

**Against privatisation?**

Whereas the national union leadership of both the ZCTU and the breakaway unions accepts privatisation almost uncritically, workers at NCZ have responded, as one shopsteward put it, with “mixed feelings” Edgar Sinyanga, vice secretary of the shopstewards committee, says that workers hope that the factory will prosper in private hands. Mboma Mboma, the treasurer of the committee, adds that the government does not have the money to fund the enterprise, and that privatisation is the “cheapest way to keep the company going”.

On the other hand, Mboma Mboma notes that workers fear that the factory’s new owners will not be bound by law to observe conditions and standards set through collective bargaining in the past. Workers also fear further job losses, citing mass redundancies at other privatised plants. Indeed, the prospective buyers of NCZ have indicated that they would shed half of the current labour force.

Plant management shares these fears. The human resources manager, FB Chola, points out that new owners will bring in their own management teams. Since most of the bidders are foreign, this would lead to the ‘de-Zambianisation’ of economic control.

National union leaders argue that only comprehensive economic liberalisation can lay the basis for economic recovery. The shopstewards at NCZ agree with their diagnosis of the causes of decline, but are ambivalent on the measures necessary to reform the economy. They do not see private investment as the only key to growth. On the contrary, they argue for additional government investment and a more professional approach as alternatives to privatisation. They were very interested in the experiments in ‘commercialising’ (rather than fully privatising) parastatals that have taken place in South Africa.

**Worker control?**

Workers do not, however, hold to nationalisation as an innately progressive or worker-friendly project. They do not express a principled opposition to a market economy. For the union activists, the bottom line is the protection of jobs and working conditions. Nonetheless, they feel strongly that they had been robbed of the opportunity to express their views on alternative forms of restructuring. Instead, the ZPA simply announced the sale of the company.

At company level, the union also had very little opportunity to influence the process, even though an NUCIW shopsteward sits on the NCZ board. Although union involvement in company decision making, which was established during Kaunda’s regime, is clearly not working, shopstewards still feel that such systems should be retained. This is unlikely under privatisation.

