

## Revisiting trade unions' response to new public management: a case from Zambia

Clever Madimutsa and Leon G. Pretorius

### Abstract

This article discusses the strategic responses by public-sector unions to new public management (NPM) reforms in Zambia. The article is based on a qualitative research methodology focusing on the Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia. The study shows that public-sector workers in developing countries are more vulnerable to the effects of externally imposed NPM reforms, which include job cuts. However, the implementation of these reforms faces opposition especially from trade unions. In line with the assumptions of strategic choice theory, union responses to NPM reforms are strategic. Despite the high vulnerability of public workers in developing countries, their unions use strategies that can also be observed in developed countries to mitigate the negative consequences of NPM reforms on the public sector. These strategies follow a three-stage process, namely, opposing the reforms, negotiating for favorable reform measures, and shifting from centralized structures to networks.

### Introduction

The public sector the world over has been undergoing reform since the 1980s. The reforms have taken two forms. The first is new public management (NPM) while the second is post-NPM reforms (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007). In general terms, the reforms attempt to promote efficiency and effectiveness of public institutions by adopting private-sector strategies. These include downsizing, restructuring, human resource management, decentralization, outsourcing, commercialization, performance management, and partnerships (Ayee, 2008; Dzimbiri, 2008).

The NPM paradigm originated in developed countries, particularly in the United Kingdom. From the United Kingdom, it moved to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Later on, it moved to Scandinavia and Continental Europe. Eventually, every country in the world got influenced by this paradigm in one way or another (Lane, 2000). However, this paradigm presents significant challenges for democratic governance (Edigheji, 2008; Manning, 2001; Zafra-Gómez, Bolívar, & Muñoz, 2012). It also affects the employment relationship in the public sector. The effects include job losses and reductions in union membership and income (Anderson, Griffin, & Teicher, 2002; Brewster, Dempsey, &









































- Simutanyi, N. (1996). The politics of structural adjustment in Zambia. *Third World Quarterly*, 17, 825-839.
- Simutanyi, N. (2011). Political challenges facing the Zambian labour movement ahead of the 2011 general elections. In *The labour movement in Zambia* (pp. 19-25). Lusaka, Zambia: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Streeck, W., & Visser, J. (1997). The rise of the conglomerate union. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 3, 305-332.
- Waddington, J. (2005, July). *Trade union membership in Europe: The extent of the problem and the range of trade union responses*. A background paper for the ETUC/ETUI-REHS top-level summer school, Florence, Italy.
- Webster, E. (2006). Trade unions and the challenge of the informalisation of work. In S. Buhlungu (Ed.), *Trade unions and democracy: Cosatu workers' political attitudes in South Africa* (pp. 21-43). Cape Town, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Zafra-Gómez, J. L., Bolívar, M. P. R., & Muñoz, L. A. (2012). Contrasting new public management (NPM) versus post-NPM through financial performance: A cross-sectional analysis of Spanish local governments. *Administration & Society*, 45, 710-747.
- Zagelmeyer, S. (2007). Determinants of collective bargaining centralization: Evidence from British establishment data. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49, 227-245.
- Zambia Privatisation Agency. (1999, July 1-December 31). *Zambia Privatisation Agency: Progress report* (No. 15). Lusaka: Author.