



18 APRIL 2025, HARARE, ZIMBABWE

45 Years of Independence: A Labour sector shaped by sacrifice and struggle

UNDER the vast skies of Zimbabwe, the echoes of liberation ring louder than ever as the nation reflects on 45 years of independence.

The journey of the Zimbabwean worker is a tale forged in the fires of resistance, sacrifice, and an unyielding quest for justice.

It is a journey that began long before the jubilant dawn of April 18, 1980, when Zimbabwe finally broke free from the shackles of colonial rule—a journey paved by the sweat, tears, and blood of the oppressed.

For nearly 90 years, from 1890 to 1980, the colonial regime, led by the British South Africa Company and its imperialist leader Cecil John Rhodes, subjected Zimbabwe's black majority to cruel and exploitative labour practices.

Harsh laws and systemic oppression crushed the working class, reducing them to mere tools in a machinery of profit and discrimination.

The indignity of forced labour and the denial of basic rights were not just injustices to individuals, they were an affront to the very soul of a people.

It was this unrelenting injustice that ignited the fires of resistance, giving rise to the first and second Chimurenga liberation struggles.

These were not just wars for land and sovereignty but battles for dignity, freedom, and the rights of workers who were treated as second-class citizens in their own land.

The names of heroes like Benjamin Burombo, Masotsha Ndhlovu, late Vice President Joshua Nkomo, late Vice President Simon Muzenda, Mayor Urimbo, Leopold Takawira, and Jason Ziyapapa Moyo stand tall, etched into history as champions of the oppressed.

They were more than political figures. They were labour leaders, voices of the silenced, and warriors against the chains of exploitation.

When Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, hope surged through the veins of the nation. The black majority Government moved swiftly to enact progressive labour laws aimed at dismantling the oppressive structures of the past.

For a time, it seemed as though the dreams of the liberation struggle were taking root. Workers, once voiceless and invisible, began to see the dawn of justice and fairness.

Yet, the road to true liberation is rarely smooth. The 1990s brought the harsh winds of economic liberalisation as Zimbabwe adopted structural adjustment programmes under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

These reforms unraveled many of the gains made in the early years of independence, thrusting workers into a harsh reality of declining wages, job losses, and deepening poverty. The decade saw a surge in strikes and protests, as the working class fought to preserve their dignity amidst growing inequality.

The turn of the millennium brought even darker days. Between 2000 and 2008, hyperinflation ravaged the economy, reducing the Zimbabwean dollar to mere paper and plunging workers into abject poverty.

In one landmark case, the late Justice Andrew Mutema likened the payment of damages to workers in worthless Zimbabwean dollars to giving children stones to buy bread.

It was a time of despair, yet also evidence to the resilience of the Zimbabwean people.

Amidst these struggles, the labour movement found strength in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013.

For the first time, labour rights were enshrined as fundamental human rights, offering a glimmer of hope in the ongoing fight for justice.

Section 65 of the Constitution became an inspiration for workers, affirming their rights and dignity. However, even this hard-won victory faced challenges.

The infamous 2015 Supreme Court judgment in the *Don Nyamande v Zuva Petroleum (Pvt) Ltd* case resurrected archaic common law principles, allowing employers to terminate contracts on notice without cause.

It was a blow to the working class, described by Chief Justice Luke Malaba as a “labour genocide.”

The subsequent Labour Amendment Act No. 5 of 2015 sought to correct this injustice, a testament to the power of collective action and legislative intervention.

Today, the story of Zimbabwe’s labour sector continues to unfold.

The formation of the Association of Labour Practitioners Zimbabwe, chaired by Advocate Caleb Mucheche, marks a new chapter in the fight for progressive labour jurisprudence.

Adv Mucheche's words resonate deeply: "The labour rights we enjoy today were authored and pioneered by the freedom fighters who voted with their lives, leading to black majority rule, adult universal suffrage, and independence on April 18, 1980."

As Zimbabweans gather this year in Nembudziya, Gokwe, to commemorate Independence Day, it is a time for reflection and gratitude.

The freedoms enjoyed today were purchased at a great cost by the gallant sons and daughters of the soil.

These were unpaid workers of the liberation struggle, driven not by personal gain but by an unshakable belief in a free Zimbabwe.

Their sacrifice is the foundation upon which the nation stands—a reminder that the fight for equality, justice, and dignity is never in vain.

The journey of Zimbabwe's labour sector, like the nation itself, is far from over. It is a story of trials and triumphs, of setbacks and progress.

Yet, as the nation looks to the future, there is hope that the dreams of the past—dreams of fairness, opportunity, and dignity for all—will continue to inspire and guide the path forward.