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Sakhela Buhlungu and Lucien van der Walt
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# The Voice from Below

## Zambian Workers Speak Out

Sakhela Buhlungu and Lucien van der Walt

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asserted that negotiations were already underway. The strikers were joined by other clinics. In October 1996, mineworkers striking over the non-payment of bonuses at the Nchanga division of Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) were forced to work at gun point. They responded by sabotaging equipment underground. A number were dismissed as the strike continued, and the MUZ had to battle to get those arrested for damaging equipment released.

- Both the CSUZ and the ZCTU attacked a 30-million kwacha, tax free gratuity fund for Members of Parliament in July, asking why it was only workers who were obliged to accept wage restraint. Academics at the Copperbelt University struck over the same issue. Their government later denied all reports of the gratuity.



Shopfloor workers and lower level management in Zambia are extremely critical of the economic policies of the MMD government. Interviews conducted with shopstewards at Nitrogen Chemicals of Zambia (NCZ) give an insight into these views.

## The factory

NCZ was established as a parastatal in 1968 to produce mine explosives. It later diversified into other chemicals and 1 fertilizers. Based at Kafue, an industrial town outside Zambia's capital city, Lusaka, the NCZ is a large plant, but its capacity is underutilised and it is poorly maintained.

As is typical in the parastatal sector, the plant used to offer employment to large numbers of workers in relatively protected conditions. However, in line with trends in other sectors of the economy, NCZ has been shedding workers and many employees work fewer shifts than they are paid for. In 1992, the workforce numbered 1600. By 1996, this had been reduced to 1073.

## The union

The unlon at the plant, the National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers (NUCIW), has been hard hit by the retrenchments, losing at least 400 union members in the process of downscaling. It is one of the unions which disaffiliated from the ZCTU at the federation's 1994 conference. In 1994, the NUCIW had a total membership of 26 000. At the time of the interviews, it had 900 members at NCZ.

The union is based on strong shopfloor structures, illustrating the resilience of the labour movement despite decades of repression and government attempts at co-option.

## Against privatisation?

Whereas the national union leadership of both the ZCTU and the breakaway unions accepts privatisation almost uncritically, workers at NCZ have responded, as one shopsteward put it, with "mixed feelings" Edgar Sinyanga, vice secretary of the shopstewards committee, says that workers hope that the factory will prosper in private hands Mboma Mboma, the treasurer of the committee, adds that the government does not have the money to fund the enterprise, and that privatisation is the "cheapest way to keep the company going".

On the other hand, Mboma Mboma notes that workers fear that the factory's new owners will not be bound by law t o observe conditions and standards set through collective bargaining in the past.Workers also fear further job losses, citing mass redundancies at other privatised plants. Indeed, the prospective buyers of NCZ have indicated that they would shed half of the current labour force.

Plant management shares these fears. The human resources manager, FB Chola, points out that new owners will bring in their own management teams. Since most of the bidders are foreign, this would lead to the 'de-Zambianisation' of economic control.

National union leaders argue that only comprehensive economic liberalisation can lay the basis for economic recovery. The shopstewards at NCZ agree with their diagnosis of the causes of decline, but are ambivalent on the measures necessary to reform the economy. They do not see private investment as the only key to growth. On the contrary, they argue for additional government investment and a more professional approach as alternatives to privatisation. They were very interested in the experiments in 'commercialising' (rather than fully privatising) parastatals that have taken place in South Africa.



against non-payment of their severance packages. President Chiluba, who was visiting the area at the time, reacted angrily to protestors, telling them not to intimidate the government.

- A number of militant standoffs have occurred. In March 1996, three senior managers at Hybrid Poultry Farm in Lusaka were nearly lynched by 200 irate workers striking against their alleged mismanagement and bad attitude towards workers. The workers were members of the National Union of Plantation and Agricultural Workers ONPAW). In October, the Managing Director of the Medical Stores narrowly escaped a similar fate, following an angry meeting on the future of the enterprise. The MD took the opportunity to escape as NWSW officials addressed the workers. The workers then turned their anger on other managers, grabbing their car keys and jeering at them to walk home or catch a minibus. Workers passed a vote of no confidence in management.

- Other actions took place throughout 1996. In April, 2000 railway workers were dismissed for striking for better wages, but were later reinstated. In May, workers at the newly privatised Dairy Produce Board protested the decision by the company's new South African owners, Bonnita Zambia Limited, to retrench 200 of the company's 240 workers without retrenchment packages. In September, Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT) members struck sporadically in Kitwe and Chingola against an inadequate wage increase. In September, junior nurses and other medical personnel at the University Teaching Hospital embarked on an illegal strike for higher wages and allowances. The strike was not supported by either the CSUZ or the Zambia National Union of Health and Allied Workers, who

Whether this perspective will, over time, provide a comprehensive alternative to the current challenges facing the Zambian working class remains to be seen.

## Unions and shopfloor militancy

Economic liberalisation has resulted in retrenchments, deteriorating work conditions, massive inflation and a government reluctance to pay severance packages. These conditions have met with a militant, if uneven, response from workers.

- A central site of conflict is the civil service. Workers in the Zambian United Local Authorities and Allied Workers Union (ZULAWLJ) embarked on a two month strike at Mufumbwe local council for higher wages in 1995. In Livingstone workers who had not been paid for two months also went on strike. In February 1996, the Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ) organised a week-long countrywide strike to demand payment of a 45% wage increase granted by the Industrial Court. They were joined by National Union of Public Service Workers (NUPSW) members. Further strikes took place in Livingstone in March, October and December of that year. After seven months of negotiation, the CSUZ was able to announce wage increases ranging between 36 and 70%, and a number of allowances.

- Retrenched workers have also organised protests demanding their severance packages. In January 1996, retrenched workers protested at the Livingstone office of Zambia Railways. In July former workers from the Kafile council launched a legal action to prevent the sale of the council houses in which they live. In September, 140 retrenched workers from the liquidated United Miing Company protested at the Chingola Civic Centre



## Worker control?

Workers do not, however, hold to nationalisation as an innately progressive or worker-friendly project. They do not express a principled opposition to a market economy. For the union activists, the bottom the is the protection of jobs and working conditions. Nonetheless, they feel strongly that they had been robbed of the opportunity to express their views on alternative forms of restructuring. Instead, the ZPA simply announced the sale of the company.

At company level, the union also had very little opportutlity to influence the process, even though an NUCIW shopsteward sits on the NCZ board. Although union involvement in company decision making, which was established during Kaunda's regime, is clearly not working, shopstewards still feel that such systems should be retained. This is unlikely under privatisation.

## Worker unity

Concern that workers' interests are protected also informs the shopstewards' views on the disaffdiation of their union from the ZCTU. They believe that it is very important for workers to speak with one voice through a united national trade union movement. They believe that trade union disunity has contributed to the government ignoring their views on economic a restructuring.

Michael Hichintu, the vice-chair of the shopstewards committee, says that the general membership of the NUCIW was not consulted about disaffiliation. The majority of members are demanding that the union should rejoin the ZCTU: "We have demanded that the national union leadership should come and address the workers, but they do not come. If they do not come

to address us soon, workers at our factory will consider leaving the NUCIW and re-affiliate directly to ZCTU."

This contrasts with the attitudes of national union leaders. Whereas they seem to place the greatest importance on competing with one another for positions in union elections (as was shown by the acrimony at the 1994 ZCTU congress that contributed to the split), the NUCIW workers place a premium on solidarity as the means to defend their interests.

## Old divisions

Differences between trade union leadership and rank-and-file membership are by no means a new development in Zambia.

Such conflicts were common in the 1960s and 1970s when the Kaunda government sought the to enlist the unions in a project of rapid economic development. This was done by banning strikes in much of the economy, making conciliation procedures compulsory in the remainder and by extending direct control over the unions.

The ZCTU itself was formed on the orders of government which wanted a federation which could be closely monitored. Systematic attempts were also made to co-opt union head offices into the national political elite.

All of these efforts failed to halt worker resistance. Although the national union leaders committed themselves to policies such as wage restraint and increasing the pace of work, mineworkers in particular continued to resist work discipline. There was an Increase in the number of strikes, in some cases in direct opposition to the ZCTU itself. While union leaders reaped rewards from their 'co-operative' attitude, workers were not rump to tighten their belts any further.

In the late 19705 the ZCTU moved Into opposition against Kaunda and conflicts between union leadership and membership were reduced. They seem set, however, to take off once again.



## Unity with management?

While workers and management at NCZ share similar concerns and fears over the process of restructuring, there is not necessarily a convergence of interests. Faced with redundancy, management tends to stress its unity with workers. According to Chola, "management believe that relations with the union are very cordial and there is close consultation:' He argues that the union is a "social partner with management in efforts to improve efficiency and avoid redundancies."

By contrast, workers do not identify with, or seek to defend the interests of management. The existence of a common threat does not remove their belief in the distinctiveness of their own interests, or raise their low opinion of management's abilities. The solutions the NUCIW shopstewards put forward are, in fact, bad news for management.

The workers' proposal that the state intervene more effectively in the NCZ implies current management would be replaced by more effective and skilled personnel. Workers are also convinced that their interests would be best articulated through a strong and united workers' movement. This clearly excludes management from any real participation.

It also contrasts with the views held by the national leadership of the NUCIW. While union leaders are strongly wedded to the ideals of economic liberalisation, workers at NCZ express serious reservations about both privatisation and nationalisation. Their primary concern is the defence of workers' interests. the policy that best advances this aim is the one they will support.