*, commented that socialism "cannot be switched on like a tap of water in ten to twenty years either. We have the danger that in ten to twenty years the country will grow accustomed to capitalism, where a few of our ranks will have joined the bosses."

While support for SWAPO is still strong, NUNW leaders speak of the need for union independence. NUNW president Shaetonhodi stresses a "free and democratic trade union movement in Namibia, independent of any external or internal domination."

Ben Ulenga, who is also a member of the Constituent Assembly, states: "I do not think the proper relationship to SWAPO should be through affiliation...a union in a basically capitalist society or a situation of a mixed economy, needs to maintain its independence."

#### **Namibia Food & Allied Union (NAFAU)**

**General secretary:**

**John Pandeni**

**P.O.Box 1553**

**Windhoek**

**Tel: 61-63108**

NAFAU was the first of the NUNW-affiliated industrial unions. It launched in September 1986, and was soon involved in major strikes in the meat processing and fishing industries. With over 13

000 members, it organises food (including meat processing, dairy, bakeries, and chocolate), beverage (soft drinks and breweries), fishing and cannery, hotel, restaurant, and retail trades. There are branches in Windhoek, Luderitz, Walvis Bay, Swakopmund, Otavi, Tsumeb.

Large employers are Coca Cola, South West Breweries, several abattoirs, and the fishing industry. Most members are employed in small firms with under 30 employees. Women form over a third of the membership, and a number of the regional officials, as well as the national vice-secretary, are women. NAFAU has strong links with South Africa's FAWU, and the International Union of Foodworkers.

**Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN)**

**General secretary:**

**Ben Ulenga**

**P O Box 1566**

**Windhoek**

**Tel: 61-63109**

Launched in November 1986, MUN now organises around 15 000 workers, which comprises over half the total employed in the mining industry - the key sector of the Namibian economy. MUN has members at every major mine, and is strongest at the three largest mines. These are Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM) at Oranjemund in the far South-West, owned by De Beers; Rossing Uranium, at Arandis near Swakopmund in the

West, owned by British multinational Rio Tinto Zinc; Tsumeb Corporation Ltd (TCL), operating copper and lead mines in the North, and owned by Gold Fields of South Africa.

MUN signed agreements with CDM and Rossing in 1988. TCL, however, is more obstinate, and recognition talks are deadlocked. MUN has close links with the South African and British NUM.

**Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU)**

**General secretary:**

**Helmuth Rukoro**

**P O Box 22771**

**Windhoek**

**Tel: 61-6300**

Formed in May 1987, MANWU has over 7 500 members. They are employed in garages, small workshops, and on construction sites. MANWU therefore faces the problem of a relatively isolated membership confronting diverse employers. The union is now seeking to organise systematically within industrial sectors, as a basis for wage bargaining.

The entire manufacturing sector totals only 8 718 employees in 254 firms (1989 figures), within which food and beverages is the leading industry. However, future investment is likely to stimulate manufacturing growth (Volkswagen is considering setting up an auto plant).

MANWU has been active in Walvis Bay, with nearly

900 members. The continuing South African occupation there has harsh industrial and political effects. MANWU members are continually harassed, and some firms have tried to prevent employees from voting in the 1989 elections. At Metal Box (supplying the fish canneries) the problem was resolved only when South Africa's NUMSA threatened a dispute with Metal box in South Africa.

NUMSA has worked closely with MANWU on membership education. They have invited MANWU members to workshops and conferences in South Africa, and NUMSA organisers have visited Namibia.

**Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU)**

**General secretary:**

**Petrus Ilonga**

**P O Box 50035**

**Windhoek, Bachbrecht**

**Tel: 61-62078**

Formed in December 1987, NAPWU now has over 11 000 members employed in municipalities, hospitals (manual labourers and nurses), schools (non-teaching staff), water and electricity. Most are migrant workers living in compounds and earning an average of R.130 a month (1988 figures).

White civil servants belong mainly to the Government Service Staff Association, which for years had a cosy relationship with the Interim Government. NAPWU was denied registration, and barred from



*Namibian workers celebrate the independence of their country*

*Photo: William Matlala/COSATU*

obtaining stop-orders, while the municipalities automatically deduct R6 to R8 from employees' monthly pay as a contribution to the South West Africa Municipal Staff Association (SWAMSA). Immediately after independence, NAPWU called on the government to intervene, and to allow the union to register.

#### **Namibia Transport and Allied Union (NATAU)**

**General secretary:**

**Willi Matsi**

**P O Box 7516**

**Windhoek, Katutura 9000**

**Tel: 61-216607**

NATAU was formed in July 1988, and was almost immediately thrown into battle as SATS prepared for privatisation. When the newly-formed National Transport Corporation took over, they retrenched 492 workers, and weakened NATAU. However, in January 1990 the union began negotiating recognition with major road transport firms and Trans-Namib. It now has 7 000 members in railways and airports (TransNamib), buses, and long distance lorry drivers. The union recently established a branch in Walvis Bay, and expects to

recruit dockers in the port.

#### **Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU)**

**General secretary:**

**Markus Kampungu**

**P O Box 61009**

**Windhoek, Katutura**

**Tel: 61-62876**

Currently organising 9 000 teachers, NANTU was established in February 1989 with the aim of uniting teachers across the boundaries of separate education. While ethnic teachers' organisations in Ovambo and Kavango immediately dissolved into NANTU, the executive leadership of other ethnic

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professional groupings refused. In May 1990 these merged to form a rival *Teachers union of Namibia* (TUN), whose strength is unknown.

The majority of the membership are women, as is the national secretary. The system has produced a society with 60% illiteracy and widespread lack of science education for black students. NANTU is committed to democratic, participatory education, and will play a key part in worker education programmes, the mass literacy campaign, and redesigning the school syllabus. NANTU has developed closed links with the student organisation NANSO.

### **Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers Union (NDAWU)**

**Chairperson: Hileni Ilonga**  
**Contact via NUNW**  
NADWU was formed with 150 domestic workers on 21 April 1990. Most women in Katutura township in Windhoek are domestic servants, earning an average of R50 a month. Strategies include fighting for a legal minimum wage and a baseline contract, and for domestics to be included in the definition of 'worker' in the forthcoming labour legislation.

### **Farmworkers**

In 1986 farmworkers were estimated to earn around R20 a month, plus a fixed food ration, regardless of family size. There are many instances of farmers assaulting or



murdering their employees. On 29 April 1990 the new Minister of Agriculture, Gert Hannekom, announced that no statutory minimum wage would be introduced if commercial farmers "put their own house in order". Farmworkers were unimpressed, and an organiser from NAPWU has disclosed that a farmworkers union is in the process of being formed.

## **Other unions**

**W**hile SWAMSA is certainly a joke, and the TUN may be, the GSSA represents a conservative but real force: the white civil servants, who may exercise a newly discovered right to strike if their racially-based privileges are unduly threatened. The NABWU is another union that cannot be written off easily.

### **Namibia Building Workers Union (NABWU)**

**General secretary:**  
**Aloysius Yon**  
**P O Box 22679**  
**Windhoek 9000**  
**Tel: 61-212828**

NABWU has a base in the Windhoek and Rehoboth areas, particularly amongst coloured construction workers. It has recently been

involved in industrial action against International Construction Ltd, and Karibib Mining and Construction. It also negotiated a compulsory pension fund with the employers' association. It will be administered by a board of trustees involving the union and employers, and intends to invest in Namibian business and housing programmes. Aloysius Yon was a member of SWANU (MPC), which participated in the Interim Government, and sat on the National Labour Committee with employers and the state. In 1989 Yon opposed NABWU participation in May Day celebrations.

### **Namibian Trade Union (NTU)**

The NTU claims a membership of 55 641, comprising Automobile and Metal (7 128); Transport and Allied (10 877); Cleaners (4 010); Farmworkers (2 004); Chemical (3 974); Domestic (2 000); Wholesale and Retail (9 054); and Building and Construction (13 116).

With the exception of NABWU, there is no evidence of the real existence of these unions in terms of recognition agreements, negotiations and industrial disputes or congresses. The leader of NTU, Alpha Kangueehi, is a member of SWANU (Progressive) which is part of the Namibia National Front, which has one seat in the Constituent Assembly. ☆