



ECONOMIC & SOCIAL JUSTICE TRUST

Right to strike needs to be defended

Press Statement, 12 October 2016

During the past few months, tensions increased significantly regarding the possibility of a country-wide teachers strike in support of a demand for an 8% increase in salaries. What started as a routine collective bargaining process, escalated when the Namibian government declared that it was unable to offer more than 5%, citing increasing financial constraints and debt levels as the main reasons. Government also pointed out that a teachers strike would have far-reaching social, economic and financial consequences. On its part, the majority union negotiating on behalf of teachers, the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) pointed out that politicians have increased their own incomes and benefits substantially over the years and that the inflation rate has reached around 7% in August 2016. Thus they argued that a demand for an 8% increase was reasonable and was in fact little more than an inflation adjustment.

This argument presented little more than the usual differences of interests between employers and workers. However, these differences intensified when government declared that it would not move beyond a 5% increase and when high ranking government officials accused teachers of being unpatriotic and lacking a sense of care for their students. The vast majority of teachers then voted for a strike to push government (as their employer) back to the negotiations table and to be more open in its approach. In response, the Namibian government made various efforts to delay the strike and to explore options for replacing striking teachers. This clearly undermines the letter and spirit of the Namibian Labour Act and also constitutes an attack on the right to strike.

We wish to point out the right to strike was hard fought for by Namibian workers as well as workers elsewhere. Even in cases where this right is formally granted, employers and even governments still make attempts to undermine it. In our own case, the crude labour exploitation and the repression of workers' struggles during colonial rule provides the background and a reminder of the need to protect the right to strike. After the first Labour Act of 1992 was implemented, several employers still resorted to "scab labour",

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i.e. they brought in new workers to do the job of striking employees. This effectively undermined the strike as a tool for workers and increased tensions and conflicts at workplaces. The Labour Act of 2007 therefore stated very clearly that employers must not ask anybody to do the work of employees who are on a protected strike.

As a Trust advocating for social and economic justice, we therefore need to add our voice to those who reject efforts to bring in “volunteers” and even teachers from elsewhere to undermine the strike. Delaying and arguing over the strike rules, approaching the Labour Court for an interdict etc. will not help to find a solution to the current conflict of interests between teachers and their employer. Government has preached for years that it believes in social partnership and tripartite consultations. However, it now acts contrary to that commitment and instead of being an exemplary employer, it attempts to undermine the right to strike.

We therefore call on the Namibian government to return to the negotiation table in good faith and we appeal to both parties to show the leadership and maturity required to reach an agreement.

Herbert Jauch
Chairperson