

DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTRICITY GENERATION AND PRECARIOUS LABOUR

Methodology: Quantitative and Statistical (secondary data)

Though expensive a methodology it is, I feel it works well for this type of work and research question in situations like Zambia where there is loss of jobs due to electricity shortages and subsequent setting up of new generation plants and solar plants as mitigation.

Zambia is a country that is mainly dependent on copper for foreign exchange and it remains the biggest contributor to the GDP. To produce the copper, a significant amount of electricity is needed. Zambia has lately faced electricity deficits that have led to cuts in the amount of electricity supplied to the mines and other important industries like milling and the manufacturing sector. As a result of electricity shortages, companies have responded by cutting down on labour, this is so in the mines, whereas the milling and manufacturing companies have increased the cost of their products and commodities.

The electricity deficits have been seen by many as negative to the economy of Zambia, but others have seen it as business opportunity to grow their business by introducing different forms and sources of electricity. It is true that the existing electricity facilities and systems employ a big number of the Zambian people.

New generation plants have come up in provinces around the country; solar plants are eminent in other areas too. These have not come in the Zambian economy without consequences. Many of the people employed in these new power generation plants may be skilled or unskilled manpower that remains unorganised and unrecognised by the trade unions in Zambia. The new solar plants that are being developed may not employ as many people as the current system is employing (Insider-Outsider theory may apply). In their numbers, individually small, but when put together these are institutions that will employ more workers than the current system. The trade union must make sure that they come up with measures to capture these workers that have 'fallen' from the closures of the mines in the country due to shortages of electricity in Zambia. What are the causes of the current electricity shortages in Zambia? The mining industry and infrastructure development around the country can be the major causes

The workers that are employed in the construction of generation plants, be it hydro or solar are mainly on short term contracts, while others may be retained as maintenance personnel. Trade unions in Zambia have been on the laissez-faire side on important matters organising

these workers in these 'small' industries. Why? Mainly it is believed that trade union membership is supposed to be organised according to the numbers enshrined in the national statutes, but on the other hand, freedom of association is NOT a collective matter, but an individual one. Trade unions in Zambia must take up the proactive stance by capturing every worker regardless of their status. Where the trade unions take the economic benefit more than the plight of the workers, this situation will not be solved or resolved; more leverage will therefore be given to the employer will exploit the workers with impunity. The labour laws in Zambia are right; it is the level of disregard that is high. Zambians, investors and government are all not compliant, neglected of our own labour laws is alarmingly high. This is also coupled with high levels of corruption at levels of governance. The trade union leadership has not been spared in terms of corruption. Allegations of corruptions in the trade unions have been heard, made and they have not been refuted. Until, there is counter reaction to refute these allegations, it is right to think that corruption is rife in the trade unions. As Professor Guy Standing puts it in his book 'The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class', trade unions have contributed to the levels of destitution in the small sectors of the economy of Zambia by avoiding to organise the few workers in new 'small' institutions, citing economic trends more than the rights of the workers; the reason they are in office. It is also true that due to lack of space in urban settings, these new generation power plants are located in country sides of Zambia; this may discourage trade unions to reach such areas, but surely not at the expense of potential members. This may not be the case for solar systems which may not require suitable terrains of water. Trade unions are not proactive at all, some trade unions even side to have workers retrenched by participating in the selection of those to be included on the retrenchment lists.

Not until the trade unions in Zambia change their mind-sets and start thinking globally, the rights of the workers in the new power generation plants and solar systems will remain unorganised. The working class is not those in already established institutions, but trade unions in Zambia must employ skills of finding new markets and new businesses by engaging all the employers regardless of their size. The law in Zambia allows one employee to belong to a trade union, of course by the clause of freedom of association, but also restricts the same employ if s/he does not belong to a group of 25 other employees to form a branch and belong to a trade union of their choosing.

The trade unions in Zambia are at the weakest pint in the last decade and NOW. The trade unions in Zambia need reengineering to overhaul the system. The earlier it is done, the better for the workers in Zambia.

Naaman Kipumbu
GLU, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) 2014-2016
+260950450098