

The History of Political Parties - Trade Unions Relations in Zambia 1946-2012 by F.E. Mulenga

Introduction

In this paper we traced the history of the relationship between trade unions in Zambia and political parties. Why is it important or necessary for political parties, especially ruling parties, to have good relationships with trade unions in the countries they rule? The answer to this question would be that in a developing country such as Zambia there is need for a political party in power to have a good relationship with trade unions in the country because such a relationship would be good for the development of the country. Ruling parties and the trade unions were supposed to be partners in development. It was for that reason that when UNIP began to rule Zambia it very much wanted to control the trade unions, especially the AMU/MUZ on the Copperbelt. This was in order to guide them along a path where there would be no strikes or few strikes which could be disruptive to the economy; not too many demands for salary increases and hard work by everyone for increased productivity. Salary increase demands were supposed to be matched with higher productivity. It was in this regard that the issue of increasing productivity against demand for higher wages became crucial in the relationship between UNIP and its Government and the labour movement in Zambia. Since UNIP did not own the capital used for production in the country and it did not determine how to dispose of the wealth created from the production of goods and services in the economy, it was very difficult for it to really control what happened in the economy. The cost of living kept going up and the value of the wages kept being eroded and so the unions kept asking for higher wages and the stage was set for clashes between employers and the unions and between the unions and the Government which would attempt to intervene on behalf of employers and as an employer itself. Nationalisation and the creation of parastatal companies was partly an attempt by UNIP and its Government to control the creation and distribution of wealth, but as we all know, this did not work very well.

In this paper we were interested in firstly, finding out if through their relationship with political parties the trade unions tried to enhance their political influence and also to protect their autonomy; secondly, we were interested in finding out if the trade unions used the political parties to transform society by bringing positive change in society or if they merely became part of the status quo or part of the political elite suppressing the masses; and thirdly, we were

interested in finding out if the trade unions were merely interested in protecting the special interests of the small and dwindling wage-earning population or if they voiced grievances of a wider popular constituency, that is, speaking for the masses.

In 1981 when President Kaunda announced the detention of trade union leaders, namely Frederick Chiluba, Newstead Zimba, Chitalu Sampa and Timothy Walamba after a spate of strikes on the Copperbelt, he accused them of using the labour movement to serve their own selfish political interests.

In 1995 in an article in *The Post*, Sketchley Sacika criticised the leaders of the labour movement for having allowed itself to become part of the MMD and its Government to the extent that this leadership was failing to protect the workers from the harsh economic reforms which were killing jobs and sending former workers into poverty. At the same time some MMD politicians were unhappy with some labour leaders whom they accused of acting more as politicians than as labour leaders who should articulate issues that had to do with workers' benefits.

In 2006, when Mutale Nalumango was spokesperson of the MMD she thought Joyce Nonde (now Mrs Simukoko) and Leonard Hikaumba were being more of politicians than trade unionists. She therefore invited them to resign as trade union leaders and become full time politicians so that the MMD could take them on in the political arena.

We could ask here: Can a trade unionist be a politician or can a politician be a trade unionist? It would appear that in the relationship between political parties and trade unions in Zambia and the rest of Africa, a trade unionist should be just a trade unionist and speak only on trade union matters. He/she was not expected to speak on issues the politicians considered their own. When they did, politicians became angry and asked them to resign as trade unionists to become politicians. On the other hand, politicians believed they could speak on trade union issues because the job of a politician included speaking on all issues and for all the people all the time. This has caused problems and we have heard trade unionists also complain that politicians were interfering in trade union issue and they would remind them not to do so. On the other hand, some trade union leaders had claimed that trade unionism was politics.

The relationship between political parties and trade unions in the country was sometimes warm and sometimes hostile, especially from the political party in power when it felt the trade unions were being “difficult”.

Studying the relationship between trade unions and political parties means studying the political role of trade unions by the way trade unions tried to influence political parties and the state. In some countries such as Nigeria, the main trade union movement, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) tries to put a political party of its choice in power, while in South Africa, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) chooses to be part of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to influence policies from inside the system. In Namibia and Uganda the unions were incorporated into the one-party dominated state, while in Ghana the unions insist on being autonomous. In Zambia the labour movement in the late 1980s helped to bring down the one-party state and then seemed to lose direction. In Zimbabwe the labour movement led the way in creating an alliance to oppose the repressive regime.

The 1940s: The Beginnings

The trade unions in Zambia first emerged on the Copperbelt on the mines around 1946. It was also at this time that the African nationalist political party, the African Congress also emerged. This situation was later to create problems as both began to compete for the workers, each claiming it could represent the workers better than the other group could do.

Received wisdom informs us that the trade union movement in Africa participated fully in the nationalist struggle which brought independence to many African countries. However, after independence many African Governments chose to become one-party states and trade unions then became a threat and so were to be controlled or swallowed up.

The 1950s: The Quest for non-political trade unionism

The British Colonial Government was happy to allow the African workers in Zambia to form trade unions to represent them at their places of work so long as the trade unions did not participate in politics.

The African Congress became the African National Congress (ANC) in 1951 and changed its leadership from Godwin Mbikusita Lewanika to Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula.

The number of African trade unions in this period increased and an African Trade Union Congress (ATUC) was formed with Lawrence Katilungu of the African Mineworkers Trade Union (AMWU) as its president.

One of the major highlights in this period was the refusal by Katilungu to allow the African mineworkers to join in the Two Days of National Prayer in April 1953 to protest the setting up of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The administration of the mines and the Northern Rhodesia Government (NRG) were happy with Katilungu but Nkumbula, the leader of the ANC was bitter with him. Later Nkumbula and Katilungu became political allies, a move seen to have ruined his status as leader of the mineworkers' union.

The 1960s: The Political Decade

The United National Independence Party (UNIP) dominated the politics in Zambia in the 1960s. It was formed in 1960 from an amalgamation of different political parties formed after the Zambia African National Congress (ZANC), which broke away from the ANC in 1958, was banned for being violent.

UNIP was concerned about industrial relations on the Copperbelt mines and so tries to intervene. The African Mineworkers' Union (AMU) which in 1967 became the Mineworkers' Union of Zambia (MUZ) did not welcome this interference in industrial issues by UNIP. In 1962, for example, John Chisata, the leader of the AMU and who was a member of UNIP, sternly warned UNIP to stay out of the industrial dispute the miners had with the mining companies.

In 1963, when Kaunda the leader of UNIP felt the miners were being "difficult", he warned that UNIP would meet them head on.

The Trade Union Congress faced challenges and it split into two, with one faction forming the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), which became ardently UNIP. Later the UTUC declared support for UNIP because it was seen as the only progressive political party in the country at that point in our history.

However, some trade unionists such as Katilungu and Mbikusita Lewanika showed a complete lack of respect for the African nationalists, who included Kenneth Kaunda, Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, Reuben Kamanga, Munukayumbwa Sipalo, Arthur Wina, Sikota Wina and many others. They argued that these nationalists who were unemployed could cause trouble anytime since they had nothing to lose, but the trouble could lead to workers losing employment and property. Katilungu joined Nkumbula to oppose UNIP and this partly led to his fall as a trade union leader. He died in a road traffic accident early in 1961.

In October 1964, Zambia became independent with UNIP as the party in power. The trade union movement entered independent Zambia in a weakened state because of all the divisions it had faced from around 1960. In addition, the trade union movement was unhappy with UNIP which it felt had betrayed it by not giving it enough rewards from the benefits of independence, such as cabinet positions. This arose from the fact that the trade union movement felt it had played a very important role in helping to bring about independence to Zambia. The UNIP Government on the other hand decided to re-organise the trade union movement because it felt that in the state in which it entered independent Zambia it would not be of much use to the country's development agenda. This led to the amendment to the colonial labour law, the Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Act in 1965 and the formation of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) with its first executive appointed by the Government. This executive did not have much respect from some trade unionists that saw it as being there only to do the bidding of the Government. The Government was urged to allow free and fair elections for the ZCTU executive so that an executive put in place by the workers themselves could be respected. This was done in 1967, although some of the people in the executive still saw themselves as nationalists who were more interested in pushing the political agenda than the economic agendas.

A very important labour conference was held in Livingstone in 1967 at which the future of trade unionism in Zambia was discussed. Issues of how to increase workers' productivity industrial relations were discussed. Some of the recommendations were put in the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) of 1971.

In the late 1960s and during the mid-1970s, there was a group of trade unionists, which was happy to see the labour movement dominated by UNIP because they believed that would be a good thing for the labour movement. They believed, for example, that if UNIP controlled the

labour movement there would be discipline among the workers in the country. This group of labour leaders was, therefore, willing to let the labour movement submit to the political will of the ruling political party. As individuals they were also very willing to accept political appointments and expected Government's good will to reward the workers. On its part, UNIP expected the labour movement to be grateful to it for helping it to re-organise itself and become strong after the chaos of the mid-1960s, for example, through the enactment of the 1971 IRA, which brought in one union in one industry and allowed free collective bargaining.

All in all, during the First Republic the trade unions remained suspicious of the political parties.

The 1970s: New Leadership in the trade union movement

UNIP found it difficult to operate in a multi-party environment inherited from the British Colonial system and decided to work towards creating a one-party state in Zambia.

As a result of not fulfilling the expectations of many of the people of Zambia with independence, UNIP began to face opposition from various groups of Zambians. Apart from the ANC, there emerged other opposition political parties to oppose it, such as the United Party of Nalumino Mundia in 1968 and the United Progressive Party (UPP) in 1971 of Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, who was Kaunda's childhood friend. As soon as the one-party state was declared, all opposition political parties were banned as only UNIP could exist legally.

A nation-wide strike by teachers in 1970 led to the detention of four leaders of the Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT), who included its president, Newstead Zimba. They were released in January 1971.

Interestingly, the trade union movement supported the creation of the one-party state, which some trade unionists felt would improve industrial relations in the country as there would be no divided loyalty.

In 1974, the Chiluba-led group took over the leadership of the labour movement. This group was said to have been different from the labour leaders who had gone before them because they were determined to fight to have the workers enjoy the economic benefits of independence

and were not very keen on accepting political appointments. This set the stage for a fractious relationship between UNIP and its Government and the labour movement.

During the Second Republic, the ZCTU resisted attempts by UNIP to incorporate it into the party as a subordinate wing of the party like the Women's and Youth Leagues. This was resisted. In 1976, the UNIP Central Committee even tried to impose the vetting of candidates for positions in the ZCTU executive. This was also resisted. It was during this period that Chiluba became something like an unofficial opposition leader.

Meanwhile, the IRA of 1971 helped to re-organise the trade union movement in Zambia by, among other issues, bringing in the regulation that all trade unions should affiliate only to the ZCTU which was the only recognized mother body for the unions. There was also the introduction of the regulation that there should be only one trade union in one industry to cut out the issue of splinter unions.

In 1973, there was the start of the world energy crisis as a result of war in the Middle East. In 1975, Zambia began to feel the effects of that energy crisis as importing oil became very expensive. This in turn affected production in many industries as importing raw materials and spare parts to run the industries became difficult. Some companies began to retrench workers.

In 1976 Zambia turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for help with meeting some of its financial obligations. The trade unions were fighting hard to ensure that their members did not suffer too much from the adverse economy.

The 1980s: The Trade Union Movement's fight for autonomy intensified

The 1980s were an interesting decade in the relations between the UNIP Government and the trade union movement as it would see a determined fight for power and the removal of UNIP from power at the beginning of the 1990s.

The relationship between the Government and the trade union movement was defined by economics. As mentioned above, from 1975, as a result of economic problems, the Government began to take measures, such as introducing structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which were aimed at improving the economy, but which ended up hurting the workers.

In 1980 there was a dispute between the Government and the trade union movement over the enactment of the Local Government Act. The Mineworkers' Union of Zambia (MUZ), fearing that the miners would lose out if mine townships were placed under the new local government set up, led the protest against the Local Government Act of 1980 and it was soon joined by the Zambia United Local Authority Workers' Union (ZULAWU) and the ZCTU. Some trade union leaders were detained and ZCTU General Secretary Newstead Zimba even lost his Chifubu Parliamentary seat.

As mentioned earlier in 1981 trade union leaders, namely Chiluba, Zimba, Chitalu Sampa and MUZ leader Timothy Walamba were detained as a result of workers' strikes.

The decade of the 1980s saw labour leaders being detained or having passports taken away to prevent them from travelling outside the country and being implicated in a coup attempt against the Government. Newstead Zimba as General Secretary often complained that UNIP and its Government wanted to weaken the labour movement, if not outright kill it. Chiluba even threatened to quit as leader of the ZCTU if UNIP managed to make the labour movement a wing of the Party. UNIP leaders denied trying to weaken or kill the labour movement with some ignoring historical truth and claiming that the labour movement was created by UNIP. They also claimed that the only reason why the Chiluba-led labour movement opposed UNIP's socialist economic policies meant to benefit everyone in the country including peasants and the unemployed rather than the workers only was because the labour movement was led by capitalists who hated the socialist policies and were being supported by capitalists abroad.

The economic problems in Zambia only got worse as a result of influences from what was happening to the world economy and the relationship between UNIP and the labour movement became worse as the 1980s progressed. In 1987, the Government abandoned the IMF/World Bank supported SAP to implement its own home-grown austerity programme, the New Economic Recovery Programme, but although it had some little success, it did not work as well it had been expected to work. It was also abandoned and Zambia went back to the IMF.

In 1989, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed and the socialist governments in Eastern Europe also collapsed. These changes partly influenced and encouraged

people in Africa to want to change their systems of government. In Zambia this led to calls for the return to the multi-party system inherited from the British at independence in 1964 and abandoned in 1972 by UNIP. The trade union movement was in the forefront of this fight for democracy. It even abandoned UNIP and opted to support the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) which was formed to spearhead the fight for democracy.

The 1990s: Successful fight for democracy led by the trade union movement

The relationship between the trade union movement and the Government was still determined by economics, but the 1990s saw a successful fight for democracy in Zambia led by the trade union movement.

In 1990, the UNIP Government decided to change the labour law arguing that since it had agreed to allow political liberalisation by changing to a multi-party system the trade union movement should also agree to democratisation. In this regard, the regulation which insisted on all trade unions affiliating to one trade union mother-body, the ZCTU, was to be changed. Individual trade unions were to be given the freedom to affiliate to any mother-body of their choice and the one union in one industry regulation was also scrapped in the Industrial Relations Act of 1990. The trade union movement did not like this Act as it saw it as being hostile and meant to kill trade unionism in Zambia.

However, what followed later turned out to be worse than what the 1990 Act had put in place. In October 1991, the MMD defeated UNIP and formed Government. Chiluba, Zimba and Sampa and others exited the labour movement and Shamenda and others took centre stage in the labour movement. Initially the labour movement was happy with the MMD and happy a good relationship with it until it decided to put in place a serious economic recovery programme by implementing the SAPs in a way in which they had not been implemented before under the UNIP regime. The MMD SAP began in February 1992. The long-term goal of the restructuring programme was to reduce inflation and stabilise the economy with a view to stimulate economic growth, reduce poverty and improve the living standards of the people. The SAP included privatisation of state owned companies; liberalisation of domestic and international trade; liberalisation of the foreign exchange market; strong fiscal policy, which included government operating on a cash budget to reduce inflation; health and education sector reforms, which

included the introduction of user fees; transformation of the Civil Service; and transformation of the agriculture and transport sectors.

In May 1992 the labour movement celebrated Labour Day again after boycotting it for six years over differences with the UNIP regime. Shamenda the ZCTU leader then took advantage of the occasion to criticise Government for being sensitive to criticism by labour leaders. He accused some top political leaders who were not sure of the role of the labour movement in society of working towards destroying the good relations existing between President Chiluba and the labour movement. However, in June 1992 relations between the labour movement and the MMD were marred by the sacking of about 500 hundred bank workers who had gone on what was termed an illegal strike. ZUFIAW fought hard to get its members reinstated but the jobs were not recovered.

In May 1992 ZCTU president Shamenda described the MMD's privatisation policy as "too narrow to be meaningful as a development tool" and warned of serious ramifications if the Government implemented it with an "iron fist". Then when the ZCTU joined the MUZ in warning that it would oppose the privatization of ZCCM, ZAMTEL and ZESCO, Ronald Penza the Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industry called Shamenda "a terribly irresponsible unionist who did not understand Government policy." Shamenda countered that he was responsible since he was advocating the security of workers' jobs while Penza was irresponsible because he was advocating redundancies through the sale of public companies at dinners while drinking champagne.

In August 1993 the relationship between the MMD and the labour movement reached a new low when the Government, in an unprecedented move, declared a dispute with the three public service unions, ZNUT, CSUZ and NUPSW, when they rejected a 50 percent salary increment. The Government acted within the stipulations of the Industrial and Labour Relations Act of 1993, but the move left the labour movement dumbfounded and it warned the Government not to play with people's lives.

The trade union movement was not usually consulted by Government when it wanted to implement economic reform programmes. Many workers lost employment during the period of

privatisation through retrenchments and redundancies. The loss of employment led to a reduction in unionization levels and this weakened some trade unions.

And so just as Zimba had been crying foul and claiming that UNIP and its Government were working to weaken or kill the labour movement, in the 1990s it was the turn of Shamenda and other labour leaders to cry foul and claim the MMD and its Government wanted to weaken or kill the labour movement. Zimba who became the Minister of Labour accused Shamenda who is now the Minister of Labour of being timid. When Shamenda complained about the harsh economic reform programme, Ronald Penza, then the Minister of Trade, Commerce and Industry, dared to call him a “very irresponsible trade union leader”.

The 2000s: Fall of MMD and the rise of Patriotic Front: What role trade union movement?

In the 2000s, the same situation existed in which economics determined the relationship between the trade union movement and the Government of the MMD. In August 2000, Shamenda’s sharp response to some colleagues in the labour movement who were urging members to vote against the MMD in the 2001 elections was to maintain that although union leaders could speak on behalf of their own unions, the ZCTU should not become politically involved. He argued that in 1990-1991 the ZCTU only became involved in politics in order to restore democracy, to entrench the freedom for opposition parties to oppose and it was not partisan. As we have shown, Shamenda’s reluctance to give the Government or any political party a pretext to interfere in ZCTU’s internal affairs was historic, going back to the era of Katilungu in the 1950s and early 1960s.

However, Leonard Hikaumba who was then the president of the Civil Servants’ Union of Zambia (CSUZ) urged the labour movement to take a stance on politics. He said: “We cannot stay away completely from politics because the decisions made by politicians affect our members.” At the same time, the president of the Hotel and catering Workers’ Union of Zambia, Crispin Mbolela stated that the ZCTU resolved to be non-partisan the last time they met. Shamenda argued that it was difficult for the mother body (ZCTU) to decide which political party to support because the same people were rotating from one party to another. He added that individual union leaders could choose the political party they wanted to support.

Shamenda and his team also exited the centre stage of the labour movement and Leonard Hikaumba and Joyce Nonde (now Mrs Simukoko) occupied centre stage of the labour movement. Chiluba's term of office ended in 2001 and he reluctantly handed over power to Levy Mwanawasa. It was Mwanawasa whom Hikaumba and Joyce Nonde had to face. Things were getting rough. Jobs were still being lost, the few workers in the country were mainly scared of joining trade unions because new labour laws gave investors and employers powers to hire and fire workers at will. In some cases employers preferred to engage workers on contracts signed by individual workers meaning that trade unions were cut out

Clearly, in 2000 and leading up to the 2001 elections, there was ambivalence among the labour leaders on how to deal with political affiliation. Ambivalence seemed to have been the guiding principle for the labour movement at this time. However, in February 2004, the labour movement with the support of some Civil Society Organisations took a stance when they opposed the high income tax (PAYE) and the wage freeze

However, the unions were still perceived to be weak as a result of having compromised themselves through their support of the MMD in the 1991 elections. It was not surprising then that when in July 2005, Mr. Michael Sata, the then leader of the opposition Patriotic Party was arrested and accused of inciting miners at the units of Konkola Copper Mines to go on strike, there was no word from the labour movement in support or in opposition to Mr. Sata. It was not surprising then that exactly two years later in July 2007 Mr. Sata charged that the leadership of the labour movement then had let down the workers. He argued that the leadership had failed to live up to the leadership qualities of the late Justin Chimba, Lawrence Katilungu and Robinson Puta. Mr. Sata's attack on the labour movement leadership was in connection with their silence on privatisation, for example of Zambia National Commercial Bank (ZNCB) and the secrecy on the deals with investors such as those that had opened Albidon Nickel mine in Mazabuka. According to Mr. Sata the only exception was the leadership of the Joyce Nonde-led Zambia Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers (ZUFIAW).

The ZCTU stated that Mr. Sata was offside on labour issues and called on him not to speak on labour matters because he was not competent to do so and should concentrate on politics. Mr. Sata argued that he was competent enough to speak on labour issues because he was

a product of a vibrant labour movement. However, a question could be asked here on whether Mr. Sata was not trying to establish a relationship between his party and the labour movement.

In February 2004, the trade union movement was joined by Civil Society Organisations in a big demonstration against the high pay as you earn or income tax. Nothing much came out of the demonstration as the Minister of Finance, Ng'andu Magande remained adamant and the PAYE remained high.

In the elections held on 20th September 2011, the Patriotic Front led by Michael Sata defeated the MMD which was led by Rupiah Banda and formed Government. This time the role of the trade union movement was not as pronounced as it was in the fight to unseat the UNIP regime of Kaunda. This was probably because the MMD Government had managed to intimidate the trade union movement and kept it away from coming out to support an opposition party.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we examined the relationship between political parties in Zambia and the trade unions or the labour movement. It is considered important or necessary for political parties, especially ruling parties, to have good relationships with trade unions in the countries they rule because in a developing country such as Zambia there was need for a political party in power to have a good relationship with trade unions in the country because such a relationship was good for the development of the country. Ruling parties and the trade unions were partners in development. It was for that reason that when UNIP began to rule Zambia it very much wanted to control the trade unions, especially the AMU/MUZ on the Copperbelt.

The relationship between the political parties and the trade unions has sometimes been warm but mainly they have been hostile because both have operated in a situation in which the economy of the country has not been doing very well. As a result of hostility from the Government some labour leaders were arrested and detained while others have been intimidated.

We were interested in finding out if through their relationship with political parties the trade unions tried to enhance their political influence and also to protect their autonomy. The

trade unions tried to enhance their political influence and to protect their autonomy. In the process the labour leaders would be accused of being “politicians”.

We were interested in finding out if the trade unions used the political parties to transform society by bringing positive change in society or if they merely became part of the status quo or part of the political elite suppressing the masses. During the Third Republic it was the feeling many observers of trade union affairs in the country that the labour movement had stopped being relevant to the workers and to the masses as it had compromised itself by being too close to the MMD. It was for this reason that the trade unions were accused of being merely interested in protecting the special interests of the small and dwindling wage-earning population. The labour movement no longer voiced grievances of a wider popular constituency, that is, it did not speak for the masses any more.