



Charles Chirowdza stands next to the industrial creek that serves as a community bath for workers who sleep at the railway station

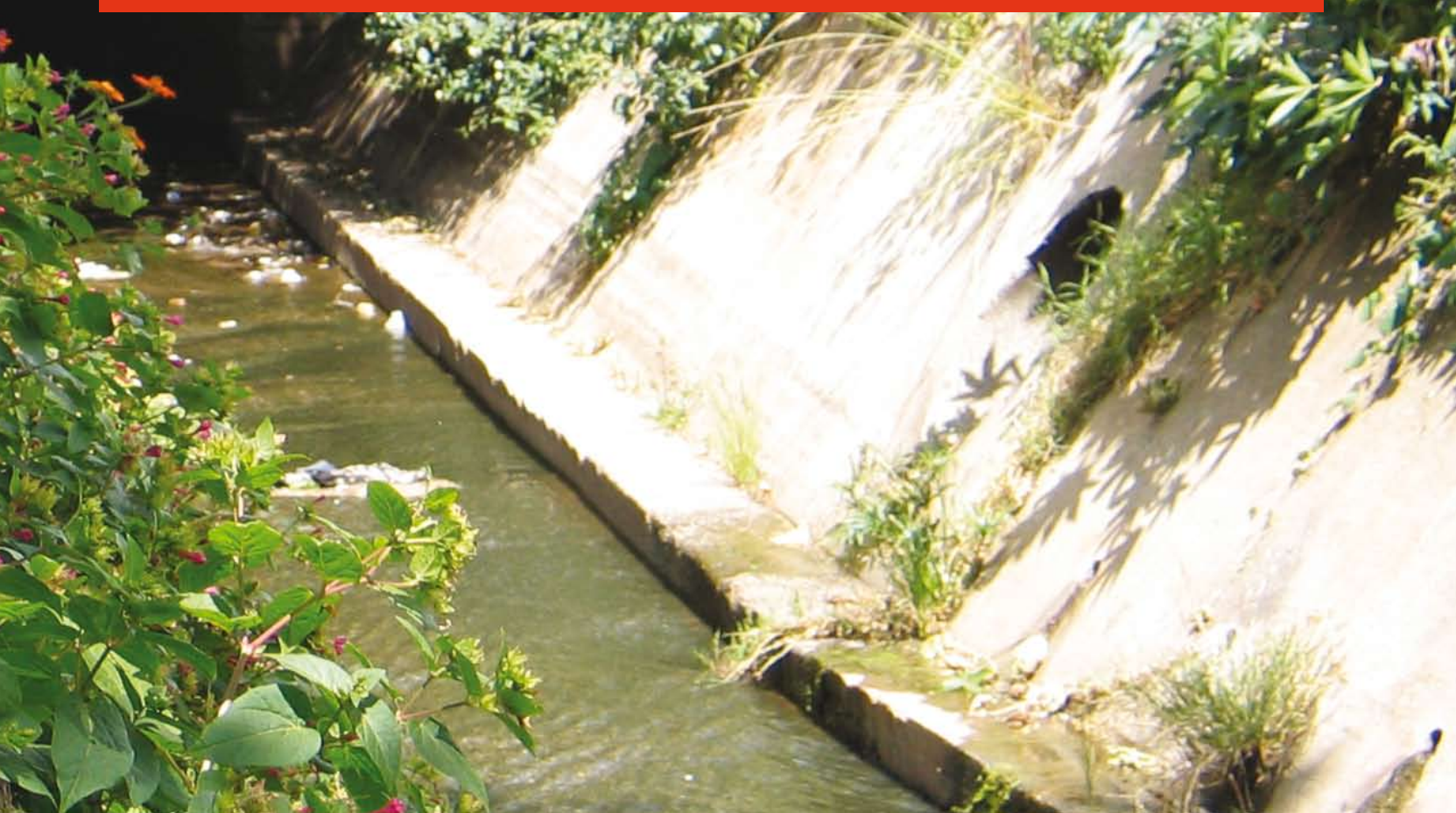
PHOTO: KRISTYNE PETER

GOING BROKE TO GET TO WORK

While the Zimbabwean economy is in a free fall, workers' wages are worth less and less each day. The cost of transport to and from work now surpasses the average worker's daily wage. What happens when a workforce, teetering on the brink of survival, must pay to work? And what are the implications for union organizing in the country and the region?

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FEATURE

GOING BROKE TO GET TO WORK



Charles looks at the place he sleeps after work

PHOTO: KP

Charles Chirowdza, a metalworker at CT Bolts and a member of the National Engineering Workers' Union (NEWU), sleeps outside the railway station in downtown Harare about two to three times a week. He isn't alone. On any given night, 150 to 200 workers will be huddled together under the station's faded blue awning that provides little protection from the rain, and no protection from police, drunks or thieves. Here, as in many areas around the city, workers struggle under the constant threat of arrest and violence to report to work the next morning.

In Zimbabwe, the rising price of public transport, which now costs more than the daily wage of an average worker, has forced thousands of workers to live on the streets. In an effort to save the meagre wages they make for necessities such as food, water, and rent, workers sleep in parks and public buildings close to factories and work sites. It is a new breed of homelessness, tempered by weekends with the family.

In the winter months, when temperatures can fall as low as -5°C (23°F), workers burn tires for warmth. A small creek, filled with industrial and human waste, serves as a community bath in the mornings, leaving Charles with

severe skin rashes. The area is littered with rotting garbage, discarded clothes, human faeces and snakes. It is hard to imagine the desperation that has forced hundreds of men and women to call this railway yard a temporary home.

PAY TO WORK

The average metalworker in Zimbabwe makes around Z\$140,000 (US\$559.45 at the official rate, April 2007) per month. The price of public transport costs approximately Z\$14,000 per day, round trip. Proud Ndlovu, a NEWU shop steward at CT Bolts, says the "ride deficit" is the union's major issue in negotiations. "At the end of the day, I'm paying the company to work, or I'm subsidizing the company to make its profits," Proud said. NEWU has been fighting for a transport allowance for the 15,000 members it represents for the last three years. However companies are resisting giving in.

In the case of CT Bolts, the company reported profits for the last quarter, but still maintains that a wage raise is not an option. Morale is low. Workers claim the company is expanding, buying new cars for management, and renovating the premises while the workers literally teeter on the brink of starvation.

“We are given a meal,” says Charles, referring to the lunch the company provides, which is deducted from his pay “but instead of eating that sadza in the afternoon, we are going into the streets selling that sadza to get bus fare.”

NEWU is demanding that employers carry the cost of reporting for duty, either through a transport allowance or by providing real transport.

Given the current situation, it begs the question: Why do workers, still work?

“Hope,” says Stephen Nhlapo, IMF regional representative for Africa. “These people have an intense hope that things will change. And IF they change, they’ll have employment. But, if they don’t continue working and things change, they will lose out on the benefits of that change.”

Women workers, who are less able to travel the long distances to factories due to family constraints, are forced into the informal economy, selling vegetables such as tomatoes and onions to subsidize their husbands’ shrinking salaries. Often their wares are confiscated by police under Mugabe’s orders to crackdown on all unlicensed vendors, a policy the police interpret loosely given their own depreciating salaries.

“Can you imagine negotiating maternity leave?” asks Stephen, “You ask for six months, and they give you three years, with no pay!”

ZIMBABWEAN CRISIS

Zimbabwe, once considered the “breadbasket of Africa”, enjoyed a robust economy and thriving workforce in the mid-1990s. Today, the situation for Zimbabweans is dire. Chronic shortages of food, electricity, petrol and medicine has reduced the life expectancy to a tragic 34 years for women, the lowest in the world, and to just 37 years for men. Most Zimbabweans live on one meal a day, some even less. Eight out of ten workers are out of work, and the unemployment rate continues to rise.

Led by Robert Mugabe, independence hero cum dictator, the country’s steady decline has been punctuated by a series of bad governmental policy at best, and shocking human rights violations at worst.

“Operation Murambatsvina” which is Shona for “Operation Drive Out Trash”, has undoubtedly had the most devastating effect on Zimbabwe’s working poor. In May 2005, Mugabe unleashed what he called an “urban renewal program” to squash illegal vendors. The result was the demolition of 94,460 urban homes which left 700,000 people homeless and affected 2.4 million people directly or indirectly, according to the United Nations. Between May 2005 and May 2006, prices for accommodation jumped by 3,000 per cent. Because many of the homes destroyed were outside of industrial complexes, metalworkers were largely impacted.

PRICES OF BASIC GOODS IN ZIMBABWE

The average Zimbabwean metalworker makes approximately Z\$140,000 (Zimbabwean dollar) per month. In April 2007, inflation was at a world record of 1,700 per cent with inflation climbing each day, workers’ salaries are worth less and less, while the cost of basic goods continues to soar. In a country where the price of cooking oil is half a month’s salary, and a bar of soap is almost a third of a worker’s monthly wages, how are Zimbabweans surviving?

| | Official rate US\$* | Informal rate US\$ |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Monthly wages Z\$140,000 | 559.64 | |
| Loaf of bread Z\$6,500 | 25.95 | 2.59 |
| Litre of Petrol Z\$22,000 | 87.91 | 8.71 |
| Aspirin Z\$50,000 | 199.81 | 19.98 |
| Cooking Oil Z\$70,000/ 2 litres | 279.73 | 27.97 |
| Butter Z\$70,000/ kg | 279.73 | 27.97 |
| Milk Z\$4,000/ 500 ml | 15.98 | 1.59 |
| Bar of Soap Z\$30,000 | 119.88 | 11.98 |
| Flour Z\$30,000/ 5kg | 119.88 | 11.98 |
| Mealie Meal Z\$30,000/ 10kg | 119.88 | 11.98 |
| HIV Medicines Z\$300,000 | 1198.83 | 119.83 |
| Toilet Paper Z\$55,000/4 pk | 219.79 | 21.97 |
| Monthly’s Electricity Z\$20,000 | 79.92 | 7.99 |
| Monthly Rent Z\$100,000 | 399.16 | 39.91 |
| Monthly Water Z\$50,000 | 199.81 | 19.98 |

* The official rate is what the Zimbabwean dollar is worth, according to the government and banking institutions. However, foreign currency is bought and sold regularly at “informal” prices at markets and on the streets. The informal rate, sometimes known as the “black market rate”, is approximately one tenth the official rate at time of writing, April 2007. The informal rate fluctuates frequently.

NOWHERE TO GO

In June 2005, Brighton Munyaradzi, a serviceman for AFA PVT LTD and NEWU member, was ordered by police at gunpoint to remove his belongings and leave his Highfield one-room cottage. “The police, they came in their vehicles ordering people to destroy their houses. In a matter of hours we had nowhere to go, we were sleeping outside,” said Brighton, referring to his young wife, Itai, and then one and a half year old baby.

Brighton now lives with his wife and two baby girls, three years old and five months old, in a temporary dwelling using plastic for the walls and the roof. During the rainy season the structure leaks, and he gets little sleep trying to protect the children from the damp. Unable to afford the high price of transport, Brighton gets up at the crack of dawn each day to walk the 12kms to work. After putting in a full 9-hour day, he hurries back home, afraid to leave his children and wife unprotected after dark. “It is like I am working twice. At work I have to make sure I work a full day so I can get food for my children. Then I get home and I must make sure my children are protected, from either snakes or thugs who want to steal something from us — me, I have nothing, but they try.”

Charles also once had a two-room cottage on the outskirts of Harare in Chitagweza, which he shared with his wife and kids. It was reduced to rubble after government bulldozers flattened it. He now lives with his parents on the days he is able to afford transport home. The modest two-bedroom house provides basic shelter for Charles and 15 other family members. Charles’ father, Micheal Chirowdza, is a former telecom worker who thought his children would be able to care for him and his wife in their old age, a point he makes often to Charles.

For Charles and Brighton, and hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans just like them, life before Operation Murambatsvina or “Tsunami” as the locals call it, was pretty good. Brighton had a small garden, a sturdy roof, the protection of doors that lock, and electricity for a TV and radio. For Charles, he had independence, a home for him and his family close to work, and hope for the future. At the moment, the future looks bleak. Charles, whose anger and frustration is noticeable on sight, remarks that things have grown unbearable in the last year; “I don’t know where we will be in April, May. We just pray that things might change because ehhhh, I wish I was dead.”

KICKS OF A DYING HORSE: WIDESPREAD REPRESSION

As in many parts of the world, the labour movement in Zimbabwe has been a leading force for change. The Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), to which NEWU is an affiliate, has been at the forefront in addressing



NEWU member Brighton Munyaradzi

PHOTO: KP

the workers’ suffering under Zimbabwe’s economic collapse. Viewed by Mugabe as enemies of the state, members of the ZCTU have been attacked with a force that has astonished the international community, including government-sanctioned beatings, torture, abductions and arbitrary arrests. Mugabe has banned political demonstrations, he has shut down the independent press, and declared war on any and all that criticize his policies.

On April 3 and 4, the ZCTU organized a mass stay away after talks broke down within the Tripartite Negotiating Forum (TNF) regarding payment of salaries in accordance with inflation. The TNF is a joint negotiating body that comprises representatives from business, labour and the government, in which the ZCTU plays an active role.

In the days leading up to the action, and those that followed, ZCTU offices were ransacked, staff beaten, and workers and trade union leaders were arrested. Witnesses in the townships reported that people were forced to go to work at gunpoint, however, many of them had no “work” to go to. Helicopters hovered over downtown Harare and businesses were threatened with losing their operating licence, should they shut production down.

The media was quick to call the worker action a failure, however, given the nature of the stay away, its success is hard to measure. Only 20 per cent of the country is formally employed. Of that number, 70 per cent work for the government. Journalists are denied access to Zimbabwe, so those who operate in the country risk arrest, or worse. In April, Edward Chikombo, a cameraman for the state-run broadcaster ZBC, was found pummelled to death in a shallow grave on the side of the road after he leaked images of a beaten Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and former mineworker and ZCTU General Secretary.



Charles at home

PHOTO: KP

NEWU general secretary, Japhat Moyo, who is also acting assistant general secretary for the ZCTU, referred to the recent attacks as, “kicks of a dying horse,” and explained the reasoning behind the stay away. “Last time we went to the streets we had our limbs broken,” he said, referring to the strike on September 13, 2006 that resulted in the arrest and torture of 15 unionists, many so severely beaten they had to be hospitalised. “If you demonstrate in the streets, you are going to be butchered. We are not going to be sending other people’s kids to the war front. We are supposed to be on the front lines ourselves,” Moyo said.

“The workers decided that we cannot risk our leaders, let’s stay at home as a sign of demonstration. Every three months we are doing these activities, and we are not limiting ourselves to only stay aways. If the situation improves, if government upholds human rights principles, we will be able to go to the streets instead of sitting at home,” Moyo added.

Workers like Charles and Brighton believe collective action is the only way change will come. “I have to participate. To make sure that things get better for me, I have to take part in the action,” said Brighton a few days before the stay away. “If you want to have a better life you have to do something.”

Charles doesn’t flinch when asked if he is worried about being attacked by police during demonstrations “being beaten is okay,” he says. “Because the situation is getting out of control. People are suffering, people are dying. We are suffering so much,” he said as he placed his hand on his stomach, “being beaten is better than this. At least we are trying to accomplish something.”

Every three months, workers plan to risk arrest and torture in a brave attempt to win basic worker rights and a living wage. As Charles put it so succinctly, “I just wish my take home pay would take me home.”

Regional and international response

The IMF has taken a three-pronged approach to addressing the problems Zimbabwean metalworkers face.

First, for the past 15 years, the IMF’s Africa office has assisted Zimbabwean metal unions in building one strong national metalworkers’ union through the merging of smaller unions. Their growing strength has helped metalworkers weather the difficult economic climate (see page 21).

Second, the IMF regional office has been an outspoken critic of Mugabe’s attacks on human and labour rights and has worked to encourage IMF affiliates to support change in Zimbabwe through their national centres. “We condemn the current government’s terror campaign on the people of Zimbabwe, especially the gross violations of workers rights,” said IMF regional representative for Africa, Stephen Nhlapo.

“The sub-regional meeting two years ago adopted a resolution calling on all of our affiliates in the southern Africa region to work with their respective national centers to put pressure on the Zimbabwe government to stop the brutal attack on workers and their leaders. We are also encouraging our affiliates in the region to participate in all campaigns that are organized by the national centers and NGO’s which focus on changing the situation in Zimbabwe,” Stephen said, noting that international solidarity will only be as strong as the participation of the affiliates in that region.

In South Africa and Botswana, national centers have demonstrated at the Zimbabwean border in solidarity with the ZCTU. Their criticism of Mugabe’s actions have been key to private discussions taking place among the leaders of the Southern African Development Community.

Third, the IMF has supported the International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) initiatives to block Zimbabwe’s participation in key international summits and its work with the International Labour Organization to bring about change. The IMF regularly reports on developments in Zimbabwe, and is urging its affiliates to work through their national centers in supporting the work of the ZCTU.