

Unions in Botswana: Comparisons with Lesotho

Dave Cooper*

Roger Southall's article on trade unions in Lesotho in the recent issue of SALB is most welcome. (1) This is by far the most detailed and analytical work on trade unions in Lesotho, and no such similar study exists on other states on South Africa's borders. (2) Despite the lack of such detailed information on Botswana, it is worthwhile making some brief comments on the trade union movement in that country in comparison with Lesotho as outlined by Southall. Although these comments are made very tentatively, they will hopefully stimulate further research. Another reason for this brief comparison is that Southall's information suggests to me certain important similarities with the Botswana case. Most importantly, I shall argue, such a comparison gives significant insight into the class struggles which have been occurring in such countries of Southern Africa.

The recent "Nkomati Accord" has firmly put on the agenda the question of the types of societies that have been forming on South Africa's borders. A very useful way of getting insights into this question is to examine and compare the trade union struggles in these countries. This question of type of society has actually been discussed for a long time in studies on Botswana - but not with reference to the trade union movement. Some have seen Botswana as a vibrant liberal democracy, providing broad freedoms and a form of welfare-state capitalism for its population; Botswana is also seen as having taken a strong and principled stand against apartheid and South African political domination. Others, at the opposite extreme, see Botswana as dominated by "western" and South African capital to such an extent that all these freedoms, economic development and political independence, are a myth. The ruling class within the country is seen as so weak that the term "governing elite" is preferred (parallels are drawn with the

*International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), Cape Town. I am indebted to the other members of ILRIG, and to Fred Hendricks, for helpful comments.

so-called "Jonathan clique" in Lesotho and the "royal clique" in Swaziland). (3)

What all these views lack is a serious consideration of the internal class forces of these societies. As soon as one begins an in-depth look at trade union struggles, as Southall does in his article, this question becomes crucial. He shows how there has been an ongoing struggle in the Lesotho labour movement: he provides excellent insight into the ways certain internal (and external) classes have acted through the state apparatuses to exert control over the emerging labour movement since independence. I extend these ideas to Botswana, suggesting how the overall class struggle has affected the nature of the labour movement since its early days. (4)

The 1950s

Virtually nothing has been written on the history of Botswana unions in the early period except for a very good, short study by Gilbert Sekgoma. (5) He discusses how the first Botswana union developed in the colonial trading town of Francistown in 1948. This union, the Francistown African Employees Union (FAEU), organised among shop assistants, garage workers, government manual workers, teachers and the lower ranks of the civil service. The union registered under the Bechuanaland Protectorate Proclamation No 16 of 1942, adapted from similar legislation established in other British colonies in Africa in the early 1940s. The British High Commissioner in Mafeking in 1942 claimed it was better to have trade unions in the open than underground. (6)

According to Sekgoma, (7) the FAEU was based mainly in Francistown, its constitution stressed non-political functions but it did establish relations with the unions in Ghana and Zambia as well as with the ICFTU. It was involved in wage demands and negotiations; it reached its peak in 1958, but was always weakly organised around a small leadership group. Before the 1960s, Sekgoma notes that only two other unions existed: the European Civil Service Association formed in 1948, and the Bechuanaland Protectorate Workers Union (BPWU) formed in 1958. The BPWU, despite its national name, was largely confined to Serowe, the capital village of the Ngwato "Tribal Reserve". Interestingly, this union was started by the Ngwato chief, Tshekedi Khama, and its pres-

ident Lengeletse Seretse was to become a Minister of Agriculture much later. Both the FAEU and the BPWU were very weak by the early 1960s, according to Sekgoma. In his study he makes no mention of the sort of early South African trade union links noted by Southall in early Lesotho union developments - perhaps further research in Botswana might show more connections.

Looking at both Southall and Sekgoma's evidence, a number of points stand out. In both Lesotho and Botswana, unions had begun to emerge by the 1950s. But the external proletariat - migrants in South Africa - far outweighed the small internal proletariat. The internal working class was mainly in the "service sector" associated with the colonial economy - civil administration, shops etc. Unions did push for some wage demands and sometimes even raised issues around colonial racial practices. But essentially they were weakly organised, dependent on one or two "big men" at the top, and were carefully watched by the colonial administration despite their relatively weak political orientation.

This fact, of an internal proletariat, numerically and organisationally weak, is generally ignored in discussions of the political struggles of the early 1960s before independence. Yet the fact is crucial for an understanding of the type of societies which have emerged in the ex-High Commission territories including Swaziland. It is well-known that Britain moved forward the timetable for independence for these three territories quite rapidly in the early 60s, because of the events that were occurring outside these territories, in the rest of Africa. So an aspirant internal petty bourgeoisie quickly found itself in a strong position in each of these territories. This was not simply due to the usual explanation, that this class received support from the colonial administration and foreign capital in general. It was also because a weak labour movement offered a very fragmented opposition.

After independence in Botswana, the internal proletariat grew rapidly - more so than in Lesotho. It was no longer numerically weak. So a central task for the internal ruling class was to keep this proletariat organisationally weak. The trade unions were thus an important site of struggle, as will be seen below.

The 1960s

To discuss these struggles within the labour movement in Botswana just before and just after independence in 1966, it is useful to mention first the "end result" - ten years later. For by 1976 in Botswana, the local petty bourgeoisie had established itself in a far stronger position economically and politically than its counterpart in Lesotho as described by Southall. To summarise briefly (8), by 1976 this internal ruling class had built a base in cattle farming, in the upper levels of the civil service and the few mining multi-nationals, and in trading, particularly in the large villages. Cattle ranches were beginning to be developed by Botswana around privately owned boreholes. This resulted in an enclosure movement, with peasants being pushed off communal land which was transformed into leasehold for the borehole owners. State loans for borehole construction were crucial for these developments. So was the cattle market structure, involving the export of Botswana beef to the EEC under special terms. The civil service expanded enormously after independence, with high salaries for the upper levels. Mining developed unexpectedly, with American (AMAX) and South African (ANGLO) multinationals involved in copper-nickel; De Beers took control of diamonds. Diamond mining brought in enormous revenues. In addition, Botswana received massive foreign aid from "western" governments - as much as twenty times the Commonwealth average in the 1970s.

All this provided not only a base for the emerging ruling class. It also generated employment - the number of people employed in wage labour grew from around 10,000 in 1960 to around 60,000 in 1978. This figure was greater than the number of Botswana working in South Africa at the time, thus making Botswana relatively much less of a "labour reserve" economy compared to Lesotho. (9) Jobs, as well as health, primary school and some agricultural services grew for a fairly wide section of workers and peasants. Material improvements in Botswana has been one factor (not the only one though) making possible a "multi-party capitalist democracy", with the ruling party easily defeating its opponents in the regular elections since independence.

Many of these aspects of post-independence development in Botswana have been well-outlined in recent literature. What

has not been analysed in any depth, however, is the fact that the conditions for these developments had to be struggled for. Particularly in the 1960s, the aspirant petty bourgeoisie in Botswana had to win these conditions, to block off other possible directions of development. It had to use not just the carrot of economic development, but also the stick, in order to hold back opposition from a growing working class. More research on the various areas of trade union struggle needs to be done; but current information does suggest that the labour movement was one crucial area of struggle.

The struggles just before independence show a remarkably similar pattern in Botswana and Lesotho. Southall outlined in his article how the nationalist Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), which had ties with the South African ANC, began to mobilise against colonial rule in Lesotho in the early 60s; the Basotho National Party (BNP) under Jonathan, expressing the interests of the lower chieftaincy and some of the petty bourgeoisie, emerged in opposition and was backed by the colonial authorities. The BCP became linked to the Basutoland Federation of Labour (established in 1962), the BNP linked with the Lesotho Council of Workers (established 1963/64).

Sekgoma's Botswana study reveals a parallel process. (10) The nationalist Botswana Peoples Party (BPP, established in 1960), also with South African links, initiated the Bechuanaland Trade Union Congress (BTUC) in 1962. The BTUC got involved in political rallies of the BPP, and generally made demands around wages, working conditions and racial practices, ie. broad anti-colonial issues. In 1963 the BTUC even published a research report attacking the exploitation of cattle herdsman of subject peoples (Basarwa, Bakgalagadi), whom it stated were inherited by their owners like cattle. (11) This must surely have shaken the Tswana tribal aristocracy, especially since the BPP was becoming known as anti-chief. (12) Meanwhile in 1961 the Bechuanaland Democratic Party (BDP), under the leading chief Seretse Khama, formed in opposition to the BPP. The BDP broadly represented the "moderate" educated petty bourgeoisie and sections of the upper and lower chieftaincy. It gained the backing of the colonial administration. In 1965 the BDP formed the Bechuanaland Federation of Labour (BFL) to counter the influence of the BPP-linked BTUC. Unity talks between the BTUC and the BFL, initiated by the colonial labour officer, Murray Hudson

(later multinational mining company representative in Gaborone in the '70s), failed in 1965 because of ideological differences, according to Sekgoma.

The BDP easily won the elections in 1965 just before independence for a variety of reasons - broad chiefly support which brought in peasant votes, support of the colonial administration, the status of Seretse Khama, good financial and administrative organisation, splits in the BPP etc.

It is well-known that the BDP soon saw the Botswana National Front, formed in 1966 under the avowed Marxist leader Kenneth Koma, as an important threat. The BNF wanted a broad popular front against what it termed the "feudals, the neocolonial BDP, and the foreign imperialists". (13) This threat was increased when a leading chief went over to the BNF. What has not been analysed is the equally important threat from the emerging working class, as perceived by the ruling BDP which still had a new and shaky hold on the state apparatus. It is essential to see each of the following in this context: (i) the government response to the government workers' strike of 1968; (ii) the new trade union laws of 1969; (iii) the establishment of a trade union education centre in 1971 with American funding. The information available on each of these will be discussed briefly. I shall argue that the late 1960s to early '70s was the crucial period in Botswana, when the state established tight control over the developing labour movement - much earlier than in Lesotho, where Southall shows control is weaker and still being struggled over.

The massive growth in employment in the state apparatuses after independence was an important factor leading to the strike of government workers in 1968. Government "mental" workers, generally with at least Junior Certificate (3 years secondary schooling) and termed "public officers", formed into the Civil Service Association. Government "manual" workers, termed "industrial class", became organised in the National Union of Government Manual Workers (NUGMW). (14)

Sekgoma (15) shows how the NUGMW soon became the biggest union, spreading also quite quickly outside the capital and soon having a membership of just under 1,000. He argues that *some of the leading unionists were transferred out of Gaborone to remote areas or promoted to supervisory positions (and*

hence non-eligibility for union membership). The crunch came in 1968 over the firing of the union general secretary. This led to an extremely bitter 10 day strike which spread to other centres. The government viewed the NUGMW as linked to the opposition parties, and on the radio the Labour Minister accused the union of bringing politics into the union. (16) A speech years later in 1979 by government minister, Peter Mmusi, who had been Commissioner of Labour in 1968, described the situation in this way: "a wave of industrial unrest broke out...it was very clear that many of the unions were unions in name only and had either no following, or no mandate from workers to speak on their behalf". (17)

The reality was however that unions like the NUGMW were beginning to grow in strength. This was seen as a threat to the type of society the ruling party was hoping to create. Mmusi in 1979 was quite clear about the solution of 10 years earlier: "Government felt that the time was long overdue, therefore to introduce legislation to ensure the orderly development of the trade union movement...we therefore introduced in Parliament a Trade Unions Act and a Trade Disputes Act, together with the Regulation of Wages and Conditions of Employment Act. These three acts became law in August, 1969 and required that all unions would have to re-register". (18)

The laws of 1969 established extensive and tight control over the emerging labour movement. They seem considerably tighter than anything yet established in Lesotho in the 1980s. Briefly, these laws provided for compulsory registration, with unions narrowly defined as bodies "for the purpose of regulating relations between employees and employers".(19) Unions were placed under a registrar of trade unions with wide powers, no "general" unions were allowed, political strikes and sympathy strikes were made illegal, no foreign funding could be received without ministerial approval. There was also a long and detailed procedure to be followed before a strike could be called, and the minister could refer a dispute to an industrial tribunal at any point. Industrial Councils were set up to regulate wages at an industry level, deflecting much wage bargaining into bureaucratic channels.

Shortly afterwards in 1971, the African-American Labour Centre (AALC) helped set up and finance the Botswana Trade Union Education Centre. This has been the central point in Botswana

for union education around wage bargaining. Already by 1967 this centre claimed to have run 90 weekend courses for 400 rank and file participants, as well as having organised a number of courses for leading union officials. (20) Sekgale provides interesting information about the origin of the centre in Botswana. (21) He describes how in 1967 Seretse Khama visited the United States on the invitation of the Ford Foundation. There he met Irving Brown, head of the AALC (a later part of the AALC delegation which visited South Africa in 1982). Brown agreed to send an AALC representative to Botswana, who arrived in 1969 and played a big role in setting up the education centre. It is clear therefore that there was close cooperation between the Botswana government and American groups, to help steer the labour movement in the "right" direction.

What can one conclude about these events just after independence in Botswana in comparison with Lesotho? I do not want to overstress the role played by the Botswana labour movement. It was admittedly still relatively weak, numerically and particularly organisationally. Yet it was developing - and just as important, the government believed that it could pose a threat in the long term. So what emerges strongly from the discussion above is that, by the early 1970s, the Botswana ruling class had moved clearly and sharply to control the labour movement. Lesotho politics since independence, as described by Southall, has been unstable, factionalised, often contradictory. In contrast, the power bloc in Botswana was more unified and was developing a clear political direction. The basis was laid in the late 1960s for the capitalist accumulation process to take place in the 1970s, in the interests of foreign capital and local petty bourgeoisie. One important foundation stone in this process was the early establishment of control over the emerging unions.

The 1970s and 1980s

Despite this extensive control, the Botswana government still felt the need to extend it further in the 1970s. The procedures for strikes seemed unworkable - there were a series of brief and relatively unorganised strikes leading to the eruption of the biggest strike at the Selebi-Phikwe mine in 1975. After this strike the Commissioner of Labour was to say: "There has never been a legal strike in Botswana". (22)

In response the government in 1977 helped to initiate the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions, which has drawn in all the major unions of the country. Funded by the AALC and the German Friederich Ebert Foundation, this federation sits on the National Employment, Manpower and Incomes Council together with the government and the employers' federation. This further bureaucratises the wage negotiating process. In addition the government clearly hoped that a tighter structure, with a national executive committee of the federation at the top of the trade union movement, would dampen the demands for strikes amongst the rank and file.

However, things have not worked entirely to the government's satisfaction. This has led to a revision of the trade union laws, as seen in the Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations Act of 1983. One reason for this legislation was the government's feeling that leading positions in the new federation were being captured by supporters of the opposition BNF, and that the federation was not toeing the line. (23)

This new Act has been opposed by the federation. The introductory paragraph of the Act states that its purpose is simply to bring all federations (of unions and of employers) under the umbrella of the 1969 law. (24) However, there were clauses in the 1969 Act that might have seriously affected the employers. For instance there was the clause stipulating that trade union officials had to be Botswana citizens. Yet in the 1983 Act the minister can waive this rule, which can obviously affect many leading employers who are not citizens. And many of the clauses in the 1983 Act specifically refer to the unions and do not mention the employers' federation.

A reading of the old and the new laws often suggests that the 1983 Bill is simply a rewrite of the 1969 laws, bringing within its clauses the new union federation and, in some cases, the employers federation. Still, the most important change appears to be the new role of the Minister of Labour. For instance the Minister is legally permitted to attend every meeting of the union federation (the employers federation is not mentioned), whereas previously the union federation simply used to extend a formal invitation. And the Minister can refuse to register a trade union federation, with the decision being final; in 1969 (and still in 1983) a refusal to register a trade union by the registrar of trade

unions could be appealed against in the High Court.

With these and other new provisions in the Act, it is clear the government is showing it has wide powers at its disposal, if the trade union movement steps out of line. It seems clear from Southall's article that the state in Lesotho is belatedly trying to move in the same direction, by actively encouraging the formation of the new union federation there in 1984, through which it hopes to exert control.

Interestingly Southall also suggests that, despite a relatively larger working class inside Botswana, Lesotho has a considerably higher level of unionisation. (25) Perhaps one reason for this is that Botswana workers have experienced such a tightly controlled structure since the late '60s that: (i) the benefits of belonging to a union are not always clear to them and (ii) they take action independently of a union when their frustration reaches too high a level, as in Selebi-Phikwe in 1975. It will be interesting to see whether the Botswana labour movement follows the new tendency described by Southall in Lesotho, of organising strongly at the base amongst the rank and file. This tendency has to a large extent always been lacking in Botswana, right from the days of the first union in Francistown in the 1940s. And this lack of a strong base has made it much more difficult for the unions to fight against the government controls imposed on them since the late 60's.

Footnotes

- 1 R Southall, "Trade unions and the internal working class in Lesotho", SALB 10.3, December 1984
- 2 The most useful, but short, published work on Botswana trade unions to date had been carried by the SALB, see: 2.5, 1975; 5.5, 1980; 8.7, 1984
- 3 A good example of the first approach is J Wiseman, "Multi-partyism in Africa: the case of Botswana", African Affairs, 76.302, 1977; speeches by political party opposition leaders in the 1984 Botswana election at times reflected the second approach
- 4 The most useful works which look at the class structure of Botswana are by Jack Parson, especially his "Political economy of Botswana: a case in the study of politics and social change in post-colonial societies", unpublish-

- ed Ph.D thesis, University of Sussex, 1979; and L Cliffe and R Moorsom, "Rural class formation and ecological collapse in Botswana", Review of African Political Economy 15, 1980. See also D Cooper, "An interpretation of the emergent urban class structure in Botswana: a case study of Selebi-Phikwe miners", unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Birmingham, 1982.
- 5 G Sekgoma, "History of trade unionism in Botswana 1940s-1978", unpublished B.A. dissertation, University of Botswana, 1979, based on oral interviews and archival sources.
- 6 *ibid*, p10
- 7 *ibid*, pp22-29
- 8 This is discussed in more detail in Cooper, "An interpretation"
- 9 Figures for Botswana are for the "formal economy" and exclude domestic servants and workers on cattle posts; see D Cooper, "An overview of the Botswana urban class structure and its articulation with the rural structure: insights from Selebi-Phikwe", in R Renee Hitchcock and M R Smith (eds.), Settlement in Botswana, Heinemann, 1982, p245. There is a problem in the term "internal proletariat" since most Botswanan urban workers are also involved in agriculture. I prefer the term "peasantariat", which is discussed in this 1982 article
- 10 Sekgoma, "History", pp30-39
- 11 *ibid*, p33
- 12 R Nengwekhulu, "Some findings on the origins of political parties in Botswana", Pula, Botswana Journal of African Studies 1.2, 1979, p64. I have drawn on this article for information on the parties in the 1960s
- 13 "The Botswana National Front, its character and tasks", BNF Pamphlet No 1, mimeo, around 1966
- 14 For discussion of the mental/manual divisions amongst the Botswana working class, see Cooper, "An overview", p248
- 15 Sekgoma, "History", pp40-49. The NUGMW was at first the Government Industrial Workers Union (established 1965)
- 16 Sekgoma, "History", p44: mentions the brief emergence in 1969 of Lentswe La Badiri (The Working Peoples Voice), of the NUGMW with other unions. Articles in the paper spoke of "socialism", "the national and foreign bourgeoisie" etc
- 17 Speech by P S Mmusi in "A selection of Ministers speeches on the role of trade unions 1979-80", Ministry of Home

- Affairs, Gaborone, around 1980, p38
- 18 P S Mrausi, p39
- 19 These laws are discussed in J Parson, "Political economy", pp202-311; and D Cooper, "The state, mineworkers and multinationals: the Selebi-Phikwe strike, Botswana 1975", in P C W Gutkind, R Cohen and J Copans (eds.), African Labour History, Sage publications, 1978
- 20 Sekgoma, "History", p51
- 21 *ibid*, p45
- 22 *in Cooper*, "The state"
- 23 *in SALB*, 8.7, 1983, pp4-5, and interviews conducted by the author in Gaborone in January 1984
- 24 "Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations Bill 1983", Bill No 2 of 1985, published 14 January 1983, final form of the Act gazetted 9 September 1983
- 25 Southall, "Trade unions", p107

REVIEW: Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of BLACK TRADE UNIONS in South Africa

Don Ncube

(Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1985; 176pp + xvi; R8.95)

There is very little new material in this book. The historical sections rely heavily on recent scholarship whilst the contemporary material is largely drawn from official union statements or other secondary sources. Notwithstanding, Ncube's book makes available to a general readership some important subject matter on South African trade unions.

Black Trade Unions is divided into five sections:

- * "Black workers in the mining industry" which gives a good introduction to the system of labour exploitation which developed on the mines;