

AFRICAN RENAISSANCE – WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOUR RELATIONS?

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Everywhere labour relations systems are in a process of change. Efforts to explain these changes have included the use of punctuated equilibrium theory (Ericksen & Kuruvilla 1998) and long wave theory (Kelly 1998). While these debates remain unresolved they have served to reopen discussion on the nature of change in systems, the imperatives which give rise to this and strategic choice options of the social actors involved. Modern systems theory recognizes that systems move through periods of stability and instability through time as they find and lose 'fit' with their environments (Wheatley 1994). A system at any time is regarded as the outcome of interactive choices made by social actors in relation to their environment and each other in pursuit of their goals. As a social system labour relations is very much the consequence of strategic choices on the part of states, employers and employees, usually through their representatives. The essence of Renaissance thinking is about change – it carries with it ideas of cultural rebirth, a revival of learning and modernism. The African Renaissance drive as a cultural rebirth can only have meaning in the context of sustainable economic viability and democratic governance. States, employers, employees and trade unions generally share a commitment to these objectives. However they often differ on matters of policy and strategy. Tensions arise in debates over growth and re-distribution, efficiency and equity, privatisation and the role of the state in the economy, the use of highly paid foreign CEO's and consultancies even as a vigorous downsizing of firms is undertaken.

The manner in which parties structure themselves to pursue their own interests, and contest and/or accommodate others' interests defines the shape of a labour relations system. If Renaissance is to occur then arguably it will be the consequence of change in the manner in which the parties in the engine room of the economy engage one another – at economic and social policy levels right down to individual workplaces. In Africa however the engagement occurs in a context of scarcity and political instability. It is a context of paradox, demanding high levels of cooperation between the social actors but offering little by way of conditions which might support such initiatives. Poverty and high dependency ratios oblige unions to push for higher wages and job security even as market forces oblige employers into strategies of cost reduction and improved efficiencies. Workable social pacting requires labour constraint – social conditions militate against this. Research indicates that unions find it difficult to sustain commitment to pacts as their members begin to see themselves as bearing the weight of pain associated with restructuring. Divisions appear in the context of rising militance pressurizing more conservative unions, making collective agreements more tenuous and producing resistance to change initiatives at the level of the enterprise.

In terms of Kelly's (1998) proposals that unions mobilize around a sense of injustice and the social movement character of unions in many developing nations this is perhaps not surprising.

Organized labour faces critical choices of direction and role in pushing for and then in consolidating democracies (Valenzuela 1989; Adler & Webster 2000; Anstey 1997). These choices are current across nations in Africa reflecting an ongoing tension between equity and growth considerations in the economy (Shadur 1994). Democracies (indeed any systems of governance) are seriously threatened in scarce resource economies. Their inability to deliver to the needs of their populace

render them inherently unstable – the theory of collapsed states is perhaps most relevant in Africa. In 1994 when President Mbeki made his “I am an African” speech at the launch of South Africa’s constitution, there was room for considerable optimism following a democratic surge across the continent – indeed there were no de jure single party states in evidence (Bratton & van de Walle 1994). Since then there have been a series of setbacks in democracy, amongst others in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, and Lesotho. Bratton and van de Walle (1994) suggest that Africa’s democratic transitions have been rapid and characterized by the absence of pacting processes – in short, poorly rooted and without a capacity for self renewal through civil society. Nevertheless there are ongoing efforts to develop and consolidate systems of social dialogue within and between African nations, to continue the struggle for democracy and to engage the international community more effectively on issues of economic development. There is an emerging sense that developing nations must assume more proactive and informed policy positions in order to address inequities evident in global trade arrangements and tougher positioning evidenced at the Doha conference indicates progress on this front.

At a policymaking level then there is some evidence of a continuing drive to create conditions for more sustainable democracies. However sophisticated the vision for social dialogue might be and however well intentioned the social actors there is little to work with in the absence of competitive industries founded in profitable enterprises. Africa’s economies continue to limp rather than leap forward, hampered by massive debt, poor infrastructures, commodity dependence, low levels of investment, and workforces which are poorly educated and ill. The continent’s contribution to global GDP has fallen to just over 1%. Weak development implies weak private sectors, leaving the state in a central role in the economies of most African countries, low levels of formal wage employment and as a consequence weak and vulnerable trade union movements. Even as trade unions have assumed a more activist role in pushing for democracy across Africa their capacity remains limited. When they become full-blooded social movements as in the Zimbabwe experience they lose some of their labour identity and face dilemmas into the future should they assume governance.

Tensions are evident at the level of both sectors and individual enterprises. In South Africa democratic elections did not end the change process within companies. On the one hand there are imperatives of social redress involving not only employment equity and affirmative action but also responses to social issues of housing, education, poverty and disease. On the other hand the imperatives of the market provide unrelenting downward pressure on costs. Even as organizations then are faced with rising demands for and costs of social redress so must they find ways to compete in global markets. Within such scenarios the room for accommodation between employers and unions is constrained. They may both be supportive of democratic governance but this does not imply a simple or shared understanding of how organizations or society should operate. They may both recognize the need for organizations to achieve competitiveness in global markets but how do they deliver to the diverse needs of shareholders and constituents? Within such a reality what does the idea of Renaissance really promise to and ask of the parties?

This paper explores some the pressures and tough choices facing employers and trade unions at industry and enterprise levels, making reference to the automobile and clothing manufacturing sectors and strategic choices made by the social partners in response to these. It then moves to a consideration of strategic choice options at the level of the enterprise and the consequences of such choices for labour relations at this level. Two experiences – one within a catalytic converter company, the other within a large automobile manufacturer – will be used to shape debate as to the implications for unions and employers in seeking a joint response to new industry conditions.

In the light of political and economic realities in Africa then what implications does 'renaissance' have for the social actors in labour relations systems in Africa ? Does the weakness of labour movements across the continent imply an incapacity as social partners in a renaissance? Is their role one of simply supporting government development programs – one of compliance or co-optation in the guise of an alliance partner? What do unions bring to a system of dialogue – simply leverage through the capacity to disrupt operations or more strategic influence founded in a perspective the role of employee advocate must never be lost even as the need for more co-operative endeavor is recognized? What happens to the energy of labour movements in systems in which governments through good intention or through agendas of control use legislation to 'manage protections' for employees?

The cases referred to in this paper are all ones in which employers and unions have opted for the route of collective bargaining or joint endeavor. Such choices however reflect points of departure rather than arrival for the parties. Achieving national forums or joint endeavor within organizations creates a platform off which to respond to issues of competitiveness, job creation, decent work, and fair employment practices but will require robust and wise leadership and finely balanced mixes of adversarialism and cooperative pragmatism if such systems are to be meaningfully sustained. In the mix of developing stronger democracies and viable economies in Africa governments, employers, and trade unions carry sizeable responsibilities but also a magnitude of pressures which may prove too large for the fragile bridges of dialogue to support. In this respect then they share a responsibility not only in building bridges but in ensuring that they can carry the weight of issues they load them with. It will require long term vision in circumstances which often oblige parties into short term solutions.

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Professor Mark Anstey has been the Director of the Labour Relations Unit at the University of Port Elizabeth since 1987. Previously he was Executive Director of the Institute for Industrial Relations in Johannesburg, lectured at the University of the Witwatersrand, and worked in the Department of Labour and Welfare in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia).

He is involved in teaching programmes at the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Cape Town and Stellenbosch, and has twice been a visiting professor at Michigan State University where he has taught international labour relations. He is a member of the editorial committee of the SA Journal of Labour Relations.

He was a labour and community mediation panelist of the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa (IMSSA) from 1984 until its demise in 2000. Since 1994, he has been active in various capacities in the transformation of the South African Police Services. He has mediated frequently in labour and community disputes since 1984 and has wide experience in consulting, advising and training employers, trade unions and community organizations. He is currently facilitating the formation of a national bargaining council in the South African clothing and textile industry.

He served on the regional executive of the East Cape Peace Structures and the Independent Electoral Commission as Regional Director (Monitoring) for the East Cape in South Africa's historic 1994 elections. He has been contracted by the ILO to conduct courses in labour relations, human resource management and conflict management for social partners in SADC countries; is involved in developing conflict handling skills amongst electoral officials in SADC countries through the Electoral Institute of SA; and has recently delivered training in mediation skills in Senegal as part of a UN initiative to train diplomats and NGO's from across Africa in conflict resolution skills.

He has published extensively in academic and professional journals and is the author of several books: *Managing Change, Negotiating Conflict* (1999 & 1991); *Practical Peacemaking* (1993); *Working With Groups* (1983), and *Labour Relations In Transition: A Changing South Africa in a Changing World* (2000); and has edited two others on *Worker Participation* (1990) and *Employee Participation and Workplace Forums* (1997).

Training and research work in recent years have taken him to the USA, Britain, Sweden, Germany, Hungary, Australia, Zambia, Tanzania, Swaziland, Namibia and Senegal.