

The ZCTU's 1990

congress: *exposing the capitalist reality beneath Zimbabwe's 'socialist' rhetoric*

The Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) continues to provide hope for those who want to prevent Zimbabwe from sliding even further away from the ideals of democracy and socialism. Its 1990 congress showed a determination to further consolidate the gains made since 1988, and provide an effective vehicle for working class organisation and militancy. DEVAN PILLAY reports*

Two years after Morgan Tsvangirai took over the leadership, following eight years of corruption and maladministration, the ZCTU has established itself on the road to forging a well-organised, democratic and militant workers' movement. Its 1990 congress, held last October, was marked by a determination to assert an independent role for the labour movement, in the face of moves by the government towards the IMF and World Bank sponsored policies of 'trade liberalisation'.

Despite the 'socialist' rhetoric of the ZANU(PF) government, the ZCTU believes that "the plight of the workers is not a central concern of the government".

On the contrary, the ZCTU paint a very bleak picture: "The economic and social policies adopted in practice by the government spell a future of increasing poverty, lack of access to education and health services, lack of employment and a struggle for survival that will overwhelm the working class and the rural poor."

It is with this sober view of the track record of Mugabe's 'Marxist-Leninist'-inspired policies that 204 delegates from 29 unions gathered in Bulawayo for three days, to decide on issues such as multi-party democracy, the state of the economy, the position of women, May Day, health and safety, international relations,

union mergers, public sector unionisation, cadre development, a union newspaper, and a research department, amongst other things.

The ZCTU improves its relations with government...

Tsvangirai told the *Labour Bulletin* that the ZCTU was now in a stronger position to influence state policy. After his detention in 1989 (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 7), and his release (which followed widespread international pressure, and a court order) relations with the government have improved. Tsvangirai believes that union independence is now respected, and there is greater consultation. The

* This article is based on an interview with Morgan Tsvangirai in Harare on 5 October 1990; a ZCTU report of the congress; and the strategic document of the ZCTU, which was presented to the congress

ZCTU's mission, he feels, is not to create or support an alternative to ZANU(PF) but - given the weakness and opportunism of the opposition - to "make ZANU practice what it preaches."

This was reflected in the dialogue which took place between government ministers and the unionists at the congress. Labour Minister John Nkomo commented at the congress that "never before has the organisation made it possible that government and workers would share a platform....to openly discuss matters of common concern as happened this year."

...but asserts its right to criticise

While the ZCTU welcomes this dialogue, it asserted its right to remain independent. It adopted a resolution which rejected affiliation to any political party, and pledged support for a multi-party democracy. At the congress union delegates did not hold back from criticising various aspects of government policy, in particular its proposed economic reforms.

Union delegates argued against the approach of the Minister of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, Bernard Chidzero, who said that the government's proposed economic liberalisation and other reforms were designed not to destroy existing local industry, but to stimulate growth. The congress, by contrast, adopted a resolution which rejected the free market approach, and

called for employment creation through comprehensive land reform, investment funds for self employment ventures and co-operatives, and a greater emphasis on labour intensive production. It also called for reduced foreign control of the economy through joint ventures with local business.

Tsvangirai, in an interview with *Work In Progress* (No 65, April 1990), summed up the stark contrast between the socialist rhetoric of the regime, and the reality since independence: "Economically, after ten years of independence, we have a society which is more thoroughly capitalist than in 1980, with more deference given to private companies by the government."

Tsvangirai is particularly concerned about the proposed changes to the right to hire and fire workers. A month after taking power in 1980, the government introduced minimum wage levels, as a step to, in Tsvangirai's words, "correct the historical imbalances [in order to] re-

main legitimate in the eyes of those who fought and elected it into power, that is the workers and peasants" (*Parade* April 1990). As a means to prevent unilateral dismissals as result of these measures, the government controlled the right to hire and fire, by stipulating that the approval of the Minister of Labour had to be obtained first before any employee is dismissed. According to Tsvangirai, because the procedure was long and cumbersome, this measure acted as a real disincentive to fire workers. It is the only protection workers have had against a vengeful management, and should not be given away, he argues.

Political representation

If ZANU(PF) is unable to protect the interests of workers and peasants, is it not time to form an alternative political party based on the working class and peasantry? Tsvangirai thinks not. He feels that, given the relatively weak state of the union movement, such a move would be "irrespon-

Zimbabwe's capitalist reality

"Zimbabwean workers are deprived of all the wealth they produce. While beautiful Zimbabwean clothes are shipped to Europe, workers wear frayed shirts, broken shoes and worn coats. Huge grain harvests stockpile on our large-scale farms, while farmworkers' children suffer severe malnutrition. Workers cannot afford to read the books they bind, or go to the cinemas they build.

"The few who swallow this wealth command the economy and control politics in the hope that they will always keep Zimbabwean workers as cheap labour, and the Zimbabwean economy as a source of cheap products."

- From 'Strategies for the labour movement in the 1990s', ZCTU.

sible". The movement cannot afford to divert its energy away from the essential task of strengthening its own internal organisation, and developing the necessary cadreship, he says.

An alternative is to seek direct representation in parliament, through the allocation of five to ten seats to the ZCTU (out of a hundred). This proposal was presented to President Mugabe last March, and he promised to consider it. However, he proceeded to appoint a faithful ZANU(PF) supporter from the ZCTU to parliament, without consulting the union (she went on to become a deputy minister). This was clearly not what the ZCTU had in mind.

The ZCTU, at its general council last April, adopted the position that special seats should be set aside for worker MPs, who would be democratically elected by the ZCTU. This is to counter-balance the ample representation in parliament of interest groups like the Chamber of Zimbabwean Industries, and farmers. In addition, says Tsvangirai, there are few MPs who are sympathetic to workers. The majority are from a teacher and rich peasant background, and many are businessmen.

Such worker representatives, says Tsvangirai, would be controlled by the ZCTU. They would be subject to recall, and their salaries would be pooled into a special fund, from which they would be paid an allowance. This would limit the possibilities of

The new leadership of the ZCTU

The congress elected the following office-bearers, who will serve until the next congress in five years:

- Gibson Sibanda (re-elected president)
- Morgan Tsvangirai (re-elected general secretary)
- Edward Njekesa (first vice-president)
- Isaac Matongo (re-elected second vice-president)
- Shangwa Chifamba (third vice-president)
- Nicholas Mudzengere (re-elected assistant general secretary)
- Enos Mdlongwa (deputy assistant general secretary)
- Lyson Mlambo (trustee)
- Lodrick Mapfumo (trustee)

co-option. While five to ten seats were "not enough", Tsvangirai believes that as a start it would be a strong enough unit to place workers issues on the agenda, and influence other parliamentarians, who have their own constituencies to report back to.

At another level, Tsvangirai believes that structures need to be built within society to allow greater participation of the people in political life. While the ZCTU accepts that at present Zimbabwe is effectively a one-party state, and there is no viable political alternative to ZANU(PF), an institutionalised one-party state is dangerous. Amongst other things, it encourages the emergence of the cult of personality, as has been the case in Africa and the Eastern bloc countries. Tsvangirai believes that a multi-party system provides the space for a variety of interest groups to operate, and allows freer debate, and a spirit of competitiveness within the political arena.

Building internal organisation

In the two years since Tsvangirai took over as a full-time general secretary, there has been a considerable improvement in ZCTU's administration. Financial management has improved with the employment of a bookkeeper, treasurer and two trustees. At the congress the resource departments (economics, education, women and legal) gave extensive reports of their activities, and the launch of a new health and safety department was formally announced. The congress also proposed the formation of an information and publicity department, which would amongst other things produce the labour movement's own newspaper, *The Worker*, as well as ensure that the national media is informed timeously of the ZCTU's position on important issues.

The ZCTU resolved to build stronger and fewer unions, and to overcome the division of workers into different sectors and organisations, under different

laws. At present, for example, public sector workers cannot belong to the ZCTU, as they have their own associations which operate under special laws for 'essential services'. The widespread teachers' strike in March 1990, and the nurses' stoppages earlier, point to deep dissatisfaction amongst state employees. The government, says Tsvangirai, was neglecting the working conditions of its employees, and paying extremely low wages. After ten years the teachers' frustration boiled over into mass action. The March election promises of ZANU(PF), and Mugabe's call on workers to 'flex their muscle' (WIP 65), gave the teachers confidence. Their actions, however, were sporadic and uncoordinated, and ended in defeat. Many teachers were victimised for going on strike.

Tsvangirai told the congress that "worker mobilisation must be the key task for the next five years, to unite all workers under the banner of the ZCTU, and build an organised and active trade union membership."

Developing a conscious cadreship

The ZCTU resolved to equip its cadres with the necessary skills to enable them to participate more effectively in negotiations with employers, as well as specific skills in administration, occupational health and research methods. Workers' class consciousness, the federation believes, should be developed through

improved educational activities, and the production of resource materials. The ZCTU also resolved to campaign for paid leave for trade union education, the allocation of national funds for worker education, sponsorship for specialised training within Zimbabwe and abroad, and to link with other progressive organisations to share educational experiences and resources. The congress identified the need to undertake research which will provide information necessary to strengthen the labour movement.

Tsvangirai expressed an acute awareness of the need to develop a cadreship within the union movement. This was essential to develop new layers of leadership, and to stimulate the democratic participation of more people in the movement, he said. The crucial lesson to be learnt from Eastern Europe was that cadre development did not mean regimentation, and a "the party knows best" attitude. This, Tsvangirai believes, "represses individual initiative".

Democracy, as espoused by Lenin, was "bastardised" in Eastern Europe, says Tsvangirai. He felt that there was a need to move away from orthodox Marxism, which had a text-bookish attitude to the still-important works of Marx and Lenin. He believes that there is "nothing inherently wrong with socialism", but societies differ, and there is a need to "revise our methods, tactics and strategies".

Increasing the participation of women

The situation of women received particular attention at the congress. As in South Africa, it seems that women have still a long way to go before they are fully involved in the union movement.

The ZCTU resolved to ensure greater participation of women by insisting that:

- all union delegations to congress of greater than one person should include at least one woman delegate;
- all unions should send delegate to a women's conference to elect a Secretary for Women's Affairs;
- each union should nominate an officer who will be responsible for the co-ordination of women's activities within the union;
- each union set up women's committees at branch, regional and national level;
- the ZCTU women's desk co-ordinate the women's programmes;
- the ZCTU integrate women's issues into its other departmental activities.

The ZCTU also resolved to fight for a range of issues concerning women, including maternity rights, childcare benefits, and the right to land, as well as countering "all forms of male chauvinism and paternalism in the workplace and the union".

Re-appropriating May Day

May Day has over the previous years been appropriated by both employers and the state. The government has controlled and funded the event, and in 1990 it censored the ZCTU's participation. Employers have gone to the extent of using May Day processions to advertise their products, and conduct annual 'Worker of the Year' competitions.

The ZCTU resolved to resist this, and ensure that the union movement regains control over all May Day activities, in order to "develop workers unity at the national and international level". This should take the form of peaceful marches, theatre, speeches, music, sports festivals and other activities.

International relations

The ZCTU draws inspiration from South Africa's trade union movement, and the resilience it has shown these past two decades. According to Tsvangirai, the labour movement has shown that it is the "only institution that can outlive repression". The ZCTU has established contact with COSATU, in particular the NUM, with whom the possibilities of forging united action against the same employers in the mining industry have been discussed.

In addition to agreements of co-operation with labour movements in various countries around the world, the ZCTU is active in the Southern African Trade Union



Co-ordinating Council (SAT-UCC), and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). OATUU's secretary-general Hassan Sunmonu addressed the congress, and described how the IMF and World Bank trade liberalisation programmes in Africa brought "massive unemployment and under-employment". He warned that this policy has killed local industry, and turned the "commonwealth" of African countries into "common poverty".

The ZCTU contrasts the parade of Western capitalism as a "champion of democracy and justice", with its "cruel and anti-human character" in Africa, where it has destroyed the health and social well-being of the people. This, says the ZCTU, "lays the basis for the international relations of the African working class", as well as necessitating "united action and solidarity of workers internationally against the capitalist class as a whole". The federation makes specific mention of the need to forge links with workers in Africa, Asia and Central America.

Links will be forged with "non-racist trade union centres", and the ZCTU will

make itself aware of the policies and objectives of the organisations it deals with.

The ZCTU resolved to appoint a full-time international secretary to monitor and implement international policy. It indicated a willingness to participate in international activities related to "peace, disarmament, the new international economic order", as well as solidarity with liberation movements.

The hope for the working class

The ZCTU congress was marked by an organised, democratic spirit, which has established the federation as, in the words of Tsvangirai, "the key defender of working class rights and interests in Zimbabwe". The ZCTU still has a very long way to go before it is strong enough to make an impact on Zimbabwean society. But there is enough evidence to show that, since 1988, it has turned the corner, and become a true champion of the working class.

If ZANU(PF) continues to take Zimbabwe along the road towards complete dependence on foreign capital, and is finally compelled to abandon its 'socialist' rhetoric, then the left opposition might find itself forced to build an alternative party of the working class and poor peasantry. If the ZCTU lives up to the promise it has shown thus far, then it could form the basis for such a party. ☆