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Zimbabwe

# Arrest of trade union leaders highlights continued repression

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**Although this article was published before Christmas it is part of the current context. At least two people have been killed in protests over fuel price hikes, after the doubling of prices. President Mnangagwa is not in the country - he is currently visiting Russia. This has been roundly criticised by the opposition. [IV]**

On 16 November 2018, seven members of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) – including ZCTU Secretary General Japhet Moyo and ZCTU President Peter Mutasa – appeared in court to face charges of disruption of public order under the country’s draconian Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act.

Twenty-six others are scheduled to appear in court in the south-eastern city of Masvingo and the eastern city of Mutare at a later date.

Friday’s court appearance in Harare follows the arrest of the trade unionists on 11 October for attempting to demonstrate against new fiscal measures that were unilaterally implemented by the administration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, including the introduction of a two per cent tax on all electronic transfers above US\$10 and the imposition of tough new rules on foreign currency accounts.

Because Zimbabwe adopted the US dollar (alongside bond notes) as its official currency after hyperinflation rendered the Zimbabwe dollar worthless, both measures, the unions say, will result in already overburdened citizens paying even more taxes while eroding the salaries and buying power of cash-strapped workers. [1]

Authorities used a recent cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe to justify banning the ZCTU demonstration; however other gatherings, such as sports and Zanu-PF party events, have taken place unhindered.

Following a short court hearing, Harare Magistrate Nyasha Vitori set a trial date of 11 December 2018 for the ZCTU leaders. If convicted they face a mandatory 10-year jail term.

Their lawyer, Alec Muchadehama of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, whose request for the case to be thrown out was denied, says they will seek a review of the magistrate’s decision in the High Court. Muchadehama is arguing that the state’s case is weak as it relies on the same police who were the arresting officers as the only witnesses.

The arrest of the ZCTU leaders and activists follow an incident on 1 August 2018, just a few days after the 30 July elections, when the army fired live ammunition at the ZCTU headquarters in central Harare, shattering window panes and injuring a staff member. [2] [3] Seven people were killed that day as the army quelled protests from opposition supporters against delays in announcement of the election results.

## A long history of oppression

The recent attacks on Zimbabwe’s trade union movement are part of a long history of repression against organised labour in the country. “Zvakawoma kudaro, ndoo kubasa kwedu,” which loosely translates as “difficult as it is, this is our work,” is the slogan of the ZCTU – and with good reason.

Relations between Zanu-PF, which has ruled Zimbabwe since it won independence against white settler rule in 1980, and the ZCTU began well when the labour body was formed in 1981. But things first took a turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the ZCTU strongly opposed the ruling party's adoption an Economic Structural Adjustment Programme. [4]

Over the years, Zanu-PF has repeatedly undermined any attempts by trade unions to advocate for workers, doing everything from under-resourcing the Ministry of Labour to using state security agents to brutally suppress the work of trade unionists, often with excessive force and deadly violence. The power and influence of trade unions has also been severely impacted by decades of economic turmoil which has resulted in tens of thousands of job losses, and the ZCTU losing almost three-quarters of its members since the 1990s.

And while the Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees the rights to assembly and association, to demonstrate and petition, and to freedom of expression, the government of Zimbabwe continues to flagrantly disregard these provisions in its attacks on trade unionists and other civil society activists.

So dire is the situation in Zimbabwe that 13 September is marked as Police Brutality Day.

It commemorates a ferocious police assault on the ZCTU leadership following a march to present a petition to the government on 13 September 2007. [5] Thirty-four trade unionists were arrested in Harare and badly assaulted by police in attacks which left the then Secretary General Wellington Chibebe with permanent injuries, President Lovemore Matombo with head injuries and Vice President Lucia Matibenga with a broken arm. ZCTU Regional Officer Moses Ngondo and trade union activist Tonderai Nyahunzvi eventually succumbed to the injuries they sustained on that day.

In 2009, the International Labour Organization (ILO) established a Commission of Inquiry to look into trade union rights in the country following the ZCTU's damning submission to the ILO's annual International Labour Conference. The Commission made several recommendations – such as the need for legislative reform, the strengthening of national institutions and social dialogue as well as an immediate end to anti-union arrests, detentions, violence, torture, intimidation and harassment. To date, the government has failed to implement any of these measures.

## New dispensation, same old problems

ZCTU Legal Advisor Zakeyo Mtimtema tells Equal Times that the harassment of trade unionists in Zimbabwe continues despite the promises of the 'new dispensation' of President Emmerson Mnangagwa (who took power in November 2017 after Mugabe was ousted in a coup) to uphold human rights.

"There is no difference in the state of labour rights during the Mugabe era or with this so-called 'new dispensation' as far as the protection of freedom of association and expression is concerned," says Mtimtema. "We have seen brutal force being used against the trade union movement [by both administrations], in particular against the ZCTU." Mnangagwa, in particular, sees foreign investment as the key to ending Zimbabwe's economic woes, and is hostile to anyone or anything that he considers oppositional to his goal.

Mtimtema continues: "The new government has no respect for its own constitution that guarantees those rights. Furthermore, it does not respect international law. We appeal to the international community and international labour bodies to call the Zimbabwe government to order. All business deals must be in compliance with respect for human and labour rights," he adds.

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So far, more than 15 trade unions from across the globe have written to President Mnangagwa to express their concern over the repression, including the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), ITUC-Africa and labour federations from Argentina, Tunisia, the Netherlands and Kenya, amongst others.

ZCTU President, Peter Mutasa, tells Equal Times that “the government’s use of repression to force its toxic policies on the masses” doesn’t just affect trade unions, but also citizens at large. For example, immediately after the July elections, riot police violently cleared informal traders off the streets of Harare in a move that many considered as revenge for the vendors’ support for Nelson Chamisa’s opposition party, MDC-Alliance.

“They [the ruling elites] need this political power at all costs in order to secure their economic interests. There is, therefore, a clear convergence between the ruling elites and the capitalists who may differ in other areas but agree on neoliberal policies,” he says.

This October, without the consultation of parliament, President Mnangagwa introduced the Transitional Stabilisation Programme. [6] Scheduled to run until December 2020, it will usher in the privatisation of state enterprises and parastatals, as well as the closure of a number of such companies, which unions say will lead to further job losses.

In addition, officials recently agreed to a plan to clear Zimbabwe’s US\$2.2 billion of arrears to international creditors dating back to the late-nineties. Despite being saddled with US\$17 billion of domestic and foreign debt, on top of a \$1.8 billion trade deficit, if confirmed, this settlement will clear the way for Zimbabwe to borrow even more money from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Mutasa says the Mnangagwa regime is using the economic prescriptions of the IMF and the World Bank to justify its flagrant disregard of the constitution, which guarantees citizens’ participation in the economic affairs of the state.

“For as long as the ruling elite’s desire to protect their interests continues, and the IMF and World Bank push for the repayment of loans at all costs, the repression will continue. Workers are therefore, facing both political dictatorship and economic authoritarianism engineered locally and abroad.”

Mutasa’s sentiments were also echoed by ZCTU Secretary General Japhet Moyo, who posited that the new administration was following the infamous rule book of the former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

“She employed union-busting tactics and repealed labour laws to weaken labour, all to further her privatisation agenda. Here in Zimbabwe, the current repression of trade unions is directly linked to the broader aim to liberalise the economy and satisfy the requirements of the IMF and World Bank,” he says.

[Equal Times](#)

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[1] <https://www.equaltimes.org/cash-shortages-continue-to-cripple#.XD2M51z7RPa>

[2] <https://www.equaltimes.org/can-zimbabwe-s-high-stakes#.XD2Ms1z7RPa>

[3] <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/army-pumps-bullets-into-zctu-offices-labour-group-files-police-report>

[4] <https://hsf.org.za/publications/focus/issue-30-second-quarter-2003/origins-of-the-zimbabwe-crisis>.

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[5] [http://archive.kubatana.net/html/archive/lab/060915zimind.asp?sector=lab&year=2006&range\\_start=61](http://archive.kubatana.net/html/archive/lab/060915zimind.asp?sector=lab&year=2006&range_start=61).

[6] <https://t792ae.c2.acecdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Transitional-Stabilisation-Programme-Final.pdf>.