

AFRICA MATTERS


amicus
the union

ACTSA
Action for
Southern Africa



A GUIDE
FOR UNION MEMBERS

Introduction

It's hundreds of miles away and the sun shines almost the whole year round. Africa might feel like another world, but if you look at the day to day lives of African trade unionists you may be surprised to see they are not too different to your own.

They too struggle to keep their jobs in the face of the privatisation of public services. They too fight for multinational companies to respect their rights and protect their health and safety. They too come into conflict with their governments over labour laws. As is the case the world over, it is women in Africa who do the worst paid and least secure jobs.

But on top of all these familiar struggles African workers are also fighting against problems so vast we find them hard to imagine.

Unemployment is criminally high, wages for those in work are very low.

Governments often cannot afford to provide even the most basic services. But perhaps the biggest battle of all is against the HIV virus that is devastating entire communities across the continent.

With all that needs to be done in the UK struggling for decent jobs, safe work environments and so on, you may feel you have enough to do without worrying about the problems affecting workers in Africa.

But there are many reasons why you should look beyond your own back yard – not least the fact that you could help bring about real change.

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2005 is a critical year for Africa. In the wake of the Commission for Africa report and with the UK taking over the presidency of the G8 and the EU, it is time for the talking to stop and for action to start. Africa is not naturally poor - it has been made poor. Africa doesn't want charity; it wants justice.

Since Africa Matters was launched by Rt Hon Gordon Brown in May 2004, visiting African trade unionists have met with Amicus members in their work places and shared with them first hand what is happening in Africa. Amicus members are urged to set up practical relationships with their sister trade unions in Africa – as part of this

campaign we are encouraging Amicus members to sign up for the Africa Matters module, available online.

Visit www.amicustheunion.org/africa-matters for more information about Africa and Africa Matters, and play your part in changing the world.

The following pages of this booklet will give you some ideas of how you can get involved. They focus on the key problems of aid, trade, debt, HIV/Aids and human rights which face workers in Africa and explain how Africans are struggling for justice.

Derek Simpson
General Secretary, 2005

ACTION IDEAS

You can get involved in any of the following issues and help to fight for justice for African workers. This section gives you some ideas of what you can do.

As an individual you can:

- support campaigns run by trade unions and campaign groups. Just by adding your name to a petition or sending a postcard to a politician you can really strengthen their campaigns.
- get informed. There is a mass of information on the internet as well as numerous online actions (www.amicustheunion.org, www.actsa.org, www.labourstart.org). Or the International Centre for Trade Union Rights produces an internationally respected journal that you can subscribe to.

See www.ictur.org or call 020 7498 4700.



Andrew Wiaid

Gordon Brown, MP at launch of Africa Matters in May 2005

At work:

- find out about the company you work for. If it has overseas operations you can try to share information or build links with the unions representing your co-workers overseas. Your union head office can help.
- spread the message in your work place – invite someone to come and give a talk at one of your branch meetings to explain one of these issues.
- write an article for your local union newsletter – Amicus or ACTSA will be happy to provide you with an outline article that you can adapt.
- distribute leaflets and materials about different campaigns to your colleagues.
- encourage your branch to get involved in specific campaigns and write letters to support campaigns.
- Join ACTSA as an individual member by visiting **www.actsa.org**
- get your branch to affiliate to ACTSA to provide ongoing support and be kept up to date.



Gerry McCann

Through your union:

- find out what Amicus is doing nationally and get involved, or if you think more needs to be done, say so!
- find out what the global federation representing your sector/industry is doing and see if you can get involved in supporting any of its campaigns.
- find out if your union has links with any of its sister unions in Africa, and think about setting up a formal link between your branch and one in an African country.



Gerry McCann

Problem one: Debt

In the 1960s and 1970s many poor African governments were encouraged to borrow money from other countries, international banks, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. But interest rates shot up and many countries found themselves owing more in interest than they had originally borrowed.

Now, more than thirty years later many countries are still struggling to repay these debts.

Some debts have been cancelled, but many have not. Sub-Saharan Africa still owes \$231 billion to creditors, that is \$406 for every man, woman and child in Africa. Because of these massive debts governments are forced to spend more on debt servicing than on healthcare for their people.

The average spending on debt servicing in Africa is \$14 per person while the average spending on health is less than \$5 per person. To make matters worse, tough conditions have been attached to new loans that governments have taken out to cover their repayments.

The lenders demand that borrowing countries follow set economic principles. They say these policies will encourage development, but time after time they have failed to deliver growth. In many cases they have actually led to deeper poverty. One condition often imposed on borrowing countries is liberalisation, or privatisation. They are forced to open up every aspect of their economy to competition – farming, industry and even the provision of basic services are all affected.

ACTION

Across Africa, trade unions are fighting back, calling for greater debt relief and cancellation and an end to economic conditions on future loans. They are also spearheading campaigns against privatisation.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), has information on debt on its website, including advice for trade unions on how they can try to influence World Bank and IM policies (**www.icftu.org – see section on globalisation and economic affairs**).

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) and some individual unions in the UK are members of the Jubilee Debt Campaign (JDC). JDC is campaigning for an end to all unpayable poor country debts.

www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk tel 020 7324 4722.



Problem two: HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is devastating the lives of workers across Africa. Southern Africa is grappling with the highest HIV infection rates in the world, with the majority of those infected aged between 16 and 35. As young people are dying in terrifyingly high numbers, AIDS is striking at the heart of the working. Women are at most risk.

The impact of HIV/AIDS can be seen in every workplace. Healthy members of the workforce are under pressure to take on the workload of the sick and dying. Across Africa workers miss work to care for their ill friends and elderly relatives or to look after children who have lost their parents (Africa has over 11 million AIDS orphans).

Despite ongoing attempts to eliminate discrimination against HIV-positive people, stigma, fear and denial remain rife.

Very few governments in Africa

provide free healthcare. Ordinary workers living with HIV/AIDS simply cannot afford the medical care they need. Drugs are particularly expensive. For these people, discovering they are HIV positive is a death sentence.

International pressure and competition from cheap unpatented or generic medicine producers has led to a dramatic fall in the price of AIDS-related drugs. And slowly some people are starting to get access to medicines through national health systems, company medical schemes, and local initiatives. But even with these improvements, still less than 2% of all Africans who would benefit from anti-HIV drugs have access to them.

The impact on Women is even more acute, as they struggle to access sexual reproductive health services and have their sexual reproductive health rights upheld. The majority of people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa are Women.



Gerry McCann



ACTION

The African arm of the ICFTU has called for 'unprecedented mobilisation by trade unions', and Andrew Kailembo, General Secretary of ICFTU-Afro has declared: 'we are committing ourselves to make the HIV/AIDS campaign the mother of all campaigns by trade unions.'

Global Unions is encouraging trade unions to do more in the fight against AIDS.

To find out about the Global Unions campaign, or to sign up to receive email campaign bulletins from them,

visit their website

**www.global-unions.org/hiv-aids
or call 00 32 2 224 0210.**

Unions in the UK have also started to realise what an important role they can play in the global fight against AIDS.

In addition to running their own campaigns, the TUC and many of its affiliates have backed an ACTSA campaign calling on the British government to give more money to fund the war against AIDS.

**www.actsa.org/HIV/main.htm,
tel 020 7833 3133**

Problem three: Trade

Rich country governments argue that African countries need to develop their industries and enable their farmers to earn more money for their produce in order to reduce poverty. But the actual policies of the European Union, the US and the World Trade Organisation are crushing farmers and fledgling industries across Africa.

Instead of being free to follow the economic policies that best suit them, poor countries are put under enormous pressure to open their markets and expose their producers to competition. But rich countries refuse to do the same and instead continue to protect their own farmers and companies. Europe and the US also provide massive subsidies to many of their industries, enabling them to

make cheap products. African countries have been forced to reduce their trade barriers so these cheap products from overseas flood their markets and undermine local producers.

Poor countries could make more money through trade by processing their products before they sell them. This would add value to the products and increase profits. But rich countries impose taxes on processed goods sold on their markets, thereby preventing countries from developing in this way.

In 2005, the UK takes over the presidency of the EU, our collective challenge is to ensure that as the EU negotiates a new trade agreement with the southern African countries, it does not force liberalisation on them.



Geny McCann



ACTION

Every time trade negotiations take place, trade unionists in Africa try to make their voices heard, holding protests, lobbying decision-makers and participating in the discussions.

The ICFTU website www.icftu.org has detailed reports and briefings on different aspects of trade including how increased trade has impacted negatively on labour standards.

In the UK, the Trade Justice Movement is a group of organisations including aid agencies, environment and human rights campaigns, faith and consumer groups, that is campaigning for trade justice. The TUC is now an active member of the TJM and you can join in its activities too.

Visit www.tjm.org.uk to see their latest plans or tel 020 7404 0530.

Problem four: Investment

Many of the poorest countries in Africa are exploited by big businesses who put their search for profit before any thought for their employees, the communities where they operate or the environment.

Developing countries will often bend over backwards to try to attract companies to invest in them. In some cases this includes offering tax exemptions. But instead of using the tax breaks to establish long-term operations, many companies put down few roots and simply take their business elsewhere as soon as they no longer qualify for tax advantages.

While there are reams of international

agreements controlling the behaviour of governments, multinational companies are able to operate free from much regulation. Although they are bound by the national laws of the countries where they operate, in many places they deliberately exploit lax labour laws.

Multinational companies often show a lack of social and environmental responsibility. They ignore the concerns of local communities, pollute the environment in which they operate and fail to use their profits to invest in developing the local economy, preferring to take the money back to their home country.





ACTION

Each time a company abuses workers' rights, or labour laws are undermined, trade unions across Africa are quick to intervene and fight for their members' rights.

Trade unionists in the UK backed an ACTSA campaign to support over 7,000 South Africans who have worked in asbestos mines run by the British company Cape plc. These workers were exposed to dangerous levels of asbestos over many years and as a result contracted lung diseases including a fatal form of cancer, mesothelioma. After five years of legal wrangling Cape gave the claimants compensation in an out-of-court settlement.

Hazards is an independent, trade union-friendly magazine focussing on health and safety campaigns from around the world.

View articles online at www.hazards.org or subscribe by calling **0114 267 8936**.



Problem five: Rights and Freedoms

In a few African countries the governments themselves are accused of infringing trade union rights or turning a blind eye to rights violations. In these countries trade unions are at the forefront of movements fighting for democracy.

Swaziland is a unique example. It is an undemocratic country ruled by a king. Trade unionists have come under fierce attack from the monarchy. The government repealed its Industrial Relations Act in 1996, replacing it with one that completely violated workers' rights and restricted the right of assembly.

In 2003, the King adopted a new constitution, which gave him absolute executive, judicial and legislative authority.

In August 2003, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) held a series of demonstrations to protest against the governance record of the King. The protests were violently broken up by security forces. One trade unionist was killed and another was rushed to hospital with a gunshot wound.

The crisis that has been emerging in Zimbabwe since the 1990s has brought the trade union movement into direct conflict with the government. The draconian Public Order and Security Act has frequently been used by the security forces and police to justify monitoring or banning trade union meetings.

Both individual trade unionists and the leadership of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) have come under attack from the regime. For example, during a ZCTU-organised protest in October 2003, the ZCTU chairman for the Central region, Mr Munyuki was captured by a group of 15 thugs, which included some police officers, state security agents and youths. For five hours, he was severely beaten with whips and baton sticks.

Following the parliamentary elections of March 2005, the crisis in Zimbabwe has entered a new stage, with the primary focus of the government's attacks being the Trade Union movement. Now more than ever, Zimbabwean workers are in need of international solidarity.



Simon Clark

ACTION

The Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council has issued statement after statement protesting at the treatment of trade unionists in Swaziland and Zimbabwe and has more recently been involved in more active forms of solidarity including joint protests.

The SFTU website is
www.cosatu.org.za/sftu/.

There is also a Swaziland Solidarity Network based in the COSATU (the Confederation of South African Trade Unions) offices,

tel 00 27 11 339 3621/33
or email
swaziland@union.org.za.

The ZCTU produces a regular newsletter called the Worker. It is available online at

www.africaonline.co.zw/theworker/ or you can subscribe by contacting
worker@africaonline.co.zw
or tel 00 263 4 702474.

A ZCTU solidarity fund was set up in the UK to raise money to support trade unionists in Zimbabwe.

Trade unions have also taken the initiative to lobby the Zimbabwean government whenever it is reported that trade unionists have been arrested or mistreated.

To learn more about all of these issue in more depth, why not sign up for the fully accredited Africa Matters module, which covers all of these issues and more, and will help you build practical and mutually beneficial links with your trade union colleagues in Africa.

Visit **www.amicustheunion.org/africamatters** to sign up today.



Simon Clark

Collen Gwiyo, General Secretary
Zimbabwe Banks and Allied Workers' Union

About Amicus and ACTSA

Amicus and Action for Southern Africa have come together to produce this guide as part of the ongoing Africa Matters campaign, aimed at building solidarity between trade unionists in Southern Africa and the UK.

Amicus

Amicus is the UK's largest manufacturing, technical and skilled persons' union. With over 1.2m members in the public and private sectors, we are a major industrial force.

Amicus' vision is of a prosperous society in which employers and employees work together to build successful businesses and safe, healthy working environments. All those who contribute to their success receive the rewards, respect and recognition they deserve.

The vision of Amicus is not limited to the United Kingdom. It extends throughout Europe, and we have links with unions and governments across the globe.

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Action for Southern Africa

ACTSA campaigns with the people of Southern Africa as they strive to build a better future.

Working for peace, democracy and development across the region, ACTSA is the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. ACTSA influences decision-makers in Britain and Europe on policies that affect Southern Africa. It keeps Africa in the spotlight through lobbying, the publication of reports and briefings and media work. Information, fact sheets and action ideas on all the issues in this guide can be found on ACTSA's website or by contacting the ACTSA office.

ACTSA is a democratic organisation. Individual members and affiliated trade unions, union branches and local groups shape our agenda and lead our campaigns.

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