

https://dspace.org/

Botswana's labour relations system: lessons from 2011 public sector strike

Mwatcha, Mpho Patience

2016-02-19
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/19607

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

ABSTRACT

In 2011, public sector employees in Botswana engaged in a two-month-long legal strike over a wage dispute. The right to strike is a highly contentious and debatable right. None of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions makes an express reference to the right to strike but the ILO supervisory bodies insist that the right to strike is a fundamental right that confers power on trade unions to defend the interests of their members. By virtue of the decisions of ILO's main two bodies, member states cannot admit the right of free association and to bargain collectively and then deny workers the right to strike. Furthermore, according to ILO, the right to strike extends to all workers in the public service, the only allowable exception being for employees directly involved in the administration of the state and 'essential services'.

Although several countries entrench this right in their constitution, violation is widespread. In such countries, while the right to strike exists in principle in reality it is essentially curtailed by unworkable procedures, as it is the case in Botswana. The 2011 public sector strike exposed the frailties of Botswana's industrial relations, a country popularly eulogized as Africa's economic miracle and a shining example of democracy. This study examined the lessons brought by the 2011 strike on the character of industrial relations system of Botswana. The study was largely guided by a qualitative paradigm and data was obtained through individual face-to-face interviews, Skype and focus group interviews as well as document review.

This study established that there is a historical conflict between Botswana trade unions and the government. The 2011 strike inflamed already adversarial industrial relations. The findings of study confirm that following the 2011 public sector strike, the government has been hostile and vindictive to public sector unions especially those which steered the 2011 strike. Subsequent to the 2011 strike, the government rescinded most of the rights and freedoms that union leaders used to enjoy. There is a general consensus among public servants and their unions that Botswana labour relations has always been hostile towards trade unions and their activities, but this hostility has been obscured by the common review that Botswana is democratic, peaceful and an epitome of good governance in Africa. However, the 2011 public sector strike uncovered this mask.