

# Africa Matters



A guide for  
union members



# AFRICA MATTERS

## 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 bewilderingly 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.

The following pages of this booklet will give you some ideas of how you can get involved. They also give five examples of problems facing workers in Africa and explain how Africans are struggling for justice.



## 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.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org) has the latest news on trade union struggles across the world). Or the International Centre for Trade Union Rights produces an internationally respected journal that you can subscribe to. See [www.ictur.org](http://www.ictur.org) or call 020 7498 4700.

### 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.
- get your branch to affiliate to ACTSA to provide ongoing support and be kept up to date.

### 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.

## **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.

**Africa spends \$40 million every day repaying old debts.**

**'In Zambia, the entire copper industry collapsed after the World Bank insisted it was privatised, destroying the biggest industry in the country.'**

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.

**'Let somebody out there tell us, having privatised 80 per cent of our economy, why is it that we have become one of the poorest countries in Africa and the whole world?' Joyce Nonde, President, Federation of Free Trade Unions in Zambia.**

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.

**'In Mozambique, international aid donors demanded water privatisation. This led to an increase in the price of water and large numbers of people were cut off from the water supply altogether as they could not afford to pay their bills.'**

**'It will be public opinion and public outrage that will bring about change to cancel the debt.'**

Kenneth Kaunda, former President of Zambia.

## Action

Across Africa, trade unions are fighting back, calling for greater debt relief 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](http://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](http://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.

**In Tanzania it is projected that adult deaths will reduce the workforce by 20% by 2010.**

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.

**80 per cent of all AIDS deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa  
AIDS killed approximately 2.3 million people in 2003.**

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.

**'Humanity will judge us harshly if we fail to act now' Nelson Mandela.**

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.

## 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](http://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](http://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.

**Europe gives subsidies to beef farmers. As a result cheap British beef is sold on to the South African market. Beef farmers from neighbouring Namibia have had their livelihoods destroyed because they cannot compete.**

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

European subsidies and tariffs make it cheaper for Cadburys to produce chocolate bars in their factory in Birmingham and export them to South Africa, rather than produce them using local sugar at their South African plant in Port Elizabeth.

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.

Rich countries spend more on agricultural subsidies each year than the combined annual income of all African countries.

For every dollar given to poor countries in aid, they lose two dollars to rich countries because of unfair trade barriers against their exports.

'The EU must change their trade policies to open their markets for goods from developing countries. The double standard must come to an end.'  
Zwelinzima Vavi, General Secretary, Congress of South African Trade Unions.

## 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](http://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](http://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.

**The income of the largest 10 multinational corporations exceeds that of the 100 poorest countries.**

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.

**South Africa's deep-level gold mines are among the most dangerous work environments in the world – in the 20th century the death toll was thought to be between 69,000 and 100,000.**

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.

**Namibian trade unions had to take their own government to court to stop it suspending labour laws in order to attract foreign investment.**

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.

**Archie Palane, National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa: 'There are too many multinational companies neglecting the health and safety of their workers in their raw pursuit of profits.'**

## **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](http://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.

**Jan Sithole, General Secretary of the SFTU has been intimidated, repressed and violently attacked for his trade union activities. He survived an assassination attempt several years ago, carried out at the request the government's secret service agents.**

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.

In November 2003 the ZCTU held national protests against high taxes and trade union rights violations. The police were notified in advance but still over 350 people were detained, including ZCTU Secretary General Wellington Chibebe and President Lovemore Matombo.

**In 2003, there were several cases of brutal murder, torture, rape, imprisonment and dismissal of hundreds of trade unionists in Zimbabwe.**

Zimbabwe consistently tops the ICFTU table of anti-union repression in Africa.

## 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/](http://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](mailto:swaziland@union.org.za).

The ZCTU produces a regular newsletter called the Worker. It is available online at [www.africaonline.co.zw/theworker/](http://www.africaonline.co.zw/theworker/) or you can subscribe by contacting [worker@africaonline.co.zw](mailto: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.

## About Amicus and ACTSA

### Amicus

Amicus is the largest manufacturing union in the United Kingdom, with over one million members in the public and private sectors. 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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Amicus and ACTSA have come together to produce this booklet as part of a year of events building solidarity between trade unionists in Southern Africa and the UK

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Southern Africa

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