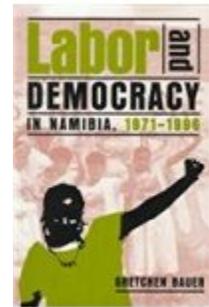


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gretchen Bauer. *Labour and Democracy in Namibia, 1971-1996*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998. x + 220 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1217-6; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1216-9.

Reviewed by Timothy Dauth (Department of History, University of Western Australia.)  
Published on H-Africa (December, 1998)



## Liberation and Restraint

“Trade unions and workers must appreciate the difficulties faced by the country; for... we are partners. Government is made up of workers, and SWAPO is a workers’ party. Together, all of us must concern ourselves with the welfare of the nation.”[1]

Since independence in 1990 the largest trade union federation in Namibia, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), has faced a considerable crisis in direction. Having operated virtually as a wing of the liberation movement, the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), in the years leading up to independence, the NUNW now faces the problem of how to relate to SWAPO as government and ruling party.

The above statement by the Namibian Prime Minister, Hage Geingob, encapsulates the question facing worker organisation since independence. While SWAPO’s actions in government in terms of economic and labour policy may make it hard to accept its self definition as a ‘workers party’, SWAPO is still seen as such by many trade unionists, workers, and indeed SWAPO activists.

The political quandary facing the NUNW in the post independence years is similar to that facing any union federation under a ‘friendly’ government. While the federation is bound to militate for the interests of its members, it is also restrained by its affiliate links with the governing body. This is more particularly so when that government includes many former unionists.

The history of the relationship between the NUNW

and the ruling SWAPO Party, as Gretchen Bauer explains in this work, adds further dimensions to the NUNW’s difficulties. While SWAPO has proclaimed itself a ‘workers party’, its stance towards trade unionism and trade unionists has been problematic.

On the one hand, SWAPO is, as Bauer argues, a strictly nationalist organisation and on the other, SWAPO is a party which at least “acknowledges the superiority of the socialist system” [2]. While Bauer, amongst others, contends that “the bulk of SWAPO’s leaders and members never particularly embraced socialism and its tenets” (p.100), the political framework SWAPO uses in its relationship with the NUNW is at least partly drawn from a Marxist-Leninist ideological heritage. During the struggle years, SWAPO acted both as a National Liberation Movement and as a ‘vanguard party’. Although it itself created the NUNW, it also sought to keep the union movement under its strict control. Trade unionists, as Bauer notes, were prominent amongst those who fell victim to SWAPO’s security apparatus in the internal crises that shook the party in 1976 and in the 1980s. For the most part, and until just a few years before independence, union activity was to be under the direction of SWAPO, or it was deemed ‘counter-revolutionary’.

SWAPO politics has also been very suggestive of a ‘stagist’ approach - in which SWAPO would oversee the transition to independence and a future transition to socialism. In this sense, the ultimate solution to the problems of workers - a transition to socialism - is seen as

the prerogative of the party. The role of the unions in this, as former General Secretary of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia, Ben Ulenga, noted in 1990 is “helping SWAPO to create the right conditions for Socialist Construction.”[3] This ‘supportive’ relationship then becomes ambiguous when the ‘second stage’ becomes delayed.[4]

Then SWAPO General Secretary, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, acknowledged in 1989 that: “We cannot jump to a conclusion and say that tomorrow we are going to declare the socialist system. If we do that we will just commit suicide.”[5] In this instance, the primary concerns for the party, union and government are the ‘welfare of the nation’, ‘nation building’ and ‘national unity’: “If we reach a maximum point where we think, yes, the society can handle it on its own... If you have nationalism in the country, its where you can say lets go for socialism.” [6]

In this context and in a climate of economic restraint, the unions, the party and the government are bound to clash. While the SWAPO government argues, for example, that Export Processing Zones (in which union rights are curtailed), are essential for the development of the nation, the NUNW is bound to respond.

Gretchen Bauer’s work describes in detail, and on the basis of considerable research, how the NUNW’s capacity to respond to such issues has been restrained in the post-independence era. Considering the relatively late development of unionism and the union federation in Namibia, and the NUNW’s close political ties with, and virtual subordination to, the ruling party, SWAPO, the NUNW is not in a strong position to reassert itself.

Although somewhat pessimistic as to the prospects of such, Bauer argues for the development of strong and au-

tonomous social movement unionism in Namibia. Such a unionism, Bauer contends, would disentangle itself from its ties with SWAPO to link with ‘civil society’ in the consolidation of a democracy in Namibia that is not, as is feared, solely dictated by the ruling party.

#### NOTES

[1]. Hage Geingob. “Introductory Remarks of the Right Honourable Hage G Geingob Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia at the Consultative Meeting on Labour Relations.” Windhoek, 25 February 1993.

[2]. “An Independent Namibia: SWAPO’s Goals and Aspirations.” Statement from SWAPO President, Dr Sam Nujoma, Delivered by Comrade Hage Geingob, Member of SWAPO Politburo and Director, UN Institute for Namibia. London, 21 April 1989.

[3]. “Union Man in Constituent Assembly.” Interview with Ben Ulenga. *Namibian Worker*, No.12, January 1990, p.7.

[4]. Ben Ulenga has since left SWAPO and was instrumental in the formation of the Congress of Democrats in 1999.

[5]. Andimba Toivo ya Toivo (later to become Minister for Mines and Energy). “Time of Hope.” *World Marxist Review*, vol.32, 4 April 1989, p.69.

[6]. Louise Nambahu (SWAPO and Namibia National Students Organisation activist). Interview with the author, Windhoek, 19 July 1995.

Copyright 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** Timothy Dauth. Review of Bauer, Gretchen, *Labour and Democracy in Namibia, 1971-1996*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2614>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).