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How and why trade unions engage in politics in Southern Africa?: the case of Zambia and Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This research report seeks to present a comparative analysis of how and why trade unions engage in politics. Special reference will be made to the way in which trade unions in Zambia (ZaCTU) and Zimbabwe (ZCTU) influenced the formation of political opposition parties in their respective countries. That is, the way in which these trade unions engaged with political parties either by being part of them, taking a lead in their formation or refusing to join party politics altogether. The core questions addressed in this research report are: What was the nature of the political opportunity structure in these two countries under review? What was the nature of the State/Party-trade union relations? Lastly. What are the factors that contributed to the turn or shift of trade unions to opposition politics?

The main question of the research report is informed by the fact that in both countries the labour movements which were once subordinate to the liberation parties were instrumental in the formation of opposition political parties after independence. The reasons why trade unions were chosen as a focus of research are numerous. Firstly, trade unions usually function as significant collective interest groups whose role is fundamental to the reproduction of the economy. Their role in the economy thus put them in a critical position which explains why they have close relationships with governments. Organizationally trade unions have certain resource capabilities that differentiate them from other civil society organizations. Usually they have a centralized organizational network both at national and local levels, as well as a common history of struggle against political repression. Lastly, trade unions sometimes have the capacity to interrupt the whole economy in a country through industrial action which makes central trade unions an organizational power that is attractive to the political opposition (Hedblom 2005)

The research outlines the political and social context in which trade unionism developed in the colonial and post independence period and sets out the legal and institutional framework within which labour relations were conducted. After a review of the shift in economic policy which led to the adoption of ESAP, it will consider the effects this programme had on trade union, labour relations, living standards and the eventual formation of opposition parties.