



Bernard Pollack

The ZCIEA organizes a meeting at an AIDS orphanage outside of Harare, March 2010.

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By Bernard Pollack

# BUILDING A LABOR MOVEMENT IN A FAILED STATE

## *The Case of Zimbabwe*

IN 2000, THE ZIMBABWEAN GOVERNMENT ENACTED LAND REFORM POLICIES which allowed for the seizure and redistribution of white-owned commercial farms. These fast-track land reforms made all acquired land state land, with settlers having the right only to occupy and use it. The land reform policies have left about 1.5 million farm workers without a source of income as farms are divided

up—with many tracts given to Robert Mugabe's supporters.

While Zimbabwe's land reform movement was initially intended to reduce the number of white-owned farms in the country and provide land to the landless, it's done little to help the poor in rural areas. "Land was taken from the rich and given to the rich," says Gertrude Hambira, general secretary of the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ).<sup>1</sup> The rich farmers have not, however, efficiently utilized the land because they are already well off and choose to hold onto the land to maintain political power. This has led to lower agricultural productivity, higher prices for food, and widespread hunger. These conditions are compounded by

the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. The incidence of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe is one of the highest in the world, with about one-third of the adult population affected. Many families in Zimbabwe support orphans and many households have become female-headed or child-headed as a result of HIV/AIDS deaths, now running at over three thousand people per week.

These combined crises, in large part, hastened an end to the single-handed, three-decades-long rule of Robert Mugabe. In 2008, Morgan Richard Tsvangirai—with support from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)—was elected Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, ending three decades of Mugabe's exclusive reign. Prior to this post, Tsvangirai

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had been the general secretary of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). The ZCTU had been growing strong, fighting for more rights and better wages for workers since the early 1990s, and firmly opposing the Mugabe government. Mugabe's government participated in voter intimidation and suppression, and routinely arrested and jailed opposition activists. Mugabe implemented many policies that weakened Zimbabwe's economy and dramatically worsened workers' quality of life. Among those policies, land "reform" enacted in 2000 gave complete control of the land to the government, and left informal workers—who had largely depended upon farming—without a stable income.

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However, Tsvangirai's election to prime minister was hampered by government-sponsored attacks on his supporters. After Tsvangirai won the first round, Mugabe won the second round through election fraud, forcing the three parties involved in the elections—Mugabe's ZANU-PF, Tsvangirai's MDC, and an MDC faction supporting Arthur Mutambara—to sign a power-sharing agreement that reapportioned the allocation of ministries. The pact was made to create an even distribution of power between Mugabe's party and opposition groups. As prime minister, Tsvangirai oversees a council of ministers which supervises a thirty-one-member cabinet headed by Mugabe.<sup>2</sup> However, the biggest concern for many Zimbabweans is whether the parties in the new government will put aside their differences in order to address the nation's grave economic problems.

Labor leaders in Zimbabwe are routinely followed, arrested, and beaten. Unemployment hovers above 90 percent for Zimbabwe's population of over twelve million, and anti-union legislation is routinely proposed and enacted. The Constitution of Zimbabwe does not incorporate the right to strike or the right to freely collectively bargain.<sup>3</sup> The procedural requirements for a legal strike in Zimbabwe "are so convoluted that there has never been, since Independence in April 1980, one legal strike in Zimbabwe."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the ZCTU plays an increasingly important role in empowering and improving conditions for informal workers, who constitute 80 percent of the workforce in Zimbabwe.

**THE ZIMBABWE CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS (ZCTU)**

**T**HE ZCTU, AN UMBRELLA BODY of all labor unions in Zimbabwe, currently consists of thirty-six affiliate members countrywide.<sup>5</sup> It represents nearly thirty affiliate national unions, with close to 350,000 worker-members—spanning nearly all sectors of the national economy—with farmers and artisans making up a large percentage of the workforce. The ZCTU includes ten departments: Education and Training, Health and Safety, Legal, Capacity Building, Information, Gender, Advocacy, Organizing, Accounts, and the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA). The ZCTU has made an important commitment to represent and assist workers in the large informal sector of the economy, which is central to its mission. The enormous scope of the informal sector, the complicated politico-socio-economic environment, the weakness of the economy, the negative effects of the brain drain, and the rampant violations of trade union rights—such as harassment, arrests and detentions, shootings, and the barring of strike actions—present inordinate challenges for trade union activity. In addition to responding to these problems,

the ZCTU has been lobbying and advocating for the adoption of labor policies to support the disabled, youths, women, ex-combatants, and other disadvantaged groups.

The current general secretary of the ZCTU, Wellington Chibebe, is one of today's most vocal (and effective) proponents of human rights and democracy. Despite being brutally beaten, tortured, and having his life threatened over the last two decades, Chibebe remains more positive than ever about the direction of his country. He is cautiously optimistic about the power-sharing agreement and the future of democracy in Zimbabwe, saying "our role as the labor movement is to fight for democracy and good governance, respect for people's basic rights, and also social and economic rights . . . We just can't afford to repeat the same mistake by treating any government or political party as angels from heaven."<sup>6</sup> Rather than directly endorsing political candidates, the ZCTU currently advocates for democracy and good governance. While Chibebe described the early stages of the power-sharing system as "terrible," he feels strongly that "things are now getting better; we are able to make some positive changes happen."<sup>7</sup>

*The ZCTU has made an important commitment to represent and assist workers in the large informal sector of the economy.*

Currently, the ZCTU is growing as a leading opposition voice in Harare. It has a communications network—including its own

newspaper, *The Worker* (the lone far-reaching media voice that's critical of the government); a research arm, the Labor and Economic Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRI); and a lobbying arm. This is quite an achievement given that all other media outlets are under tight state control. The ZCTU recently built a deeper national/local organizing structure (similar to the Central Labor Councils in the United States) that promotes trade union democracy, economic policy education, and strong local labor coalitions in each of the provinces—a remarkable feat, given the laws preventing unions from providing education or training.

The federation has received valuable support from the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, which maintains an office in the country. Chibebe asserts that "because of the Solidarity Center and the American worker, we've had incredible moral and material support."<sup>8</sup> The Solidarity Center has supported the ZCTU's research institute, expanded the distribution of *The Worker*, ensured its ability to fund a lobbyist, created a paralegal program, trained activists and leaders, and has gotten support from international governments and politicians through organizational delegations, such as the visit from the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU).

#### THE ZCTU'S NEWSPAPER: *THE WORKER*

**T**HE ZCTU'S NEWSPAPER IS A forceful, widely-read anti-government and anti-corruption voice in the country. Given Zimbabwe's literacy rate of 90 percent—one of the highest in Africa—print media is a critical tool for communication. With a population spread out over hundreds of miles in rural areas, *The Worker* is the main way for the ZCTU to disseminate news and inspire activity. According to Ben Madzimure, editor of *The Worker*, "when [the] ZCTU calls for

national actions, [and] the media doesn't report on it at all, *The Worker* is a main vehicle giving directions to people on how to participate in strikes, elections, and public actions."<sup>9</sup>

Zimbabwe's media history has been marked by censorship and government control since the country became independent from Britain in 1980 (when Mugabe came to power). Madzimure (in contrast to previous reporters) actively seeks out stories the government doesn't want mentioned—such as worker discontent and political corruption—and provides an analysis of current events. The newspaper is printed once a month, with five thousand copies distributed throughout the country. Despite financial support from the ZCTU, the Solidarity Center, the Canadian Labour Congress, and others, the \$1 USD price tag to purchase the paper is too expensive for most Zimbabweans. Madzimure emphasizes that after one copy of the newspaper is read, it's passed on to at least nine other people. With 80 percent of the population employed in the country's informal sector, the labor movement relies on its local networks to make sure the message filters throughout the country. Union members in every district serve as "volunteer correspondents" and several unemployed reporters contribute stories as well.

### THE ZCTU'S RESEARCH ARM

**I**N ADDITION TO SUPPORTING AN independent press, the ZCTU established LEDRIZ in September 2003. The institute's primary objective is to develop well-grounded policy positions designed to influence developmental processes and outcomes at the national, regional, and international levels. Currently, LEDRIZ is strategically positioning itself to be part of every major economic policy debate in Zimbabwe, by working with the ZCTU to strengthen and empower the country's large worker base. Together, they are drafting and promoting policies to increase salaries,

representation, and rights. Since the 2008 elections, LEDRIZ embarked on a campaign to inform workers of their eight socioeconomic rights—the rights to food security, health care, an education, housing, basic public utilities, transportation, decent work, and a living wage.<sup>10</sup> In addition, LEDRIZ is fighting hard to

*LEDRIZ is positioning itself to be part of every major economic policy debate in Zimbabwe, to strengthen and empower the country's large worker base.*

establish progressive policies such as opposing the privatization of public utilities, providing support for the informal sector, protecting workers' pensions, and ensuring their ability to retire with dignity.

LEDRIZ develops training materials to educate members of the trade unions on regional and global policy initiatives, such as free trade. Due to the country's political and economic instability, LEDRIZ has developed training and educational materials, for labor unions and schools, on social and economic rights. LEDRIZ is also working with the ZCTU to provide education and training specifically geared toward informal sector workers.

In establishing an aligned research institute, the labor movement in Zimbabwe is following the examples of American, European, South African, and Namibian trade unions. Such a think tank is particularly helpful in an economy like Zimbabwe's, which has experienced a wrenching brain drain during

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its recent (and severe) economic downturn. The main strength of LEDRIZ is that it is a member of several national, regional, and international networks such as the Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Southern Africa (ANSA), which it coordinates; the African Labour Research Network (ALRN); and the Global Union Research Network (GURN), launched in January 2004 under the coordination of the International Labour Organization's Bureau of Workers' Activities and the International Trade Union Council (ITUC).

### THE ZIMBABWE CHAMBER OF INFORMAL ECONOMY ASSOCIATIONS (ZCIEA)

**A**S A RESULT OF THE DRAMATIC trend toward the informalization of the economy during the 1990s, smaller informal sector workers—everyone from street vendors to musicians and artisans—formed associations such as the Cross-Border Traders Association and the Tuckshop Owners Association. Informal economy associations suffer from major infrastructure weaknesses, including a lack of coordination, duplication, fragmentation, overdependence on donor funding, and a lack of strategic vision.<sup>11</sup> This leads to the collapse of many of these organizations when donor funding is withdrawn or runs out.

In response to the desire for social and economic change, the ZCTU launched an initiative in 2001 to form a single, comprehensive body of trade-related organizations, in order to repair the disintegrating informal economy associations. The result was the formation of the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA). According to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), based in Britain, the ZCIEA aimed to bridge the gap between the trade union movement and the informal economy workers (comprised of mostly petty businesspeople), and to build the capacity of informal workers to secure economic and

social justice.<sup>12</sup> Informal workers have been marginalized, exploited, harassed, and taken advantage of by Mugabe's government—they've been left with few (if any) rights. If these workers and petty businesspeople could be compensated or aided, they would be better empowered to fight for social reforms to improve their lives. With the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding—setting the terms of the relationship between the ZCTU and the ZCIEA—the ZCIEA was officially launched in August 2004.

Since then—and despite many setbacks, including the Operation Murambatsvina (also known as Operation Restore Order) period in 2005 when the Zimbabwean government launched a large-scale campaign to clear out the slums throughout the country by destroying the homes and businesses of thousands of informal economy workers and their families—the ZCIEA has grown into an impressive national organization, with individual members in all sectors of the Zimbabwean economy.<sup>13</sup> Based in Harare, the organization includes a lobbyist, a communications team, a research arm, and more than 1.5 million dues-paying members. The informal workers now have access to all the resources of the ZCTU, such as its lobbyists, its research arm, and the strength and power of the ZCTU's affiliate unions.

Today, the ZCIEA aims to create decent standards of living for all Zimbabweans in a stable economy, and to alleviate poverty through transforming informal economy activities into mainstream activities. It's a national alliance of membership-based organizations that includes market vendors, and street vendors and/or hawkers (such as cooperatives and other types of business-specific associations). The objectives of the ZCIEA include: the protection of the informal economy players' interests; the development of entrepreneurial skills through training; and the provision of resources to improve and increase business.<sup>14</sup> The ZCIEA's newly-elected president, Philip

Sanzvenga, works with his wife, trading in potatoes, dried beans, yams, and vegetables bought from rural farms.

Annie Watson, a TUC adviser, had the opportunity to attend the ZCIEA Congress, held in Nyanga, Zimbabwe in October 2010. During this meeting she learned about the activities of a wide array of ZCIEA members, including Lydia (a fruits and vegetables trader). Lydia is a widow with two children who earns enough food for her family, but has problems paying her children's school fees. Her home has no electricity and no running water. She buys

*Unions have helped further the economic enterprises of exploited and underrepresented farmers and artisans across Zimbabwe.*

her food in Bulawayo, traveling one hundred kilometers by bus with the produce to sell it in a vendor market provided by the City Council. She says the ZCIEA has made her feel less isolated, and she wants to work with the group to improve conditions for her fellow traders, many of whom are homeless and cannot get stalls in the Council market.<sup>15</sup>

Other work of the ZCIEA includes strengthening workers and communities that have been hurt under the leadership of Mugabe. It is working with, for example, one local community to build a school in an area where hundreds of people were forced to

relocate during Operation Restore Order. As part of this de-urbanization program, under Mugabe nearly two million workers were forcibly removed from their homes in cities, stripped of their belongings, and forced to live in rural areas, without any agricultural skills or training. These workers—who have traditionally competed against each other and with the formal sector—are now coordinated and working together to tackle pressing issues such as social security, disability benefits, improved infrastructure, working conditions, and many others.

### THE WAY FORWARD

**U**NIONS, DESPITE THE SIGNIFICANT challenges presented by oppressive government policies and actions, are a strong force in Zimbabwe. They are vital for building a democratic future in the country. The rise of labor unions has helped promote and further the economic enterprises of many exploited and underrepresented farmers and artisans across Zimbabwe. The ZCTU has grown as a critical player, not only in terms of Zimbabwe's economy, but also as a political influence (the ZCTU's role in the 2009 elections led to a new political structure). Its work has been crucial in helping underrepresented workers gain more rights and increase their wages through education, outreach, and the growing movement for labor policy reform. The efforts of unions, like those discussed earlier, have kept the worst policies of Mugabe's government in check, and their continued work will be critical in ensuring a better future for the workers of Zimbabwe. The ZCTU shows the importance of the grassroots labor movement in trying to increase labor rights in opposition to a rigid and corrupt government—work that may suggest promising strategies for unions in other developing countries.

Notes

1. Gertrude Hambira, interview by Bernard Pollack, April 26, 2010.

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4. Ibid.

5. Naome Chakanya, *Zimbabwe Country Report*, LEDRIZ (prepared for the ILO Trade Union Training on Research and Rural Youth Unemployment, Turin, Italy, May 19–June 6, 2008).

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ben Madzimore, interview by Bernard Pollack, May 2010.

10. Chakanya, *Zimbabwe Country Report*.

11. Godfrey Kanyenze, *Giving Voice to the Unprotected Workers in the Informal Economy in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe*, discussion paper 22 (prepared for the ILO/SRO-Harare, International Labour Organization, 2004), 28.

12. Annie Watson, *The Chamber That Delivers—A Report from the ZCIEA Congress, Zimbabwe* (Trades Union Congress, November 15, 2010), available at [www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-18813-f0.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-18813-f0.cfm).

13. Ibid.

14. StreetNet International, "ZCIEA (Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations)," available at [www.streetnet.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ZCIEA-Zimbabwe-Chamber-of-Informal-Economy-Associations.pdf](http://www.streetnet.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ZCIEA-Zimbabwe-Chamber-of-Informal-Economy-Associations.pdf) (accessed on January 21, 2011).

15. Watson, *The Chamber That Delivers*.

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