

The NUNW Congress: A turn-around?

By Herbert Jauch

The National Union of Namibian Workers' (NUNW) congress of last week-end was held under the theme "Back to Basics: Workers Take Control of Trade Unions for Economic Emancipation" and promised heated debates. Two issues in particular were expected to be contested, namely the NUNW's withdrawal from the Basic Income Grant (BIG) Coalition and the events surrounding the Government Institutions Pension Fund (GIPF). In addition, after experiencing years of declining influence, weakening union structures and an inability to mobilise workers on a significant scale, the theme suggested that the congress would also revisit the fundamental question of workers' control within unions. In recent years, unions have adopted an increasingly hierarchical top-down approach which caused a significant gap between membership and leadership in several unions. Spaces for open debates were increasingly narrowed and leaders' accountability to their members diminished.

Economic matters

As Namibia is now "officially" the country with the highest levels of income inequality in the world (UNDP 2009) and has an unemployment rate of over 50%, questions of economic development and emancipation were also debated at the congress. Workers confirmed their opposition to labour hire, criticised the Supreme Court ruling of last year (which overturned the ban on labour hire) and called on parliament to enact the necessary laws to prevent the continued operations of labour hire companies. The Congress also called for improved skills development for workers, the recognition of prior learning, the introduction of national pension and medical aid funds as well as the inclusion of HIV/AIDS workplace policies as an issue for collective bargaining.

Reviewing Namibia's economic policies, workers noted that EPZ companies like Ramatex hold no benefits for Namibia and bemoaned government's silence on the matter. While accepting the need for foreign investment, congress called for increasing local control over resources and an end to the export of raw materials. These and some other resolutions dealing with Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), land acquisition from absentee landlords, better access to housing loans and the abolition of Regional Electricity Distributors (REDs) are in line with previous positions held by the country's largest trade union federation.

The BIG debate

What set this congress apart from previous ones was the opening up of debates on what some unionists termed “controversial” issues. Particularly important was the debate on the pros and cons of the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) and the decision by the NUNW’s Central Executive Committee (CEC) in July to leave the BIG coalition. Although some union leaders tried to stifle debate on the BIG, workers resisted from the floor and discussed the issue for several hours. In the end, they decided that the NUNW must rejoin the BIG Coalition and that the BIG should be part of a broader initiative to fight poverty and to effect structural economic transformation. This decision is significant in various respects: firstly it contradicts the expressed sentiments on a national BIG as expressed by Namibia’s Prime Minister Angula and President Pohamba and it nullifies the decision taken by the NUNW’s CEC just weeks before the congress. This is a clear sign how removed some trade union leaders have become from their base and points to a lack of accountability through mandates and feed-backs within the labour movement. At congress, workers refused to “toe the line” and in some instances openly defied the views of their leaders. This must certainly be seen as an important step in the process of workers reclaiming control over their unions. The congress decision on the BIG will not only redirect the NUNW leadership but will also increase the pressure on the Namibian government to seriously consider the introduction of a national BIG as a tool to fight poverty.

The GIPF scandal

For several week prior to the NUNW congress, the GIPF scandal - triggered by the writing-off of over N\$ 600 million of public servants pension monies as a result of ill-advised investment practices - made headlines in the local media. Despite the shocking revelations that pointed to mismanagement, recklessness and corruption, the trade unions in the public sector whose members were directly affected by the squandering of the pension money remained silent. The Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) replaced its delegate on the GIPF board but neither the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) nor the public sector unions affiliated to the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA) took any visible action. The NUNW congress, however, made its views clear. Workers refused to be “guided” in the GIPF debate and resolved that all those involved in the failed loan projects should be brought to book. The congress called for the management and board of GIPF to be suspended, for a special commission of inquiry to be set up and for the lost monies to be recovered. This puts pressure on the Namibian government to act, not only as the employer of civil servants but also as the custodian of their pension fund.

The workers have spoken – what next?

Workers seem to have expressed their views loud and clear and the resolutions passed will guide the NUNW leadership in the years to come. The challenge now is to operationalise them and to implement them consistently in line with the workers' mandate. This implies reviving union structures to involve members and ensure accountability. It also implies resisting pressure (political or otherwise) to amend or "soften" the resolutions taken. The NUNW will have to demonstrate that it is accountable to workers only and the union federation will have to heal the rifts that were apparent during congress to build unity of purpose within its own ranks. The election of particular candidates into leadership positions should not distract from the broader struggles awaiting the labour movement. Internal divisions can only weaken its cause.

The NUNW congress could not deal with all organisational and policy issues confronting the labour movement today and much remains to be done in the months and years to come. The question of managers serving as union leaders and the arising conflicts of interest, for example, needs to be debated as a principled issue without being linked to specific individuals. The same applies to the unusual arrangement of having former trade union leaders (who are now politicians or business managers) represented on the NUNW's CEC – the highest decision-making body between congresses.

In the broader socio-economic arena, unions will have to play a much stronger, pro-active and more consistent role in advocating for the "transformative economic changes" that its members have called for. The federation will have to develop a long-term vision and plan of action, informed by a coherent set of principles and ideological underpinnings to confront the challenges ahead. Events in the coming months and years will show how far the NUNW is willing and able to go.

Published in the Windhoek Observer, 10-16 September 2010