

# FACT SHEET

## TRADE UNIONS IN NAMIBIA

### Brief Historical Background

The Namibian people have a long history of resistance to colonial domination, starting from German colonization of the territory in 1884. German colonization of Namibia (then called South West Africa) was brutal and exploitative. Over 80,000 Namibians were killed during German military occupation. After Germany was defeated in World War I, The League of Nations (a precursor to the United Nations) was formed. The League divided Germany's colonial holdings amongst the victors of World War I and South Africa acquired a "Mandate" from the League to govern Namibia.

In 1966, the United Nations revoked South Africa's "Mandate" over Namibia and called for free and fair elections in that country. The South Africans refused to recognize that UN ruling. In 1978, the United Nations Security Council finally adopted Resolution 435 which calls for the immediate withdrawal of South African troops from Namibia and the holding of UN supervised elections.

By conservative estimates, Namibia's population approximated 4 million prior to the proliferation of the slave trade. After centuries of depopulation and genocide, Namibia now has a population of about 1.6 million, 95 percent of whom are black. Although Namibia has abundant natural resources, including diamonds, uranium, and fish, exploitation by South Africa and Western multinational corporations has kept its black population among the poorest in the world.

### Trade Union History

Although working conditions were poor under German rule, they worsened under the Mandate, as South Africa imposed apartheid and a harsh contract labor system. Under the contract system, workers cannot quit, choose which jobs they do, or bargain for wages. Breaking

a labor contract constitutes a criminal offense. Most employed Namibians work under the contract labor system. They are separated by law from their families during the contract (usually 12 to 18 months) and must live in hostels, with up to 12 per room.

Namibian workers engaged in strikes as early as 1893. Despite South African laws forbidding Namibian blacks from forming unions, or even having legal status as "employees," over 40 worker protests occurred from 1950 to 1971.

On December 13, 1971, Namibian workers organized an unprecedented general strike. Nearly half the black labor force, 12,000 workers, joined the strike, and by January 20, 1972, they had crippled the mining industry and essential services. Worker demands included the abolition of contract labor, freedom to look for and resign from work without harassment, the right to live with their families, and wage scales based on their qualifications.

The South Africans refused to discuss the workers' demands. Thousands of striking workers were thrown out of the miner's hostels and dismissed from the mines. They were forcibly removed to barren rural reserves, or bantustans, where unemployed Namibians must live. Although the mass deportation effectively ended the strike, workers continued to resist, striking over 70 times between 1973 and 1975 alone.

In 1978, the South African authorities announced a series of "reforms" in the labor system. Africans would now be considered "employees" and were thus, in theory, allowed to organize trade unions. However, these unions were required to be segregated and to register with the government. Even registered unions were seriously restricted in their ability to negotiate, to organize, and to strike.

### The Formation of the NUNW

Namibian workers attempted to organize outside this apartheid structure. In 1978, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) was formed. The union went underground when the South African government detained its leaders and banned meetings. However, in 1986, the NUNW was reactivated, and began organizing at individual factories and mines.

The first major test of the new NUNW was the July 27, 1987 general strike of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia (MUN). Workers at three Tsumeb Corporation Ltd. (TCL) mines, struck after management rejected all attempts at negotiation. The MUN demanded that TCL negotiate in good faith on 15 improvements, including a living wage (workers were earning an average of \$50 to \$150 per month), safe working conditions, improved conditions in worker hostels, and a 40 hour work week. Most importantly, the MUN also demanded that TCL oppose South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia.

TCL reacted harshly to the strike by firing 4,000 strikers. Once again, the workers were evicted from their hostels and transported back to Namibian bantustans. On August 18th and 19th, 1987, The South African-sponsored para-military force, Koevet (pronounced Ker-foot) arrested top leaders of SWAPO, trade unions, student organizations and churches. With the workers forcibly deported, and union leaders detained for almost a month, the MUN was forced to end the strike without achieving any of its stated aims.

### Trade Unions and the Independence Struggle

The resurgence of the NUNW has important implications for the struggle for independence in Namibia. The MUN strikers demonstrated both their commitment to Namibian independence and their understanding that the independence struggle and the struggle for better working conditions are intrinsically linked. The NUNW's ability to organize over half of Namibia's workforce in mining, food and metal industries in less than a year, and to organize a strike which inflicted more than \$2 million in losses on TCL, despite the military occupation of Namibia, displayed the powerful role workers can play in ending corporate exploitation of Namibia.

### U.S. Policy On Namibia

In 1978 the United States voted for United Nations Security Council Resolution 435. This commitment to Namibian independence was effectively reversed by the Reagan administration policy called

"linkage," which makes the withdrawal of Cuban troops from neighboring Angola a pre-condition for Namibian independence. Cuban troops serve in Angola precisely to repulse continued South African invasion and occupation of Angola. But, the Reagan Administration insists that communism, not the racist apartheid system, is the major threat to peace in southern Africa. Because of this position, the US supports South Africa's continued colonization of Namibia.

In October 1986, the U.S. Congress passed, over President Reagan's veto, a limited package of selected sanctions against South Africa. Those sanctions, which include a ban on the importation of most uranium and all agricultural products, also apply to Namibia. However, the loopholes in the limited sanctions law have allowed continued importation of many South African and Namibian commodities.

### Conclusion

Trade Unions in Namibia clearly do not separate the need for increased wages from the need for an end to South African illegal occupation and colonization. Trade unions in Namibia work with the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) to organize educational and political events inside Namibia to reiterate that unity.

It is important that the entire international community focus additional attention on the ongoing struggle of the Namibian trade unions to continue their long battle for humane working conditions and an end to South African occupation.

