

Abstract

Trade unions have always been part of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, whether as a civil society formation mobilizing for better wages and improved working conditions on the shop floor, or in alliance with political formations in a bid to transform society and introduce regime change. In most cases, especially in South Africa, it was the unions that continued the struggle even after political parties were banned. It was also through the mobilization strength and resources of the unions that political parties (National Liberation Movement) emerged as formidable and hegemonic forces in Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Thus, the paper argues that, in part, UNIP (and later MMD), ZANU-PF and the ANC owe their political ascendancy to the mass mobilization by the trade unions. Trade unions have often had to resist subordination by the liberation movements. The paper suggests that; the fight for independent and worker-centered trade unions, and the unilateral implementation of structural adjustment programmes, were central to the conflict between trade unions and liberation movements. These are seen as factors that undermined the dominance of National Liberation Movements hegemony. The paper argues that; the contemporary union/party relations in South Africa show similar trajectories to those in Zambia and Zimbabwe. While the literature is explicit on how UNIP and ZANU-PF lost their ideological dominance and hegemony, the continued dominance of the ANC remains an object of ongoing debate.