



TRADE UNIONS IN ANGOLA

(In this article we continue our series on mass democratic organisations in Angola.)

The National Union of Angolan Workers (UNTA) was formed in exile in Kinshasa in 1960 under the guidance of MPLA. The main mover behind starting UNTA was Pascoal Luvuala, who is still the general secretary of the Union, and a member of the MPLA Workers' Party political bureau.

In 1961 MPLA launched its armed struggle to liberate Angola from Portuguese colonialism. During the liberation struggle, UNTA could play only a limited role in organising workers within Angola. Portuguese colonialism left Angola's development very backward. Compared with South Africa, the working class was very small and scattered. These objective factors,

in addition to heavy repression, made organising workers difficult at this time.

But still UNTA built up an underground network of contacts. At the same time, many working class militants from UNTA were directly involved in the armed struggle. In fact, the Union's first deputy general secretary, Ndongola M'Bindi was killed in action during the liberation war.

After liberation, UNTA took overall responsibility for organising the national trade union movement. It set up new organisational bases, and took over existing structures. In colonial times trade unions were largely craft unions for skilled workers only, under the control of colonial settlers. After liberation, in the changed political situation, these organisations either collapsed, or came under progressive control.

INDUSTRIALISATION OF UNIONS

In the first period after liberation, the major task of UNTA was to build and restructure. Amongst other things, this involved turning the Union structures into industrial unions. The previous, colonial unions had been based on crafts and professions (lorry drivers, clerks, etc.). Now the task was to organise according to economic sectors. Today UNTA has 655 000 members in 10 trade unions, organising in the following sectors: agriculture, coffee products, construction, health services, administration and public offices, heavy industry, light industry, food production, fishing, educational and cultural sector and

other social services. Included in UNTA's 655 000 members are 134 000 women workers.

THE BATTLE FOR PRODUCTION

After liberation large numbers of the colonial bourgeoisie abandoned their businesses and fled from Angola. In some cases they sabotaged machinery before leaving. The already underdeveloped economy was further weakened.

In order to ensure that these abandoned factories continued to work, the new revolutionary government nationalised large numbers of them. It also introduced legislation to ensure effective worker participation in every sector of the economy. In the newly nationalised enterprises workers participate in decision making through joint worker-management committees.

For the Angolan working people the two major tasks are :

- i) the defence of the revolution;
- ii) the struggle for improved living conditions, which means building the economy and advancing productivity.

In fact, the two revolutionary tasks are closely linked. In the words of the deputy general secretary, Guimaraes Pascoal Tavares: "UNTA believes that one cannot ignore the fact that Angola is an underdeveloped country with a very dependent economy. Our goals can only be achieved by an increase in production and productivity. This process has been delayed by the wars waged against us by the racist regime in Pretoria. South Africa

particularly wants to undermine the rails, harbours, bridges and industry of this country. Ten years after independence, acts of destruction and sabotage have caused damage worth billions of dollars. The Angolan government therefore has to give priority to defence. But at the same time major progress has been made in labour legislation and in the training of union officials."

In a capitalist country, (including many neo-colonial countries in Africa like Kenya and Senegal for instance) progressive trade unions often fight attempts by management to increase productivity. This is because in a capitalist system, increased productivity often means just bigger profits for the bosses, harder work for the workers for the same pay. It also often means retrenchments and more unemployment with fewer workers expected to do the same work as before.

But in a socialist country, or in one that is trying to build socialism, the approach of progressive trade unions to productivity is very different to that in a capitalist country. In a country like Angola, trying to build socialism, the main wealth of the mines, factories and banks belongs to the working people. Improving productivity means increasing the social wealth available to the working people of Angola. It means more money for schools, hospitals and for more factories and therefore more jobs. It also means more money for the defence of the people's revolution.

This is the key difference between productivity in socialist and capitalist societies. Only if we understand this difference, can we understand why progressive trade unions in a

country like Angola work to improve productivity. UNTA calls on its members to see themselves as the leading class in a nation struggling against the enemy of underdevelopment. Only development will mean there can be jobs, houses, health services, clothing, education and food for everyone. This means constant political and technical training to keep members active and involved.

In this task, UNTA works closely with the MPLA Workers Party, and with the people's state. But the trade unions in Angola also have their own independent role.

TRADE UNIONS, PARTY AND STATE

During the liberation struggle, MPLA was a broad liberation movement. Since liberation MPLA has changed into a vanguard party, the MPLA Workers' Party. As a vanguard party, it draws its membership mainly from the most advanced militants of the working masses. The MPLA Workers' Party is guided by scientific socialism. It sees its special task as safeguarding the political direction of the revolution, making sure that the medium and long-term interests of the working people are won. The party has its cadres present in every level and sector of society - in the army, on the production line in the factory, in the state institutions, in the civics and schools. While the party provides overall political and ideological leadership, the state structures have the responsibility for carrying out and administering social, economic, cultural and military tasks. These tasks are carried out within the broad political framework set out by the party.

The trade unions, for their part, are mass organisations. They organise workers at the point of production. Unlike the vanguard party, unions recruit all workers, irrespective of their political and religious outlook. Many party members are, of course, active in the trade unions. But it is seen as important not to collapse party and union structures. Each has its own special responsibility.

In the words of the late President, Agostinho Neto : "Trade union bodies should not simply echo the desires and viewpoints of MPLA members. Workers can and must freely discuss decisions by the party. This will prevent the party from having too much of a theoretical approach remote from the practical problems at the grassroots level."

The trade unions and the party co-operate closely, then, but they also have their independent functions and character.

The same can be said for the relationship between the trade unions and the people's state. In the nationalised sector of the economy, it is the state that supplies management. To ensure that workers are able to voice their own outlook, it is important that unions do not act like simple branches of the state in these industries.

To guarantee its own economic independence from the state, UNTA collects subs from all members equal to one percent of their wages. This money is used by UNTA to fund all its activities, especially the education and training of union officials. There are also no government members on its national council, which is largely made up of workers and only

a minority of paid union officials.

By understanding the different roles of the party, the state and the trade unions, co-operation between them is deepened, not weakened. As mass organisations, the trade unions play a very important role in developing the basic organisational and political skills of workers. In turn, such development helps increasing numbers of militant workers to advance into leading positions within the state and party. It is in this way that the working people of Angola are beginning to achieve, in concrete organisational practice, their leading role in the struggle to build a new life for all the people of Angola through socialism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe it is politically correct for UNTA trade unions to campaign for higher productivity? Why? Would it be politically correct to make this call in countries like South Africa or Kenya?
2. Discuss the different roles played by the trade unions, the MPLA Workers' Party, and the state in Angola. Do you think these differences are useful and necessary?
3. Does the last question have any relevance to the debate about the political role of trade unions in S.A. at the moment? How?





COMRADE DOS SANTOS SPEAKS ON UNIONISM

(The first congress of the National Union of Angolan Workers - UNTA - in April 1984, was addressed by President José Eduardo dos Santos. The following is an extract from his speech.)

"At the current stage in the democratic and popular revolution, where we have to lay the material, technical and spiritual foundations for the building of socialism, the unions constitute a vast organisation representing the workers, independent of their political or religious convictions. (...) As the leading force in the state and in society, the party is linked to the trade unions both by its membership and by the general policy goals it has established.

Through the unions, the party can be made aware of the problems and views of the workers and, in turn, inform them of its own aims, in order to adopt measures that can better safeguard the interests of society and the labour force. However, the trade unions should not confuse their own activities with those of the state.

The state directs and executes a policy of economic, social and cultural development in accordance with the party's intentions. The trade unions provide a framework for the workers, help seek answers to their problems and mobilise them in the tasks necessary for the construction of socialism. At the same time, they provide workers with the training and preparation required to take on the responsibilities of directing and administering the affairs of state.

Through the unions, the workers, who are the main force in our revolution, have a chance to take part in the discussion of plans and other questions within enterprises or in their workplace. In this way, they can participate in the management of production and of the national economy. This is an important point since, as everyone knows, it is the economic base that determines the nature of political power."

