



Role of Trade Unions in eradication of in-equality

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While we celebrate our achievements in Transformation of Social Relations, it is equally important for us to acknowledge the predominant levels of in-equality, unemployment and poverty.

Statistics South Africa has reported an increased South African unemployment rate to 25.6 percent in the second quarter of 2013, "the highest rate in two years. Between the first and the second quarters of 2013, the labour force increased by 222 000 persons, reflecting a rise in the number of both unemployed persons (122 000) and employed persons (100 000).

In the second quarter, both the formal sector and the informal sector saw an increase in employment (109 000 and 30 000 persons respectively), while employment decreased in agriculture and private households (26 000 and 12 000 persons respectively). Between Q1 and Q2, the number of discouraged work seekers increased by 35 000; while that of other (not economically active) persons decreased by 145 000 resulting in a net decrease of 110 000 among the not economically active population.

Compared to a year ago, in the second quarter, employment increased by 2.0 percent (274 000), while unemployment increased by 5.7 percent (254 000). The number of discouraged work-seekers increased by 2.3 percent (54 000) and other (not economically active) decreased by 1.0 percent (132 000), resulting in a net decrease of 0.5 percent (79 000) in the not economically active population".

“Income inequality has increased across the board”. Making reference to numerous sources, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD report cites South Africa’s Gini co-efficient at approximately 0.70 and amongst the highest in the world. It further suggests blatant income variances within South Africa than at the global level, as the world income inequality Gini – pooling all incomes across all countries – was estimated at 0.62 in 2008”. The share of employees in national income was 56% in 1995 but it had declined to 51% in 2009, i.e. there has been reverse redistribution from the poor to the rich.

Capitalism is in crisis from its Global economic depression, and workers are paying the price. We are witnessing workers’ constitutional rights for fair working conditions been threatened by inhuman, precarious working relations, emanating from Capitalist Privatization and deregulation of the labour markets.

Well comrades, “we can condemn Globalization and we can condemn gravity but it is more useful to devise concrete strategies to deal with realities than only condemning” (Fidel Castro).

Now the question is to what extend can we as Trade Unions deal with realities of the Capitalist Economic crisis, while operating in the Capitalist economy? We need to address the inherent contradiction in that we fight for higher wages within the existing capitalist system, even though we explicitly commit ourselves to the overthrow of that very same system.

On the other hand, we need to ask ourselves if our mandate as a trade union organization should be confined to the organized expression of workers’ desires and needs at the shop floor, or whether a fundamental importance of the linkage of struggles for wages with political struggles is what makes us a class for ourselves and not a class in ourselves.

The same argument need to apply to gender struggles, on whether we should or should not align ourselves with the broader struggles for women’s

emancipation and move beyond the narrow, reformist objective of bettering the position of women within the existing patriarchal capitalist system.

Whether our strategic objective should or should not be the fundamental transformation of oppressive gender relations in the economy, the workplace, in our organization and broader society.

For us to meaningfully engage on these issues, we need to understand that the origin of women's oppression is economically and socially-created, that it is not natural or inevitable, but most importantly that it is linked to the capitalist system of exploitation and domination of one by the other.

We need to understand that In South Africa race, class and gender are interconnected, and that black working class women experience triple oppression, because they are oppressed on the basis of race, class and gender.

"Inequalities in income and wealth ownership are still racialised. An average African man earns in the region of R2 400 per month, whilst an average white man earns around R19 000, which makes a racial income gap of roughly R16 800. Black women are yet to be liberated from the triple oppression. While most white women earn an average of R9 600 per month, African women earn R1 200, which makes a racial income gap of R8 400. 56% of whites earn more than R6 000 per month whereas 81% of Africans earn less than R6 000 per month.

Almost all the top 20 paid directors in JSE listed companies are white males, and in 2008 they earned an average of R59 million per annum, whilst in 2009 the average yearly earnings of an employee was R34 000.

The means of production remain concentrated in white capitalist hands: 50% of JSE is accounted for by 6 companies and more than 80% is accounted for by large banks and companies engaged in the core of the minerals-energy-complex. Estimates of black ownership of JSE-listed companies range between 1.6% and 4.6%" (Zwelinzima Vavi, SACP 13th National Congress).

This means, experiences and challenges of a rural African woman are different from that of a white middle class woman and also from those of a rural African man.

“Woman's fate is bound up with that of the exploited male. This is a fact. However, this solidarity arising from the exploitation that both women and men suffer and that binds them together historically, must not cause us to lose sight of the specific reality of the woman's situation.

The conditions of her life are determined by more than economic factors, that she is a victim of a specific reality. It is true that both she and the male worker are condemned to silence by the exploitation.

But under the current economic system, the worker's wife is also condemned to silence by her worker husband. In other words, in addition to the class exploitation common to both women and men, women must confront a particular set of relations that exist between them and men” (Thomas Sankara).

We further need to understand that Capitalism, racism and patriarchal systems are also interconnected. All these systems benefits from oppression of one by the other. Meaning that, the Struggle for Gender Equality is not secondary to Class struggle, but it is a Class Struggle. And we cannot therefore address the class question until women are completely liberated.

Beyond understanding, we need to have programmes and activities that reflect our level of class consciousness, and these are the sentiments shared by Lenin when he said “the character of any organization is naturally and inevitably determined by the content of its activities”.

It is for the above reasons SATAWU's programme on Understanding Gender in the Class context, which is meant to Transform Gender stereotypes and build cooperative gender relations, is still relevant.

The rationale behind this union programme is that workers (both women and men) are stronger united than divided. The programme acknowledges existent misconceptions and the power relations between women and men and it suggests solidarity in a fight against capitalistic domination.

It complements the Union programme on Women Leadership Development, as it seeks to create a conducive environment for women development, while supportive of the programme in transformation of workplaces.

It serves as one of our efforts as a Trade Union in strengthening Democracy.

Refer to SATAWU Gender Strategy for our detailed approach on transformation.