

ITUC OnLine

151/151010

ITUC OnLine

"The improvements are only on the surface and trade unionists still face political harassment"

Brussels, 15 October 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Whilst denouncing the political harassment trade unionists continue to face, Wellington Chibebe, general secretary of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), welcomes the progress made with the ILO Commission of Inquiry (1). Fearing a return to violence as the presidential elections draw nearer, he is nonetheless optimistic about his plans attract more young people and women to the trade union movement in Zimbabwe and to finally achieve the people's freedoms that will give way to a brighter economic future. Chibebe was awarded the inaugural Arthur Svensson Internacional Award from the Norwegian "Industri Energi" trade union on October 11 in recognition of his outstanding record on workers' rights and welfare.

What is the situation facing trade unions in Zimbabwe at this time, two years into the power-sharing government agreement between President Robert Mugabe and the Movement for Democratic Change?

The situation is dire because of the non-performing economy. We had hoped that by the introduction of the new currency and also with the coming in of the new government, which is an inclusive government, things would improve, but the unions are hardest hit because union dues are quite meagre simply because employers are refusing to engage in wage negotiations. Where they are engaging in wage negotiations they are refusing to honour the agreements. Also the government has made a pronouncement that there should be a moratorium in terms of wage negotiations so the situation is quite difficult for the unions.

And are unionists still falling victim to political harassment?

At the surface it may appear as if things have improved, but we are still facing political harassment. You may recall that in the past one and one-a-half years, we have had activists arrested and ZCTU activities denied by the police to the extent that we had to approach high courts to have events like commemoration of the health and safety day in Kwekwe for example, and the arrest of (ZCTU President) Lovemore Matombo in November and also the shooting of activists, or workers who were protesting for non payment of salaries in Shabanie.

So things have not improved much under the power-sharing government?

Not at all. Things have partially improved, but it's on the surface and you wouldn't call that improvement, because the problem is that whereas the political leadership are making statements to the effect that things are improving, the structures or the infrastructures in terms of the securocrats or the armed forces, the security sector, the situation remains because they are the same people who used to harass people and they are the same people who occupy the same positions. Others have actually been promoted for having tortured human rights activists.

The ITUC has just meet for its first conference in Zimbabwe, to look at the findings of the ILO Commission of Inquiry which found there were widespread violations of union rights. How important have the COI and the ITUC meeting been for the Zimbabwean unions?

For us it was quite critical that the Commission of Inquiry was launched by the ILO. We saluted that. In fact we celebrated the setting up of the Commission of Inquiry and we also were happy that what we were alleging or what used to be allegations have now come to be true. The Commission of Inquiry established the facts and verified the facts and they concluded that what the ZCTU was saying was actually true. We are also happy to some extent that the government has accepted the outcome and promised to implement the recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry. Whether they will do that in total, that is something else, knowing the way our government operates, but we are also excited that the ITUC has managed to have a follow-up conference here in Harare; the conclusions and recommendations of the conference (on Sept. 28-29) were very exciting and very encouraging. We hope, if we manage to continue to monitor the

programme and the process, we will actually get results from the Commission's report.

The government in Zimbabwe has record of ignoring international opinion and not keeping its pledges. Are you more confident this time that it will implement the recommendations of the COI?

We have what we regard as guarded optimism. We may not be overly optimistic. But we hope given the fact that the government has upfront accepted the report and knowing full well that every June we will be in Geneva for the ILO Conference and the issue is live on the table, we believe that the government for once will be able to carry through the recommendations. To this end they have already started some steps towards addressing some issues raised in the report.

It seems there will be elections next year. How concerned are you that there will be a repeat of the violence which has marred recent election campaigns?

We are very concerned, more so because recently during the constitution-making process we've already recorded some levels of violence and given the fact that politicians, particularly President Robert Mugabe, would not want to let go and have been using violence as a tool to win elections. We believe that the elections will be bloody and we are extremely worried that they will degenerate into some kind of a chaotic situation. But unfortunately we may not avoid elections simply because there has been violence, because elections must be held when due. Otherwise, if we remain scared of violence, it means that those perpetrators of violence who continue using violence knowing full well that people are scared will continue using violence as a tool, so we are prepared to face this, or bite the bullet as it were, every election. Our position as ZCTU has been to say that elections should be presidential elections only, because there was never a contestation regarding the parliamentary elections or the local elections. The contestation was all about presidential results and therefore that's the position that should be subjected to an election. But we are worried that they would want to have harmonised elections. The life-span of this current parliament is up until 2013 and therefore we expect the parliamentary term to be allowed to run through.

The process of drawing up a new Constitution was supposed to be driven by the people, but this appears not to be the case, with the political parties taking control of it. What is the position of the ZCTU?

We are not surprised because we predicted the route the politicians wanted the constitution-making process to take. We are however saddened by the fact that even the MDC as a political party have also taken the route of speaking on behalf of the people. In terms of our democratic values we expect people to speak freely and contribute freely in terms of the constitution-making process but as currently constituted it's the political parties which are actually making the contributions. Our position is that the constitution-making process should be an independent process. Talking from experience, that process should be chaired by an independent person under an independent commission and they should have gone to the people, or should go to the people to ask them how they would want to be governed. Once they have the kind of raw data, they would then reduce that to some sort of legal language that is submitted to parliament. Currently you have guiding questions prepared by somebody from somewhere and some of the questions are too technical for our people to understand. For example you go to an illiterate person in a deep rural area and ask how that person expects the courts to be constituted. They may not understand the difference between a magistrate's court and the labour court and therefore they have no input.

You've identified women's issues and the need to mobilise young people as priorities for the ZCTU. Can you elaborate on your plans?

We have scanned the ground and realised that if we don't target women as a priority and don't target young workers as a priority it will be very difficult in future to have unions, because that's where the majority of our people are, particularly the young workers both male and female. That is the future of the unions, because as we speak the generational gap between older people and young people is actually getting wider and wider, meaning that very few young people are interested in trade unionism because they feel they are better qualified to represent themselves and that has to be addressed. And also the unions have to be seen to be delivering because you cannot, even in marketing, you cannot sell something that is not sellable so our commodities must be sellable in terms of the language, in terms of the package and the issues we are talking about in terms of unionism. So therefore, we must generate interest among young people for them to belong to the unions, because that is where the future of unionism is. And regarding Women in Zimbabwe, 52 percent of our population are women, but you may find that because of our cultural background where women have been discouraged to participate in public affairs issues, you have a 20 percent participation of women in these issues and therefore we must fight vigorously to ensure

that women and young workers are on board.

With an official unemployment rate running at 86 percent, the informal economy is clearly very important in Zimbabwe. How can the trade union movement reach out to workers in the informal economy?

We are glad to say that since 2002 we have been working with the informal economy people. We actually assisted them to have their own national association for the informal economy. We went into a joint agreement, the memorandum of understanding which is behind me here, with informal economy actors, where we agreed to work together in areas of health and safety, legal formulation and even education activities and joint actions on the ground with the informal economy. We have a fully fledged department within the ZCTU which is responsible for the running of the informal economy section, because our retrenched members, or former members, are found in the informal economy section which is quite huge. And recently when we were at our political review workshop in Yanga it was recommended to the general council, the policy making body, that we must consider affiliating or accepting the affiliation of the informal economy people within the ZCTU, either as a fully fledged affiliate or as an associate member of the ZCTU.

How can the international labour movement give more support to the ZCTU?

One thing I can guarantee is that moral and political support has been put upfront and we are sure of that. We are also happy that material support has been pledged by our partners, particularly regarding the current programmes, which they have assured us will continue. We were also excited and humbled by the fact that our partners who are colleagues have also pledged to support us in terms of our administration, because we have been hard hit by lack of meaningful subscription amounts coming to the ZCTU. And that has also attracted the sympathy of our partners who have pledged, once they go back to their bases, to consider our plight and we hope they will favourably consider our situation and assist whenever and wherever they can.

Trade Unions have suffered tremendously over the years of oppression and economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Is there room for optimism for the future?

We are very optimistic concerning the future despite our current problems. They will come to pass, because we don't think our problems will be permanent and as we promised our colleagues yesterday (at the ITUC conference) we are in the trenches to make sure that we deliver. Over and above the independence we delivered to our people we are prepared to deliver the democracy and peoples' freedoms which are actually not present at the current moment, but we believe, given the terrain, we will achieve that. Zimbabwe is endowed with a lot of natural resources and once we have democracy and peoples' freedoms, and we are working in a situation of liberty, we will be able to turn around this situation in not more than five years.

Interview conducted in Harare by Paul Ames.

- (1) See the ITUC press release "ILO Commission of Inquiry on Zimbabwe Confirms Allegations of Severe Trade Union Rights Violations": <http://www.ituc-csi.org/ilo-commission-of-inquiry-on.html>

- Also see the chapter on Zimbabwe in the ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights: <http://survey.ituc-csi.org/+Zimbabwe-+.html>

See the video: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/video-interview-wellington-chibebe.html>

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 301 national affiliates.

<http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on: +32 2 224 02 04 or +32 476 62 10 18.

You are currently subscribed to ituc-online as:

To unsubscribe click here: <http://forum.ituc-csi.org/u?id=38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3&n=T&l=ituc-online&o=21903>

(It may be necessary to cut and paste the above URL if the line is broken)

or send a blank email to leave-21903-38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3@forum.ituc-csi.org