



**“Assessing Zimbabwe’s Election and  
Prospects for a Democratic Transition”  
A conference at the  
National Endowment for Democracy (NED)**

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On January 29, 2018, more than 200 women gathered outside the Hwange Colliery Co. to [protest the theft of their husband’s wages](#), some of whom had gone without pay for five years. The women maintained their protest for nearly 120 days, braving cold, rain and challenges from the government and the company that ranged from issues of legitimacy—they were not employees, so what standing did they have in this issue, etc.

Hwange Colliery is one of the country’s biggest mining companies. The government is the largest shareholder, and the company provides coal to leading industries in Zimbabwe and exports to 13 countries, including Belgium, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, South Africa, Russia and Zambia, yet it had not been paying worker salaries for five years, accruing a debt of [\\$70 million](#) to its employees.

The company’s second-largest shareholder is British investor Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, who emigrated to Zimbabwe and has vast property holdings and investments in mines in Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Van Hoogstraten, a notorious UK slum lord, who, by the way, was [convicted of manslaughter](#) of a business rival in the UK, although that verdict was overturned on appeal.

For five years these women have sustained their families through informal trading, cross-border trading, farming, vending, taking in laundry, selling airtime. Some have resorted to sex work, while also carrying out unpaid labor in the home.



In late May, the demonstrations ended following an agreement negotiated with the women, the union and management. The first demand: management's signature on a document stating that their husbands would not face retaliation. In addition, management has agreed to pay workers their full salaries beginning June 2018, along with a 2.5 percent monthly payment on the arrears. This is a huge victory in the fight against wage theft in Zimbabwe and against one of the country's most egregious violators. And, it is one of the clearest indicators of the change that has occurred in the country, under this new government that is deeply concerned with achieving international legitimacy.

The change represented by the political opening in the country is important, as important as are other changes that have occurred.

First, the courage of the Hwange wives, a group of women living under extreme conditions, demanding their rights—who had tried the same approach in 2013 and were viciously attacked by the police, beaten and hospitalized, but came back again. Following the 2013 attack, the Harare-based NGO the Centre for Natural Resource Governance began working with the women in Hwange. They conducted capacity-building workshops and shared information on non-violent strategies for direct action, facilitated exchanges between women in other mining communities, as well as participation in feminist schools. This work has built a partnership that has helped lay the foundation for what might be an emerging social movement in the country.

Also, over the past several years, the National Mineworkers Union of Zimbabwe (NMWUZ)—an independent union that has been prohibited from organizing workers at Colliery—played an important role. The union, with several of our staff, traveled to Hwange in 2016 to conduct a community survey. While there, the team was surveilled and, facing a detention threat, had to leave the area. But the union has continued to quietly engage workers and, when the women began their demonstration, the union was there to provide support, including food, supplies and a tent to protect them from the elements. The union has been a presence. The union recognizes that the fight is not only in the workplace, but also in the community. The Hwange wives are not dues-paying union members. Their husbands are not dues-paying union members. These women are the wives of workers, so the union stood with them.

We spend a lot of time trying to think about how autocrats, kleptocrats, authoritarian regimes and systems and structures that perpetuate inequality will



behave. And in Zimbabwe that has meant lots of time spent on scenario planning. But, regardless of the particularities of the scenarios, we do understand that mass-based membership organizations, like unions, working in concert with informed communities around common interests, are a powerful force for change. This is critical now, during this period of political opportunity, and will remain even more important after the elections, regardless of who wins.

Because, while things have changed, there are no illusions about what remains the same in Zimbabwe.

- [Wage theft](#) is a phenomenon that affects all sectors of the economy, including the public sector. Ninety-four percent of workers work informally, which means that only 6 percent have formal jobs—which means with contracts and benefits. Yet, of that 6 percent, nearly one-third are victims of wage theft.
- In addition, the ZANU PF government is a militarized state with widespread corruption and an enormous debt burden.
- Key provisions of the constitution have not been implemented. The government fails to engage all stakeholders in national dialogues, and the election reform process is incomplete.
- Labor is particularly concerned about the country's legal framework, and that the new government has been more combative when it comes workers' issues. For example: The country's vice president dismissed 6,000 nurses who were striking for better working conditions and salaries. The decision was overturned because the decision was illegal, as the right to strike is guaranteed by the constitution.
- Labor is also wary of the government's international mantra that Zimbabwe is "open for business" and fears that without an equal emphasis on protection of worker rights, the phrase might be that Zimbabwe is "open for abuse."

In summary, things are changing in Zimbabwe, but structurally much remains the same. What is clear is that regardless of who wins the election, mass-based, membership organizations, like unions, working with communities to advance issues of common interest, are a powerful force for change. And, working together, with international supporters, they can use their power to help build the inclusive economy and sustainable development that Zimbabweans want.