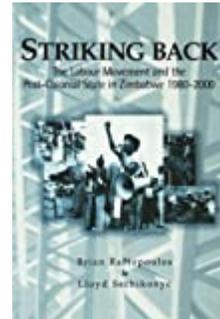




**Brian Raftopoulos, Lloyd Sachikonye, eds.** *Striking Back: The Labour Movement and the Post-colonial State in Zimbabwe, 1980-2000*. Harare: Weaver Press, 2001. xxvii + 316 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-0-7974-2286-5.



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The role of both labour and the labour movement in the development and political processes in the southern African region as a whole has undoubtedly been a critical one. The development of the mining industry in the region, for instance, was so closely intertwined with migrant labour that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss the history of this vital sector of most southern African economies without discussing labour. Labour has also been at the forefront of all struggles against oppression and exploitation in every southern African country from the very early days of the region's incorporation into the international capitalist system.

Yet, when compared to other southern African countries, most notably South Africa, Zimbabwe's labour history has generally been marginalized from both academic and public discourses. Among scholars, for instance, the history of labour in both the colonial and post-colonial state has not reproduced the same kind of intellectual interest and debate that has characterized the history of labour elsewhere. As a result, Zimbabwe has a general dearth of published sources that deal with labour history in general, and the history of labour in the post-colonial period in particular. Edited by two of Zimbabwe's most accomplished labour historians, Brian Raftopoulos and Lloyd Sachikonye, *Striking Back* thus not only seeks to address this imbalance but, through its rich collection of

essays, also offers readers one of the most detailed study of the history of labour in the post-colonial state.

*Striking Back* attempts to analyse the changes in the labour force in the last twenty years of Zimbabwean history, a period in which the country has gone through various phases of development. Focusing on a wide range of issues, such as the relations of the labour movement with the state and the role played by the labour movement in spearheading social transformation, the book, in addition, tries to analyse the general contribution of the labour movement to the history of Zimbabwe. Apart from examining the history of the labour movement in the past twenty years, the wide collection of essays also focuses on the future of labour in the country. In this regard, the articles discuss the challenges that are likely to confront labour in the near future.

The book is organised into ten chapters, which all deal with various aspects of labour in the post-colonial period. The editors' excellent introduction surveys the whole content of the book and outlines the major issues tackled in each chapter. They synthesise the main arguments in every chapter and offer the reader an opportunity to get a glimpse of the full range of issues explored.

The opening chapter of the book is provided by Brian Raftopoulos, whose discussion focuses on the history of

the labour movement from 1980 onwards. In this excellently written chapter, Raftopolous argues that for the greater part of its life in the post-colonial period, the labour movement was not only weak and divided but also subordinated to the state. Its autonomy, as constituted in the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), was extremely limited, its capacity to set out and implement its own independent programmes was greatly reduced, and this remained the case for much of the 1980s. The breakthrough, as Raftopoulos argues, only came in the 1990s when the state was finally forced by external pressures not only to liberalise the economy but also to relax some of the laws inhibiting the growth of independent organisations. The social and economic problems associated with the Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), at the same time, began to push workers towards militant agitation of grievances. Against this backdrop, labour was able to reorganize and establish its autonomy from the state. Through the development of social alliances and an articulation of the problems of economic crisis the labour movement thus played a pivotal role in the establishment of a major opposition party, the Movement For Democratic Change (MDC). Whether the labour movement is not subordinated by other forces with their own political agendas in this latest development remains a debatable issue.

While the opening chapter traces the history of the labour movement in Zimbabwe and discusses the various stages which ultimately led to the formation of the labour-backed opposition Movement For Democratic Change (MDC), the succeeding two chapters by Patrick Bond and Paris Yeros discuss the problems and challenges facing the ZCTU and the MDC. Bond's chapter mainly critiques the MDC's accommodation to a structural adjustment programme. Discussing some of the negative effects that the programme has already inflicted on the population, he also attempts to outline some the problems it is likely to pose for both the party and the country. Similarly, Yeros, focussing on the labour movement's struggle to establish and consolidate its autonomy from the state over the last 20 years, analyses the shift of the ZCTU from a socialist agenda towards a neo-liberal agenda.

Lloyd Sachikonye's chapter examines the strides that have been made in union development and the organisational challenges facing the labour movement. He argues that towards the end of the 1980s, unions experienced more stable growth and consolidation, largely because of the introduction of free collective bargaining in 1989/90, which in his view contributed to union self-assertiveness

and autonomy. Sachikonye also argues that the unions' focus on educational programmes aimed at increasing the knowledge and skill levels of officials and the consciousness of rank and file members enhanced their effectiveness and helped them to grow in stature. After acknowledging the advances made in strengthening the labour movement's stature and effectiveness in dealing with labour-related problems, Sachikonye proceeds to discuss several challenges that remain. These include the need for greater self-sufficiency in financial resources, building up the strength of union affiliates and gender equity in union structures.

Focusing on labour law, Lovemore Madhuku's chapter, like Sachikonye's, discusses both the advances in labour established by legislation, such as the Labour Relations Act (LRA), and the legal impediments that continue to hamper the unions, such as the 1992 amendment of the LRA which seriously curtailed workers' right to strike. Equally important in compromising workers' rights, Madhuku argues, has been the passing of draconian legislation such as the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures Labour Regulations) of 1998 which provides for the halting or suspension of strikes and stay-aways directed against the state.

In a discussion that shows that the strength of labour cannot be completely subdued even by the most draconian and repressive conditions, Richard Saunders' chapter, on the other hand, deals with strikes that have been organised since independence. He identifies three different phases of strike action in the post-colonial period. The first phase, as he demonstrates, is the immediate post-independence years, 1980-1982, which was a period of 'wild cat' strikes generated by the euphoria of independence. The second phase is the early 1990s, when the government moved into its structural adjustment programme, and workers responded to the impoverishing effects of the programme through strike action. The third and final phase that Saunders discusses is the period from the mid 1990s, when workers and the unemployed, increasingly suffering from rising levels of poverty and joblessness, moved towards mass action and political confrontation with the state.

While most of the chapters in this collection focus on labour in general, the last three chapters focus on the experiences of marginal workers in particular groups or sectors such as the farming and mining sectors. What comes through all the three chapters is that workers in these groups and sectors have remained not only the most exploited but also the most neglected in the coun-

try.

Naira Khan and Niki Jazdowska's chapter on women, for instance, discusses the structural weaknesses that continue to hinder their involvement in union activities. These are: the confinement of women workers to low-skill categories; their predominance in the casual labour sector; and their dual exploitation at the workplace and in the home, where patriarchal attitudes are still dominant. With regard to mine workers, Suzanne Dansereau observes that despite some notable changes in the working conditions of mineworkers, such as the removal of the hostel system, very few qualitative changes have occurred in most workers' lives. Most of them have continued to receive wages below the Poverty Datum Line as they did before independence. Focusing on farm workers in the Urungwe district of Mashonaland West Province, Blair Rutherford shows that despite the enactment of the LRA and minimum wage regulations in the early years of independence, the working conditions of these workers have actually continued to worsen. Both the government and employers, Rutherford argues further, have not been committed to implementing these measures. Neglected

and abandoned, these workers have remained vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. As far as the farm occupations that were launched in February 2000 are concerned, both Rutherford and Yash Tandon contend that these events have led to further marginalization of workers in this sector as workers have been excluded from the exercise and sometimes targeted by the farm occupiers.

All the chapters, in different ways, illuminate facets of labour history in the last twenty years. From the discussion, the reader realises that labour has indeed played and continues to play an important part in the development of the country. The articles also show that the relations between politicians and the state, on the one hand and labour, on the other, have always been fraught with tensions and contradictions. Equally important has been the divergence in views over the role and place of labour within the overall society and developmental process, especially political developments in the country. There is much in these studies which invites debate, and this collection of carefully researched essays has created a suitable atmosphere for it.

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