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Striking for wages and democracy: the changing role of public sector unions between 1994 and 2004: the case of the Communications and Allied Services Workers Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ)

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Abstract

The onslaught of neoliberal globalisation has transformed the role of trade unions in society as they, in collaboration with other civil society groups, take a leading role in issues affecting them at work as well as in society. Labour movements unlike other social movements easily assume the leading position as they have politically conscious structures in every part of the country and a high capacity for mobilisation across the country. Public sector strikes have recently hit the headlines in Zimbabwe and this study uses Communications and Allied Services Workers Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ) as a case study in view of the militant strike wave between 1994 and 2004 which were stealthily tied to democratic reforms. The concept of social movement unionism (SMU) was explored by adopting qualitative research approach through in depth interviews and documentary analysis. The findings vindicate CASWUZ transformed into a social movement union as the union's demands incorporated wages and democracy. CASWUZ managed to assume the leadership position among public sector unions by challenging the state's policies that were not favourable to the working class and the poor through strike action during the period under review under a highly politicised work environment. There is evidence however, that the workers voice did not varnish in 2004 as the adoption of new sources of power such as symbolic power and logistical power can take back the union to its original position of fighting for decent work, social justice and a democratic society.