

A critical reflection of Trade union representation during Covid-19 pandemic. A case of General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe's members in Mutare

Sauti Christian¹

ABSTRACT

The Agriculture sector remains one of the key engines to the Zimbabwean economy. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has affected all socio-economic spheres worldwide, including employment and working conditions. In Zimbabwe, the agriculture sector has been declared an essential service hence workers have been working continuously but they are subject to a myriad of occupational indecency and challenges. This research focuses on investigating the representative actions of General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) in safeguarding the rights and interests of workers in the agriculture industry in Zimbabwe during COVID-19 context. This investigation employed qualitative research method and an exploratory, multiple case study approach. The 44 conveniently and purposively selected members of GAPWUZ, HR and management from the agriculture industry were interviewed and relevant publications and media content were reviewed. This study established that COVID-19 led to new forms of employment challenges and intensified the existing challenges faced by agricultural workers such as long working hours, unsafe working conditions, and non-payment of overtime, unfair termination of employment contracts and high levels of employment precarity. This study found out that, since the outbreak of coronavirus in December 2019, trade unions have not done justice to address workplace challenges exacerbated by coronavirus pandemic in the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe. Thus, their deliverables are questionable and illusionary. This article recommends that trade unions should inspect workplaces to assess adherence of employers and workers to OHS measures meant to address the spread and effects of COVID-19. Trade unions should continuously provide training and education to workers through workers' committees and strengthen the capacity of shop-stewards to monitor and inspect fundamental rights of employees to ensure decent work.

Keywords: Agriculture sector, Coronavirus (COVID-19), GAPWUZ, Trade Union, Working conditions.

¹Part-Time lecturer, Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences, Department of Human Resource management. Email sautichristian@gmail.com, Cell No. +263782025985

Introduction

The prominence of the agricultural industry in Africa is evident in its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020)'s sectorial brief revealed that the agriculture industry support more than one billion people globally and account for more than 60.4% of employment worldwide with more than 49% employment share in Africa and Asia. Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO, 2016) indicated that on average, the industry contributes 15% of total GDP in Africa. It ranges from below 3% in South Africa and Botswana, 26% in Mozambique, 30% in Kenya and more than 50% in Chad. The agriculture industry is also the engine of Zimbabwean economy, contributing more than 18% to GDP and more than 40% of Zimbabwe's export earnings (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, ZIMSTAT, 2019). In terms of employment, the industry employs more than half of the total labour force in Africa (International Monetary Fund, IMF 2012) and it employs more than 4.16 million people in Zimbabwe. About 70% of Zimbabwe's population depend on the industry for survival (Chakanya, 2016; Mukwakwami and Uzhenyu, 2017); ZIMSTAT, 2019). This shows the significance of the agricultural industry to Zimbabwe in terms of employment, forex earnings and food security.

Coronavirus was identified on 07 January 2020 and it was first referred to as 2019-nCoV before subsequently named the COVID-19 virus. COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic by World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. This was due to the outbreak of coronavirus disease in December 2019 in the People's Republic of China's Wuhan Province. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19 is an infectious and respiratory illness (WHO, 2020). By 11 March 2020, more than 118 000 cases were reported in 114 countries with 4291 deaths recorded. As at 26 September 2020, more than 32.6 million cases were reported and 989 thousand deaths have been reported worldwide (European Union,

EU 2020; WHO, 2020). The United States of America (7 033 430) has reported most cases in America. In Asia, India (5 903 932) has also reported most COVID-19 cases. In Europe, Russia (1 136 038) has reported most cases followed by Spain (716 481). In Africa, the five countries reporting most cases are South Africa (668 529), Morocco (112 522), Egypt (102 625), Ethiopia (72 173) and Nigeria (58 062).

A state of disaster was declared on 20 March 2020 in Zimbabwe. As from March 2020 to 26 September 2020, the Ministry of Health and Child Care indicated that in Zimbabwe, out of the 7 787 reported cases, 227 deaths have been reported. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, several governments globally adopted measures and restrictions including compulsory wearing of masks, lockdown and travel restrictions both locally and internationally. A national lockdown and prohibition of gatherings was first declared for 21 days commencing on 30 March 2020 in Zimbabwe. The measures were slightly eased and the lockdown was extended indefinitely on 16 May 2020 where the wearing of masks was made mandatory, public activities and informal markets were closed with exceptions of the food manufacturing, fuel, mining and health related facilities (Xinhua, 2020). The Notice 005/03/2020 from National Employment Council for the Agriculture Industry in Zimbabwe (NEC Agriculture) indicated the classification of the agricultural industry as an essential service during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown by the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. As indicated by ILO (2020) the agriculture sector was essential for food security hence spared from lockdown measures in many countries.

Zimbabwe introduced many statutory instruments (SI) such as SI 76 of 2020 [Chapter 10:06], SI 77 of 2020 [Chapter 15:17], SI 83 of 2020 [Chapter 15:17] and SI 174 of 2020 [Chapter 15:17] to give effect to the implementation of measures to prevent and manage coronavirus. Several reviews and revisions have since

been witnessed with the latest taking effect from 15 September 2020. The government of Zimbabwe authorised the resumption of inter-city travel, re-opening of the Registrar General's Office. Most sectors of the economy including the aviation and tourism and education were re-opened after months of closure due to lockdown and the international flights were set to resume on 01 October 2020. Despite the measures being taken to resume the economy, the threat and risk of COVID-19 is still a reality. Zimbabwe Broadcasting News (ZBC) indicated on 11 August 2020 that the agriculture industry is striving to survive and support the command agriculture program during the pandemic but employers are urged to uphold occupational health and safety measures to contain coronavirus. The president of the republic of Zimbabwe expressed great commitment and that, concerted local and global efforts to find cure to prevent and eradicate the deadly pandemic remains imperative (ZBC News, 26 September 2020).

International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020) state that the impacts of COVID-19 are catastrophic, the lockdowns, travel restrictions, health challenges and other measures taken to contain the virus are impacting jobs and income security. International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2020) estimated a 7.4% negative impact of the pandemic on Zimbabwean economy. ILO (2020) declared COVID-19 as the worst global crisis since World War 11 as the virus is affecting more than 4 out of 5 workers in the 3.3 billion global workforce. Studies before the outbreak of the pandemic for the agricultural sector shows that the majority of workers in this sector are under precarious employment. Most of these workers are women who constitute more than 60% of the workforce (ZIMSTAT, 2019). ILO (2020) revealed that the majority of jobs in agro-sector are characterised by decent work deficits as a result of weak labour market institutions including ineffective labour inspection and compliance, limited social protection, unsafe working environment and increased exposure to occupational safety and health hazards.

The agricultural industry workers are defined as the working poor (Chakanya, 2016), a quarter of the workers in the industry survive in extreme poverty despite the significance of their contribution to the economy. Wages far below poverty datum line and access to social protection are some of the challenges facing agro-based workers in Zimbabwe (Mukwakwami and Uzhenyu, 2017). Other challenges existing in the agricultural industry includes sexual harassment, underpayment of wages, non-payment of overtime and unfair termination of employment contract (Chisango and Tichakunda, 2018; Chikuse, Katsvanga, Jimu and Mujuru, 2012). Chakanya (2015; 2016) in the Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRI) went on to state that “employers in the agriculture sector are failing to provide employees with adequate PPE citing liquidity challenges or economic crisis, workers are victims of sexual harassment, discrimination and limited representation.” The same author; ILO (2019); ZIMSTAT (2019) reveals that whilst the principle Act advocates for the protection of workers' rights and advancement of decent work, the majority of workers in the agriculture industry subject workers to modern day slavery punctuated by poverty wages, employment precarity, abuse, lack of social protection, working beyond legal hours and other forms of unfair labour practices. COVID-19 resulted in an intensification of employment challenges for workers in various economic sectors including the hospitality and agriculture (Uzhenyu, 2020; Bhebhe, 2020). In China, Chen (2020) posits that coronavirus has affected all sectors of production due to manpower crunch caused by fear, sickness and movement restrictions. ILO (2020) indicated that COVID-19 exacerbated job losses with an estimated 155 million full-time jobs lost globally, 5.4% jobs lost in China and 4.4% in South Africa during the first quarter of 2020. The same organisation indicated that COVID-19 has affected 81% global workforce due to partial or full time closure of organisations.

Evidence from ILO (2020); WHO (2020) and other scholars like Bhebhe (2020); Ncube (2020); Uzhenyu (2020); Mhlanga and Ndhlovu (2020) and ZBC News of 24 September 2020 indicates that the persistence of coronavirus is causing decent working hitches and threats to social protection. FAO (2020) and Poudel, Poudel, Gautam, Phuyal, Tiwari, Bashal and Bashyal (2020) revealed that the disruption of employment relations due to COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges faced by agricultural workers and that there is greater possibility that there are multiple new challenges noted following the outbreak of COVID-19. Several studies focused on the implications of coronavirus, the signs and containment measures (Bhebhe, 2020; Ncube, 2020; ILO, 2020), there is need to find out the representative roles of trade unions during the pandemic. There is not yet enough literature and empirical evidence to support the function and relevance of trade unions to mitigate the chaotic consequences and impact of the virus on employment relations in the agricultural industry.

Trade unions are not destructive associations but they are the fabric for worker motivation, and employee engagement to exhibit discretionary effort for organisational productivity (Collins, 2013). The roles of trade unions remains critical in the pandemic context (Ncube, 2020). Unions secure legislative labour protections and workplace rights through collective bargaining. Bhebe and Mahapa (2014) define a trade union as an organisation whose membership consist of workers and union leaders united to promote and protect their common interests and rights at the workplace. In relation to section 2 of Labour Act (*Chapter 28:01*), a trade union means “any association or organisation formed to represent or advance the interests of any employees of class thereof in respect of their employment.” It is deduced that a trade union is a conscious association of employees with the primary objective of maintaining or improving working conditions and achieve decent work. Mutual accommodation in the face of

COVID-19 is one key ingredient for achieving workplace decency and mitigate the implications of coronavirus on employment relations. Institutionalisation of trade unions in Zimbabwe has permitted the entrenchment of protective instrument for employee welfare. By virtue of being an important organ for representation of employees in employment relations, there is need to examine the actions of trade unions in protecting the rights and interests of employees amid COVID-19 pandemic.

The study used that case study of General Agriculture and Plantation Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ)'s members in Manicaland region. GAPWUZ was formed in 1982, registered by the government in the year 1985 and certified as a legal persona in 1986. Its major aim is to promote, advance and protect working conditions and improve living conditions for works in the agriculture sector. It is a neutral (non-partisan), voluntary and a democratic trade union which is affiliated to Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and registered in terms of the principle Act. The trade union is a representative organ for agricultural workers falling in several sub-sectors such as timber, *kapenta*, horticulture, general agriculture, tea and coffee, it has more than 32 000 out of about 120 000 workers in the entire agricultural industry. GAPWUZ membership was interrupted by then neoliberal market driven ESAP of 1991 and the fast track Land Reform Programme of 2000. GAPWUZ plays a pivotal role in eliminating discrimination and gender inequalities in the agriculture sector. It advocates for the achievement of decent working conditions and enhanced employee performance in the industry. The mission of GAPWUZ is to effectively and efficiently represent, protect and promote workers' and human rights in the Agriculture sector in order to attain decent working and living conditions for all of agricultural workers. The trade union is mandated to uphold the dignity of employees through protection of fundamental worker rights. In order to achieve decent working environment, GAPWUZ provides education and training, gender mainstreaming, health and

safety, represent workers on disciplinary and grievances and is active in collective bargaining. As shown in the vision of GAPWUZ, the union strives to create an industry where workers are taken as the source of competitive edge and not subject to all forms of exploitation, victimisation and discrimination.

Objectives of the Study

This article sought to;

- a) examine the impact of COVID-19 on employment in the agriculture industry
- b) examine actions taken by GAPWUZ to safeguard employee interests and rights
- c) explore challenges faced by the trade union

Materials and Methods

This article examines the impact of COVID-19 on employment and the actions taken GAPWUZ to safeguard the interests and rights of employees in the agricultural industry in Zimbabwe amidst coronavirus pandemic. Challenges faced by the trade union were also explored. The study employed a qualitative, multiple case study approach with a sample of 44 participants who were conveniently and purposively selected from three large organizations with membership at GAPWUZ in Manicaland Region. 13 participants were selected from each of the three selected companies which are named Company A, Company B and Company C in this paper. The remaining 5 participants were selected from GAPWUZ. Qualitative research method investigates things in their natural setting, it aims to discover attitudes, feelings and seeks to make sense of events from the interpretations of people (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The study followed exploratory research approach which utilises

qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group discussions for a particular issue with little existing knowledge. Matters relating to trade union representation during coronavirus pandemic in the agricultural industry remain less acknowledged and understood. More specifically the actions being taken by trade unions to protect the rights and interests of agricultural workers following the intensification and growth of new employment challenges.

The participants gave narrations pertaining the representation function of the trade union in safeguarding their workplace rights and interests during the coronavirus context through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were used to gather data from 24 shop-floor workers and 9 workers committee members. Shop-floor workers were grouped in the total discussion groups of 8 participants from each company and workers committee members constituted 3 members per each focus group discussion from each of the three selected companies. Semi-structured interviews with 5 trade unionist from GAPWUZ, 3 management participants and 3 human resource representatives each from the three companies were conducted. Thematic approach with the aid of themes has been used for data presentation and analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis emphasise on rich description of qualitative data and explore questions about experiences, perspectives, social processes and practices that shape particular phenomenon.

Findings

The implications of COVID-19 on employment in the agricultural sector

All participants submitted to fore that coronavirus pandemic brought myriad changes within the agricultural sector which was operating during the national lockdown period as an essential

service. Workers committee members and human resources personnel attested that COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal regulation and administration of leave provision in the agriculture industry. Shop-floor workers from company A and B indicated that the employers are forcing employees to go for vacation leave, and at worst, unpaid leave. Participants from company B reiterated that their employer is giving workers twelve special leave days during this coronavirus era and those with more leave days were given vacation leave to reduce leave liability. Trade unionists and HR participants agreed that there is no prescribed legal framework for leave management during COVID-19 era. One trade unionist had this to say;

“The three companies have been forcing workers to go on vacation and unpaid leave. There is no clear provision governing leave in time of natural disasters but we expect that based on humanitarian concerns, employers should not be unfair to their critical assets, when things are bad for employers, the same employees sacrifice their commitment, time and efforts to ensure company survival so the same should be reciprocal, in disasters, there is need to support each other not to be ruthless.”

In all the interviews, participants raised concerns over low wages and salaries. The three companies have been adjusting salaries through the NEC for the agriculture industry during the COVID-19 context but the wages were too little to cushion the cost of living. The Collective Bargaining Agreement for agriculture industry shows that the minimum wages in for agricultural workers in February 2020 were at ZWL\$165 (equivalent to US\$2.03 using the official Zimbabwean bank rate of 15 October 2020) for A1 grade, increased by 114.81% to ZWL\$1450 (US\$17.83) in May 2020. In September 2020, the minimum wage is ZWL\$4800 (equivalent to US\$59.01) for an A1 graded employee and the light allowance of ZWL\$175 (equivalent to US\$2.15). Participants from company C stated that their company

is paying an internal cost of living allowance (COLA) across all NEC graded employees. For Company B, the shop-floor employees argued that they are given food hampers equivalent to USD\$10. However, for company A, the participants stated that the company is not capable of giving employees anything above the NEC minimum wages or food hampers due to financial crisis and reduced sales. The wages and allowances given are not enough to cushion the cost of living for agriculture workers. One of the workers committee (WC) members went on to say;

“The minimum wages are not sound, the blame also goes to the trade union's inefficiencies which delays wage negotiations by not engaging the NEC in time. Employers are just taking advantage of this situation and the business viability challenges during COVID-19 era to offer peanuts whilst they pay management in USD. With the current wages, we are not able to buy basic goods for consumption, travel or pay bills, we are just cut-off. GAPWUZ should engage the employers at the negotiation table to increase our salaries and improve our welfare and not to sleep on duty.”

When asked to comment on the impact of COVID-19 on employment conditions in the agriculture sector, all study participants reiterated that non-provision of personal protective clothing has become a critical challenge. They further submitted that COVID-19 has worsened the OHS challenges in the industry. One of the shop-floor workers pointed out that;

“Before the emergence of COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions, the company was trying to provide enough and sufficient protective clothing to us. COVID-19 brought procurement challenges for employers to secure enough safety and health protective equipment for COVID-19 and OHS in general. We are working without masks, gloves, and hand sanitisers. We do not have work suits, safety gloves, safety shoes and helmets. Our employer is failing to provide such critical equipment due to the closure of PPE manufacturing organisations, closure of borders

and lack of financial resources to purchase PPC during coronavirus era. We are just working in panic, we are scared but we do not have any option, we just work so that we secure our jobs and receive the peanuts and survive.”

One trade union official said that;

“The safety and health of agricultural workers is at high risk, employers especially company A and B do not care about the safety of their workforce. Only management and a few employees have been issued with masks, hand sanitisers and other equipment to prevent the risk of coronavirus, this is very unfair. The employers claim financial incapacity to purchase the required safety gear due to COVID-19 yet they expect workers to perform, meet targets and present discretionary behaviours at the workplace.”

There was a consensus from all participants that COVID-19 exacerbated the growth of precarious employment. A human resources representative explained that contracts of employment for the majority of agricultural workers were terminated due to several reasons, some workers just absconded to stay safe at home by reducing the risk of vulnerability to COVID-19 while others on fixed term contracts had their contracts expiring without renewal.

An official from GAPWUZ has this to say;

“COVID-19 has aggravated the mushrooming of precarious work and work indecency in the agricultural sector. The pandemic came at the period when we are also fighting against temporary employment in the industry because employers had more than 70% of their workforce on precarious contracts. This virus led to massive terminations of temporary contracts and the security and future of permanent employees is not yet certain since the virus is here to stay, they might be retrenched. Workers have no comfort, peace and are experiencing sleepless nights due to fear of job

insecurity ignited by this deadly COVID-19.”

Most of the participants revealed that workers in the three companies are working for more than 9.5 hours per day and 209 hours per month which are legally prescribed in terms of the CBA for Agriculture Sector in Zimbabwe. One shop-floor worker reiterated that;

“Since March 2020 when president of Zimbabwe declared national shutdown, we never stopped working because we were told that we are an essential service. However, despite working without enough PPE as stated by the government, we are working more than 10 hours per day without paid overtime. We are being exploited daily but our trade union is silent. We have since informed our union of the matter but they did not even come to hear and address our grievances at work. This is painful, our work-life balance is compromised and we kindly ask our union to help us address these challenges.”

The human resources and shop floor workers indicated that there is lack of workplace representation by trade unions during the coronavirus pandemic. The same participants reiterated that since the rise of COVID-19, trade unions have been silent, they are not active enough to address employee grievances and concerns amid coronavirus. One trade union official confirmed the notion and said;

“The virus brought severe challenges to the working patterns of GAPWUZ and our function as a union in protecting workers rights and interests at work during the virus context. Many employers have terminated bulk of employees especially those on fixed term, seasonal and casual contracts. This has affected our density with more than 20% decrease and the dues are not paid religiously which is constraining us in terms of resource mobilisation and effective representation of workers in the industry.”

The majority of female participants noted that sexual harassment and discrimination of workers has been intensified by COVID-19. These participants also mentioned that workers especially those on temporary contracts are being abused, harassed and discriminated by senior employees in managerial and supervisory position. They do not have a voice due to fear of job insecurity. A trade union member said;

“There are numerous cases of sexual harassment and discrimination of workers in the agriculture industry during the coronavirus pandemic. Even domestic violence is at its peak in the industry. Employees are being subjugated and maltreated because their jobs are at the mercy of the capitalists. On average, at least four workers especially female are sexually harassed on a daily basis in the industry in this period. Also, many employees under fixed contracts are being terminated willy-nilly more than those on permanent employment. The termination processes are very unfair and discriminatory. Sometimes, employers are giving first preference to permanent staff when issuing safety clothing and equipment to prevent the risk of COVID-19 than those on temporary employment.”

One other participant from workers committee reiterated;

“Coronavirus empowers our employer to terminate workers without following the necessary procedures. We have raised the issue of unfair labour practice to the trade union seeking for representation and workplace protection. This was fruitless. As workers, we are now under survival mode because we are fighting alone in this battle. In the labour laws, trade unions are meant to represent our interests and rights at the workplace but what we are experiencing shows that trade unions are no longer functional and relevant. Employers should take care of workers in both good and bad situation. Unfair terminations especially during natural disasters is violation of law hence trade unions are expected to intervene.”

Trade Union representation in safeguarding the interests and rights of workers

In light of the changes and challenges brought by COVID-19 to the agriculture sector, the thrust of the article was on investigating the trade union representation in addressing the employment challenges brought and intensified by COVID-19. The following presents the actions of GAPWUZ.

Interesting to note was the fact that trade union officials identified awareness campaigns as one strategy used by GAPWUZ to address workplace challenges during COVID-19 era. On the same point, one trade unionist went on to state that;

“After realising that COVID-19 has brought a myriad of challenges and unfair labour practices to workers in the agriculture industry such as job insecurity, sexual harassment, gender based violence, and working under unsafe condition. As a union, we have introduced awareness campaigns. Awareness campaigns are part of our major goals as GAPWUZ and we have joined hands with the Ministry of Health and Child Care and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) to impart workers and the communities with knowledge to curb the effects and spread of the virus. Through the community working group (CWG), we are educating all stakeholders, employers, employees and their families to respect coronavirus preventative restrictions and support each other during these tripping times.”

In contrast to the issue of awareness campaigns, participants from workers committee and shop-floor workers corroborated that they were not involved in any of the campaigns and activities of GAPWUZ at the workplace to fight against COVID-19.

The participants argued that trade unions have not done justice to safeguard employment and job security for precarious employees in the agriculture industry. There is lack of legislation to protect workers from indecency and precarious employment during coronavirus pandemic. The introduction of the CBA on the Capping on 19 March 2020 was meant to address temporary employment since July 2015 case of Nyamande & Anor v Zuva Petroleum (Pvt) Ltd S-43-15. The trade union official has this to explain;

“When we learnt that employers are dismissing workers unfairly and terminating contracts willy-nilly mainly for atypical workers since Zuva Case in 2015, we motivated through NEC Agriculture to develop legislation to prevent unfair termination and challenges of job insecurity facing agricultural workers. In March 2020, we came up with an instrument specifying that a contract for fixed period worker (FPW) can only be renewed for three times and beyond that, it shall be deemed permanent. This piece of legislation is meant to protect the rights of workers to fair labour practices and employment security. The instrument will also help to protect agricultural workers from unfair termination and enhance job security in the industry. It is quite applicable during this coronavirus context though its emergency during the virus is by default.”

On the same note, HR participants highlighted that the legislation was not specifically meant for COVID-19 employment challenges. Trade unions need to come up with just in time policies and actions to protect workers from indecency especially in the time of natural disasters. One workers committee representative said that;

“Although there is a law passed to govern temporary employment, as workers we are unfairly dismissed and terminated without notice and packages whatsoever. Trade unions are just quiet, they

are not doing enough to monitor and enforce compliance by employers on the implementation and adherence to decent work standards. If the law is meant to protect temporary workers even during challenging times like COVID-19 period, then trade unions should be active in enforcing it.”

The trade union officials submitted that they are working in conjunction with Community Working Group (CWG) and village health workers on the safety and health component to contain the virus. They have also created WhatsApp groups to educate and advise workers and communities on the ramifications and measures to manage coronavirus in the agriculture industry. One trade union official reiterated that;

“We have created several groups to address several issues around COVID-19. We are doing our best to provide hand sanitisers, masks, and booklets for the fight against COVID-19 but we are also facing financial challenges to provide sufficient resources to our stakeholders.”

One other trade union official remarked;

“Trade unions are for checks and balances, we have employers advocating for high production whilst workers are working without PPE for coronavirus. We are advising employers to refrain from that behaviour and respect employer health and safety and they know that we can recommend for strike because this virus is a health and safety hazard. We have been also advising employers to apply the Codes of Conduct to educate workers who violate the safety and health measures meant to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19.”

Trade union representatives stated that GAPWUZ is very active in collective bargaining to improve working conditions and address challenges faced by workers. One of them supported;

“As a trade union, we are helping to increase employee wages and allowances. We have elected negotiators from the workers in all organisations who participate in collective bargaining on all matters affecting agricultural workers amid COVID-19.”

However, one managerial employee has this to comment;

“There is need for trade unions to be neutral and remember that they represent workers. They delay negotiations and make workers suffer; we expect these unions to facilitate for collective bargaining consistently in this ever-changing environment. In most cases they prefer deadlocks and leave workers with poor wages and working conditions. For example, unions want to conduct wage negotiations after at least three months in this era, this is inefficiency and we opt to give COLA and hampers to help workers in addressing the socio-economic demands they are encountering in this chaos.”

Several recommendations were given that trade unions should be involved in spearheading social dialogue at industry level. Social inclusion of all employment stakeholders will enhance their support for trade union actions in containing the virus. Some would provide PPE/PPC, financial resources and even human resources to facilitate programs to prevent the risk of COVID-19. Participants suggested that trade unions should engage workers and management when conducting awareness campaigns to combat coronavirus disease. Trade unionist need to visit the workplaces for checks and balances, they will get first-hand information from the victims of indecent work practices during the pandemic context. This will help them to develop policies to protect and empower employees against violation of workplace rights and interests. Supporting and addressing the plights of workers during challenging times will build positive perceptions of employees upon trade unions hence enhance trade union membership. The majority of participants were of the opinion that

trade unions should be engaged in revenue generating activities so that they help employers to provide OHS equipment to manage COVID-19 and help their members to cater for the cost of living through financial assistance.

When asked on the challenges militating the efforts of trade unions in safeguarding the right and interests of workers during COVID-19, the following were noted by the participants:

due to the current economic crisis, trade unions are facing lack of resources to offer OHS programs and equipment to safeguard workers against the pandemic.

there is limited manpower to facilitate awareness campaigns on COVID-19 for the entire industry.

lack of trust from the employees might be a challenge since unions are believed to be pro-employer and have a vested interest.

building a positive perception and commitment from employees and management may be a challenge since trade unions are considered external intruders who compromise the harmony in the employment relationship with political ideologies.

resistance and accepting change during the pandemic might be an hurdle

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 has brought several impacts on employment in the agricultural industry in Zimbabwe. It was discovered that management of leave has been compromised during the pandemic. Employees are subject to forced leave which affect their social protection as critical assets who can unlock organisational bottom line. This contradicts ILO's decent work

agenda (DWA) which calls for social protection of workers through respect of decent working conditions (ILO 2020). Uzhenyu (2020) and Ncube (2020) shared the notion that it is an unfair labour practice for employers to force their workers to take leave especially in the context of natural emergencies. During natural disasters, it is advisable for employers not to force workers to go on leave. Organisations need to communicate swiftly with the workers through workers committees so that the cost implications of leave liability in the context of a pandemic is fully appreciated.

Evidence from the research revealed that coronavirus pandemic impacted working conditions in the agriculture sector. Workers are earning poverty wages, they are working without proper PPE to prevent the risk of exposure to COVID-19. This confirms ILO (2020); Ncube (2020); FAO (2020)'s view that agricultural workers are vulnerable to indecent work deficits, they work without enough protective clothing during the pandemic. Sachikonye (2003) and Jerie (2012) revealed that the agriculture sector is one of the sectors with high rates of accidents in Zimbabwe. NSSA (2020) shows that COVID-19 emerged to intensify OHS challenges in the agriculture sector. This is ample testimony that coronavirus pandemic increased violation of fundamental right of workers to fair labour standards. Participants argued that they are receiving poor wages which are far below the poverty datum line and are overtaken by hyperinflation in Zimbabwe. This is in sync with Poudel et al (2020) and ILO (2020) who found that workers in the agriculture sector are the working poor because they living wages which are very low to cushion their socio-economic demands amid COVID-19. During the pandemic, agricultural organisations are not providing PPE to safeguard workers against COVID-19 yet workers are supposed to continue working under the essential service. Coronavirus pandemic has affected employment conditions and debilitated organisational capacity to increase wages on the basis of low

business efficiency.

Precarious employment and job insecurity have become the norm for agricultural workers during the COVID-19 period as found by this research. This has been supported by Uzhenyu (2020); Bhebhe (2020) and FAO (2020) as they indicated that precarious work is mushrooming in the agriculture and hospitality sectors in Zimbabwe during the pandemic era. The precariats are surviving under high job insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty levels. Their contracts are terminated willy-nilly, they are working under unsafe environment because they lack a voice or representation to advance their grievances and protect their rights and interests in the COVID-19 context. It was therefore observed that workers in the agriculture industry are subject to low labour protection on the guise of coronavirus disease.

The study found out that the representative function of trade unions amidst COVID-19 is a myriad. Trade unions are expected to visit the workplaces and engage workers so that they fully understand the concerns of their constituencies. Employees are facing workplace indecency and exploitation without effective representation from the unions. The participants reiterated that trade union has not done enough to ensure that their fundamental rights and interests of workers are protected. There is weak trade union representation due to lack of resources. Ncube (2020) also argued that trade unions fail to address worker concerns during the pandemic due to lack of financial and human resources. Trade unions should have other cash generating activities so that they supply employees with PPE and part of salaries during times of crisis. Trade unions are also affected in representation by COVID-19 which has reduced their density. The virus reduced their density with an estimated 20% rate, hence low dues and they are constrained financially to support programs for employees to curb the effects of COVID-19 in the world of work. ILO (2020); Uzhenyu (2020) also argued that natural disasters lead to

restructuring and downsizing of staff which will result in low union density. There is lack of effective representation due to low union density in the agricultural sector under COVID-19 era.

The study found out that trade unions are not performing vital functions to address the workplace challenges amidst COVID-19. Gwisai, Matsikidze, Ushewekunze and Musoni (2009); Sauti (2017); Ncube (2020)'s view that trade unions are very important and are still relevant in addressing socio-economic and occupational health and safety challenges of workers. While trade union members largely considered provision of a few PPE, training of community working groups in conjunction with CWG and taking part in collective bargaining as vital means to manage the challenges intensified by COVID-19. Other participants were of the perception that trade unions have more to offer to mitigate the challenges associated with COVID-19. The worsening economic situation in Zimbabwe is affecting trade unions capacity to effectively help in solving employee concerns during the COVID-19 era. Trade unions are expected to engage in collective bargaining with employers to provide decent work conditions (Lewchuk, 2017). Human resources are the most critical assets of an organisation, therefore, trade unions need to advocate for the provision of sufficient personal protective clothing recommended for the fight against the spread of coronavirus. In accordance with s29 of Labour Act (*Chapter 28:01*), trade unions represent workers on workplace matters affecting their working lives and they should engage employers and advise that s6 of the labour afford workers the right to decent working standards. Even s104 of the principle Act, the workers have equal right to go on strike and or refuse to work in an unsafe working environment. It is one of the key function of trade unions to promote workplace safety.

The findings reveal that trade unions should not be pro-employers when addressing employee concerns during COVID-19

pandemic. It is argued that unions have the mandate to ensure mutual benefit of both employers and employees in the employment relationship (Mucheche, 2013). Thus, when there are health and safety glitches, poor wages, sexual harassment and discrimination by senior employees and employers, trade unions should raise an alarm for immediate stoppage of such (ILO, 2020). Dehumanising practices by employers during the coronavirus pandemic gravely demotivate workers, lead to disengagement, loss of commitment hence lowered production. Employees suffering from poor and or weak representation by trade unions, have a tendency of unsubscribe from trade unions (Sauti, 2017; Mukwakwami and Uzhenyu, 2017). Therefore, trade unions need to be active in representing workers against exploitative working conditions in order to retain their density and remain vibrant in this coronavirus context. The study shows that trade unions are expected to stand with employees both in good and bad times, for agricultural workers, trade unions are most trusted but their neglect of duties has brought mixed perceptions among their constituency.

Conclusions And Recommendations

It is an undeniable fact that COVID-19 novel is posing a mirage of challenges in employment relations in the world. The current study found out that the workplace challenges faced by workers in the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe were deepened by coronavirus. This is in sync with Uzhenyu (2020); Bhebhe (2020) who argued that COVID-19 has worsened the workplace indecency for workers who are also subject to hyperinflation and heavy socio-economic challenges in the country. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, employees are subject to poor wages, indecent working conditions, limited workplace representation, non-provision of PPC/PPE hence vulnerable to the risk of coronavirus. Indecent work, unfair labour practices, unfair termination and work precariousness has heightened during the

coronavirus era. Employers are not addressing employee concerns but worry much about the bottom line despite workers plights for protection against COVID-19 and fundamental workplace rights and interests in the agriculture sector. Thus, Ncube (2020) submitted that this is the time for trade unions to co-evolve and cope with changing business realities in findings ways to address challenges faced by workers in the coronavirus period.

Trade unions are a relevant organ to advocate for the protection of workers' rights to fair labour standards as enshrined in the principle Act amid COVID-19. Based on the above discussion, the paper recommends that trade unions should develop policies for checks and balances of employers' compliance to the provision of required OHS equipment to prevent COVID-19. Employment policies developed to protect workers in the face of the virus will enhance workplace harmony and decent work. The trade unions should audit and inspect employers in the agriculture sector who are forcing workers to go on leave and subjecting their human resources to work without PPE/PPC in unsafe working environment. It is a prerequisite for employers to provide body temperature kits, masks, hand sanitisers and re-design jobs to meets the social and physical distancing declared conditions by the government. There is need for trade unions to engage employees at the workplace for awareness campaigns to fight against COVID-19.

Since the agriculture sector has been classified as an essential service, there is need for trade unions to visit the operating organisations to address and educate employees on the effects and challenges ushered by the COVID-19 pandemic in the world of work. The failure of trade unions to visit workplaces and hear employee concerns in these tripping times has brought negative perceptions on the function and relevance of trade unions in the contemporary employment relations. Therefore, to rebuild trust, trade unions should constantly engage employers in collective

bargaining to improve working conditions and OHS measures for the advancement of social justice and promotion of worker dignity during the coronavirus period.

The paper recommends that trade unions should have other revenue generating activities to support their constituency with resources in times of crisis. For example, in the contemporary COVID-19 era, trade unions would have been helping employers by providing protective equipment and personal protective clothing to workers rather than depending solely on the monthly subscription of union dues from workers. This is also key to enhance trade union density and trade union efficiency. The employment challenges during coronavirus calls for mutual cooperation and efforts from all stakeholders in the employment relations.

The study suggest that trade unions need to strengthen workers committees through training and education on their functions and responsibilities in advocating for decent work and protection of workers' rights at the workplace. There is also need for the establishment of OHS committees in agricultural organisations and training of safety and health representatives because they are the shop stewards who help in monitoring and ensuring workplace decency and advancement of worker plights to address the challenges deepened by COVID-19.

Coronavirus disease is a reality, it is the new normal disrupting the traditional nature of workplace relations and working conditions in general. It has caused and intensified a lot of workplace challenges in the agriculture sector. This therefore require effective trade union function to advocate for social justice, workplace democracy and support for occupational health and safety measures introduced to protect worker safety.

References

- Bhebhe, M. (2020). Employee disengagement from the perspective of Frontline Employees: A Hotel Case Study in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Management and Administration*, 1, 73-100.
- Bhebe, Q. and Mahapa, M. (2014). The Decline in Trade Union Density in the 21st century in Zimbabwe. A case of Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU). *Journal of Human Resources Management and Labour Studies*, 2(1), 67-82.
- Chakanya, N. (2016). *Working and living conditions of Workers in the Agricultural sector in Zimbabwe*. Harare: LEDRIZ.
- Chakanya, N. (2015). *Precarious Work and Working Conditions in the Hotel and Catering Industry of Zimbabwe*. Harare: LEDRIZ.
- Collective Bargaining Agreement for Agriculture Sector in Zimbabwe (Statutory Instrument 116 of 2014).
- Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment number 20 of 2013).
- Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, S.Y. (2005). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Gwisai, M. (2006). *Labour and Employment Law in Zimbabwe: Relations of Work under the Neo Colonial Capitalism*. Harare: Zimbabwe Labour Centre.
- Gwisai, M., Matsikidze, R., Ushewekunze, S. and Musoni, K. (2009). An Outline of Fundamental Labour Rights under International Laws, National Constitutions and Zimbabwean Constitutional Norms. *The Kempton Makamure Labour Journal (KMLJ)*, 2, 71-84. Harare: Zimbabwe Labour Centre.

- ILO. (2020). *COVID-19 and the world of work*, 5th edn. ILO: Geneva.
- ILO. (2019). *Work for a brighter future. Global Commission on the future of Work*. ILO: Geneva.
- Jerie, S. (2012). Occupational health and safety problems among workers in the wood processing industries in Mutare, Zimbabwe. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Economics and Management Sciences (JETEMS)*, 3(3), 278-285.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2018). *Precarious lives: Job insecurity and well-being in rich democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lewchuk, W. (2017). Precarious jobs: Where are they, and how do they affect well-being? *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 28(3), 402-419.
- Madhuku, L. (2015). *Labour Law in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Mariwo, T. (2008). Working Conditions and Labour Relations in the Private Security Industry in Zimbabwe, *ILO Discussion Paper No.27*. Harare: Zimbabwe.
- Mucheche, C.H. (2013). *A Practical Guide to Labour Law in Zimbabwe*. 1st edn. Harare: African Legal Resources Dominion.
- Muindi, F. and Wangara, C.S. (2010). The effectiveness of Trade Union leadership and the factors influencing the leadership effectiveness. *African Journal of Business & Management*, 1, 1-14.
- Mukwakwami, H. and Uzhenyu, D. (2017). Rise of Casualization of Labour in Zimbabwe's Agricultural Sector: A Retrogressive Practice to Employment Security. *Journal of*

Business and Management, 19(9), 72-77.

Nchimbi, A. (2018). The Trade Unions performance in Tanzania. The perceptions of School Teachers Union in Singida Municipality. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 6, 242-254.

Ncube, F. (2020). Developments and Changes adversely affecting Trade Unions in the Hospitality Industry in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 9(3), 199-214.

Ncube, F. (2017). Precarious Employment as Survival Strategy: An Emerging Reality in Zimbabwean Hotels. *The International Journal of Business and Management*, 5(2), 67-73.

Rossmann, P. (2013). Meeting the challenge of precarious work: A workers' agenda. *International Journal of Labour Research*, 5(1), 22-40.

Poudel, P.B., Poudel, M.R., Gautam, A., Phuyal, S., Tiwari, C.K., Bashyal, N and Bashyal, S. (2020). COVID-19 and its Global Impact on Food and Agriculture. *Journal of Biology and Today's World*, 9(5), 1-4.

Sachikonye, L. M. (2003). The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers after Land Reform in Zimbabwe. *A report prepared for the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe*. Retrieved from <http://archive.kubatana.net/docs/landr/> on 24 July 2020.

Sauti, C. (2017). *Survivor Syndrome and Labour Productivity. The case of Border Timbers Limited*. Gweru: MSU. Retrieved from <http://msulib.library.msu.ac.zw> on 06 August 2020.

Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*.

New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

The Zimbabwean Labour Act [*Chapter 28:01*]. (2006) Harare: Zimbabwe Government Printers.

Uzhenyu, D. (2020). Employment relations dynamics in the midst of COVID-19 induced national lockdown. The Zimbabwean scenario. *Human Capital Development*, 2, 4-7.

Webb, S. and Webb, B. (1920). *The History of Trade Unionism*. London: Longmans, Green and Company.

ZIMSTAT (2019). *Labour Force Survey*. Harare: Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency.