

May Day Commemoration Speech

Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)

May 01, 2002

Honourable Chairperson, fellow workers of Zimbabwe, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to graciously welcome you all to this important national but international commemoration of the WORKERS DAY. Today, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) joins millions of workers around the whole world in celebrating workers' achievements, and critically revisiting our successes and failures, and mapping out strategies to deal with the mammoth economic, political and social challenges facing us. It is a day when workers have to take stoke of the sweat of their labour and our theme for this year's May Day is '**WORKERS UNDER SIEGE: ORGANISE, UNITE AND FIGHT ON**'. As the country admire the magnificent buildings, bridges, roads though dilapidated due to corruption, out put from commerce and industry etc these arise from our labour. We deserve that respect though we meet when that recognition is fast vanishing into thin air due to political posturing.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

We meet today when Zimbabwe is in political, economic and social chaos mainly due to issues of government creation.

We meet when Zimbabwe is in a history of its own, peculiar to the rest of the world.

Society is polarised, governance is no more and labour under siege purely for political gains.

For the past three years, our economy has been declining continuously. The persistent macroeconomic instability has resulted in our gross domestic product shrinking, causing some companies to close and many workers to be retrenched. The high levels of inflation have seen what we bargain for once in a year getting eroded halfway through the year. This has therefore resulted in rising poverty among the workers of this nation.

Minimum wage and taxation

During the May Day commemoration last year, we put forward our demand for a national minimum wage. During the year we realised that our purchasing power was continuously declining.

During the same period, the government unilaterally increased the price of fuel by 70%.

We vehemently opposed this, and following the national stayaway, the Tripartite Negotiating Forum reconvened to consider our protest. Consequently, the minimum wage policy was effected in October last year. However, there was a problem with regard to the base level.

While from previous negotiations it had been agreed that the minimum wage should be tied to the poverty datum line, it took longer to secure an agreement on the matter. In this regard our minimum wage has never been in tandem with inflation levels which currently stand at **113% against the SADC countries which is below 10% except that of Zambia and Malawi which stand at around 20% and 14% respectively, suggesting that there is something dangerously wrong with Zimbabwe's management of the economy.** The inflation rate remains buoyantly high thereby eroding whatever we had managed to secure last October.

The question of PDL should be self -adjusting and employers THROUGH EMCOZ should be reminded that this was the agreement at TNF last year lest they risk a country-wide national strike. They should adjust the minimum wage to link it with the PDL which stands at \$19,821.97 as at March 2002, for a household size of five persons. This is in line with Central Statistical Office calculated household size.

While we welcome the introduction of a new minimum wage policy, we demand from employers to implement the PDL based minimum, mindful of grade differentials.

TAXATION

During the negotiations with government, **we had agreed that this year's tax threshold should be set at the minimum wage level. However, for reasons best known to government, they set the tax threshold at \$7,500 instead of the agreed \$8925.96.**

That is negotiating in bad faith.

Our demands

This year we call for:

- **The tying of the tax threshold with the minimum wage level;**
- **Widening of the tax bands from the current \$30,000.00 to 40,000.00; and**
- **A reduction of the tax rates for all bands by 5 points.**
- **Employers adjust minimum wages to \$19821,97 without negotiations**

Unemployment

The economy is expected to decline by more than 8% and inflation to increase to about 200% by 31st December. We have seen many workers being retrenched and companies closing. We have also witnessed the transfer of employment from Zimbabwe to other countries as companies relocate their operations to neighbouring countries. Currently unemployment stands at over 60%, and this is not sustainable. As companies retrench and relocate to other countries, they are citing their reasons for this as macroeconomic and political instability in the country, especially with reference to the break down in the rule of law resulting in unemployment rate of about 65%

Company closures and Retrenchment

Due to skewed macroeconomic policies we witnessed more than 450 company closure as at June 2001.

This was exacerbated by the illegal company invasions. Any well reasoned worker should condemn such illegal labour dispute settlements and extortions that affected the normal operations of the economy. Workers of Zimbabwe should know that there are some bunches of hooligans moving around industry masquerading as trade unionists, forcing our members to resign and to join them. These gangsters are also engaging in forced collective bargaining

over what we would have agreed upon and registered, coercing employers into submission without recourse to laws, and are forcibly collecting subscriptions, even from our members.

These acts should be condemned in the strongest of words, and we should be mindful not to force our companies into bankruptcy. As workers of Zimbabwe, we know that the principal law governing employment is the Labour Relations Act, and it has well laid out provisions for dispute settlement. We must follow what the laws say, and desist from arbitrary harassment at the workplace.

LABOUR LAW / LEGAL ISSUES

Comrades, for almost a decade now we have been engaged with government in formulating a harmonised labour law in the country. It is disgusting to note that the government has since 1993 been dragging its feet, and has produced enumerable drafts of the bill, each with variations and additions contrary to agreed positions. More so, the introduction of other repressive pieces of legislation, notably the Public Order and Security Act and the Access to Information Act, must be resisted with utmost supremacy of workers power. If we ignore these things now, we may find ourselves crying one day when our May Day celebrations will be declared illegal by these illegal pieces of legislation. The worst negative feature of these repressive laws is the undermining nature of the freedoms of the Labour Movement. The underlying issue in this scenario is that of lack of good governance resulting in general lawlessness, i.e. beating, raping and torture of the general populace by state sponsored elements. The ZCTU, therefore, calls on all progressive forces to bring forth a people driven constitution and at the same time fighting for our freedoms and liberties.

In ARTICLE 1 OF THE International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights it is stated that “all peoples have the right of self determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. This is what we are being denied due to increasingly oppressive laws. Trade union freedom is non-negotiable, it belongs to us. With this in mind we call on all Zimbabweans to organise themselves and unite in the fight to protect our freedom and rights. As you might be aware, the high court recently declared illegal the arbitrary demands by the police under the draconian P.O.S.A to willy-nilly interfere in trade union activities and meetings. We should inform those miscreants and misguided elements bent on tarnishing our image and standing by labelling our meetings political that we represent all workers in this country irrespective of their political affiliation. Rulings that protect democracy and our principal constitutional right of freedom of association must be hailed. We shall never at any time allow our right to freedom of association to be compromised.

It is true that our labour law is not one of the best, given the expanse nature of the dispute resolution process. In order to deal with this problem, we are fighting for the introduction of a progressive harmonised labour law, sensitive to the needs of the workers of this country.

We should continue mobilising and lobbying our parliamentarians to fight against retrogressive clauses in the current labour bill, and to ensure that workers rights are unfettered.

Our demands

We therefore demand that:

- The introduction of progressive and worker friendly harmonised labour legislation;
- The P.O.S.A must be repealed; and
- The police force should not implement laws selectively.
- There should not be any compromise on our freedoms.

POLITICAL ISSUES

On the political side, we have seen violence continuing unabated. Workers representatives have been harassed kidnapped and beaten up. Our residential areas have been mopped by youths, and at times uniformed forces beating up residents indiscriminately. As workers, we must condemn such heinous acts and disrespect of the rule of law and call upon all perpetrators of violence to observe the desire of this nation to be at peace. A nation at war with itself disrupts economic activities.

Due to lawlessness about 150000 workers have been displaced from their only source of employment. Less than 10% of them have been accommodated in the resettlement programme and the rest have been left to wonder along the streets

The confusion, violence, and general lawlessness on the farms and in the country have dealt us a serious blow in trying to attract foreign investment. Given the desire for technology and competitiveness among our producers, we must call for the end to the existing confusion and violence and establish stability that will assist the performance of our business sector.

Our demands

We therefore demand that:

- We must revert back to rule of law;
- Court rulings must be respected, and independence of the judiciary upheld;
- The president must publicly denounce violence; and
- The government must respect the constitution of Zimbabwe in its entirety.
- The government should publicly denounce violence and depolarisation of our society.

SOCIAL DIALOGUE / TRIPARTITE RELATIONS

Last year November in Kadoma we came together with business and government to assess the worrisome situation in the country, especially with regard to business performance and investment possibilities. It was realised that our trading partners attached a high premium in

doing business with Zimbabwe – the political risk factor. This was also identified as causing capital flight, disinvestments, and retrenchments. We frankly deliberated on the matter and came up with obligations for the social partners in order to minimise the political risk. Because of the political nature of the problem, government was tasked with doing a lot to prune the risk. Among the critical obligations for government were:

- To ensure the application of the rule of law and depoliticising the institutions of governance;
- To commit to the timeous and full implementation of its own policies;
- To desist from any action that increases the prospects of violence;
- Apply the law on those who incite and perpetrate violence; and
- Depoliticise the workplace.

It is with dismay that we realise that most of the important things government committed to do were not implemented. Nonetheless, we DEMAND the government to take action, and soon, so that meaningful social dialogue can be resuscitated.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Food Shortages

While the political and economic fronts have been riddled with problems, the social sectors have not been spared. **Never before have the workers of Zimbabwe gone so hungry and tired of waiting in queues for basic commodities.** How can a nation expect to prosper when the workers and producers of wealth are hungry? If you do not put fuel into your car, it ceases to function and will not take you from point A to point B. if you use petrol for a diesel engine, it will malfunction. The same with workers: what we want to keep maximum productivity is food on our tables. The shortage of these on the market and exorbitant prices where you find them make it difficult to keep workers in top production form. Tinoda hupfu, mafuta neshuga!!

Health services delivery

Social services delivery has seriously declined, resulting in many workers failing to access them. We need basic drugs and health equipment to be available in our health institutions. **Worse still, the HIV/Aids pandemic is taking a serious toll among the workers in this country.** It is time we all change our sexual behaviours and ensure that we do not contract nor spread the disease. We should accept that HIV/Aids is a serious disease, which is a shared responsibility. We should all cooperate in the home and at work in ensuring that those with the disease are not discriminated against, and that we give them the support that they require and deserve. Given these challenges, we call for more proactive strategies from the government to deal with the problems seriously jeopardising the health and well being of workers.

Education

Education should be made affordable to all Zimbabweans; and basic education is a basic human right that the government should ensure. Workers children are failing to access higher education because the poorly paid parents cannot afford the exorbitant fees charged. The government has the responsibility to ensure continued building of the human capital base, for which we boast of in Africa. Given that 80% of the population is living below the poverty datum line, it means children born to parents falling in the 80% group are at risk of failing to attain their desired level of education and tertiary training. For any strategic thinker and visionary leader, this is cause for concern and deserves urgent attention, and as workers call upon the government to subsidise tertiary education and provide adequate loans to students. Lest our leaders forget that they themselves benefited from state subsidised education, to which all workers' children are entitled!

WAY FORWARD

Given all these challenges and developments in our economy, as workers, we must set out our demands and aspirations for the coming year.

Our demands this year are:

1. We want a living wage pegged at the PDL level;
2. We want the adequate provision of basic food commodities at affordable prices in the country;
3. Relief food distribution must benefit ALL Zimbabweans without discrimination;
4. We have been calling for a meaningful reduction of taxation levels, and over the years this has been falling on deaf ears. This year we must poke those ears and ensure that we are heard: tax rates must be reduced, especially for the low-income earners. Raising disposable incomes stimulates aggregate demand for goods and services, and this is good for our industries; and
5. There should be no taxation to our (meagre) benefits e.g. bonuses, leave pay and retrenchment packages.

The rest of what we want you have already said through the banners you hold.

There is need for concerted efforts from all workers of this great nation to deliver ourselves from the misery that we are currently in. We own this economy, and we must have a say in determining its destiny. We must effectively participate in formulating policies that ensure social and economic prosperity. This is possible only if there is political tolerance and pluralism, and democratic principles that we have always fought for. Unless we demand that space, it shall not be voluntarily given.

Comrades, none but ourselves can liberate us.

We therefore have to;

1. Create alliances among progressive forces
2. Create platforms for public orientation, i.e. from labour forums to rallies
3. Take the Bull by the horns.

In his first official visit to Zimbabwe, the late Tanzanian President and African Statesman, Julius Nyerere said, "The armed struggle we waged and completed was easier than the economic struggle".

This has now manifested itself 22 years after Independence.

Aluta continua, and solidarity forever!!

I thank you.

ZCTU President, Lovemore Matombo