Trade unions or tribal organisations?:
the genesis of Porgera Mining and
Allied Workers Union in Papua
New Guinea

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Abbreviations

PMAWU Porgera Mining and Allied Workers Union
PNG Papua New Guinea
DLE Department of Labour and Employment
PNGTUC PNG Trade Union Congress
PJV Porgera Joint Venture
The Porgera Mining and Allied Workers Union (PMAWU) evolved out of the establishment of the giant gold mine in Porgera, a backwater of Enga Province in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) central highlands. This article documents the genesis of this union and describes the challenges and obstacles it faced from management aggression, union leadership rivalry and rank and file division.

The current context of the Papua New Guinea industrial relations system

Papua New Guinea inherited an industrial relations system from its Australian Colonial Administration. On paper this system is tripartite, with government, employers and unions all expected to be effective players. In practice these tripartite partners have performed poorly with the result that the labour relations system is unable to either effectively deal with industrial issues or meet the challenges of economic reform and other broad government policies.

The state’s role in the industrial relations system is constrained by various factors ranging from an unreceptive and apathetic civil society to its own inactivity in the area of labour relations. It’s role in labour policy and administration of industrial relations matters has been given low priority and has mostly been reactive (Heron, Machida and Salter 1998:5). The Department of Labour and Employment (DLE) is under resourced and there is a lack of sound policies to guide the work of the labour administration, particularly in the areas of employment, industrial relations and occupational health and safety. Despite the state’s lack of commitment to the maintenance and consolidation of a viable and effective industrial relations system, it has had the ability to influence the industrial wage tribunals over the years since independence. Here its role has been to argue for no or only very small increases even in circumstances of high inflation.

On the other hand, another key area of concern is that the individual employers and peak employer organisations in the country are notorious for consistently maintaining a unitarist approach to dealing with employee issues. Over the years a lot of industrial issues have risen out of workplaces that have given little or no attention to the appalling terms and conditions of employment. They have justified their low priority on industrial issues to be mainly a matter of managerial prerogative. Their compliance with labour standards is weak, particularly amongst small employers in urban areas and rural agricultural estates where workers are less unionised. A lack of adequate financial resources and manpower in the DLE seems to have compromised inefficiency in enforcement of labour regulation in those areas. Constant complaints therefore on wages and unfair dismissals are rampant in workplaces everywhere. Particularly, under-payment of workers, non-compliance with legal minimum wages and non-submission of wage deductions to superannuation and retirement funds are also some of the common problems characterising unscrupulous and dishonest employers (Heron, Machida and Salter 1998; Imbun 1999). In workplaces where unions are employers have maintained a paternalistic
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view of workplace relations, which offers little avenue for mature interactions between independent organisations of workers and management. Although the peak employer organisations are well resourced, there is very little presence outside of Port Moresby, which forces them to constantly rely on services provided by provincial labour officers of the DLE.

Equally responsible for undermining workers welfare and benefits and therefore the entire operation of the industrial relations machinery is the lack of sound unions. The trade union movement is particularly weak and fragmented, more evident in the private sector. The failure to develop effective unionism even after more than 20 years of existence has been caused by a myriad of factors including poor leadership, ‘misconceptions’ about how unions should operate, to workers’ lack of education (Imbun 1999a; Hess 1993). This poor level of union development has undermined the industrial relations system’s potential for dispute resolution and wage fixing. But there are a few exceptional organisations, which have developed both the membership and leadership prerequisites for effective operation within the system of compulsory conciliation and arbitration (Hess 2001). However, the peak union organisation, PNG Trade Union Congress (PNGTUC) lacks the resources to effectively play its role in advocating and pursuing workers issues. It acknowledges the need for union and worker education and the amalgamation of small unions for efficiency, but lacks the resources to implement and oversee such endeavours in order to improve effectiveness in delivery of union service to workers in the country.

A seriously flawed legislative and administrative framework is another issue facing the PNG industrial relations system. As mentioned earlier, the framework in which formal procedures for the prevention and settlement of industrial disputes and the making of awards and determinations, which can be enforced in the courts, are covered for by the relevant industrial relations legislation. The legislation also provides for the registration of organisations of employers and employees and gives such organisations protection from civil suits resulting from industrial disputes. Although the legislative mechanism is relatively simple and fragmented, its application is done on an ad hoc basis. It is no longer relevant since the machinery was established in the early 1960s. Over the years there has been very little effort into modifying the legislative mechanisms, particularly the Industrial Relations Act (revised) 1978 and Employment Act 1978 to adapt to current circumstances. Such a situation has allowed for very little rigour in the contracts for industrial relations and leaves far too much to the discretion of officials and politicians. This can be evidentially exemplified by the recent sacking of the Industrial Registrar for allowing a properly organised secret ballot to go ahead which eventuated a legal strike by the PNG Banking Corporation Workers Union over unpaid entitlements as the bank was in the process of being privatised. The officer’s crime was to have not physically supervised the secret ballot when in fact that has been the responsibility of the Electoral Commission Officers in other industrial disputes which have occurred. In this case
the latter was there, however, the Industrial Registrar’s sacking was done by the Labour and Employment Minister in order to nullify the whole dispute as ‘procedurally illegal’ and allow for the smooth transition of the public enterprise to private hands without much controversy (The National, 26 August 2001).

Another concern is in the administration of the industrial relations system that can be also attributed to the malfunction of the entire system. The DLE, the administrative agent for overseeing the productive relationship of workers and employers at the workplace has chronic problems. The main weaknesses of the current arrangements includes lack of adequate funds, a general lack of resources, inadequate levels of staffing, lack of technical and managerial capacity, lack of support capacity, lack of information capacity and insufficient training and expertise in industrial relations matters. These deficiencies are more critical at the provincial level where most industrial disputes and individual grievances occur. The industrial relations officers in the provincial centres lack the most basic resources necessary to properly carry out their functions in relation to labour and their other areas of responsibility. This includes irregular labour inspections where in many workplaces occupational health and safety standards are basic or non-existent. As a consequence of these most basic constraints the DLE has only been able to maintain and play a reactive role and its impact on overall government policies has been.

This is investigated in the context of a historical understanding of the difficulties PNG unions have faced in developing both the membership and leadership prerequisites for effective operation within the system of compulsory conciliation and arbitration.

Unionism in a historical context

The establishment of trade unionism in developing countries differs significantly from that in industrialised countries. The very different process of industrialisation, social formation and economic structure has hampered the proletarianisation of the workers of developing countries (Siddique 1989:390). In these circumstances workers unions have had to battle many non-industrial obstacles including colonialism, culture, tribalism, and politics to stay committed to representing the workers’ needs (Taylor 1977:238; Hess 1992). The emergence and development of unionism in Papua New Guinea provides an example of the hardships and struggles workers have gone through to form and maintain unions in the face of adversity.

In the early 1960s, the enactment of the Industrial Relations Act and Industrial Organisations Act by the Australian Colonial Government allowed unions to replace the ethnically based welfare societies that had sprung up in the towns during the 1950s as Papua New Guineans struggled to come to terms with an urban lifestyle and permanent wage labour. General workers’ associations based on a town or region became the norm but they really only operated to fulfil, on paper at least, the tripartite requirements of the industrial relations system (Hess 1983, 1988; Imbun 1995, 1999a).
The failure of PNG workers to develop effective unionism in the 1960s and 1970s has been explained by poor leadership (Chapman 1965), colonial background, (Rowley 1968), ‘misconceptions’ about how unions should operate (Patterson 1969), and workers’ lack of education (Bailey 1970). This poor level of union development undermined the industrial relations system’s potential for dispute resolution and wage fixing (Isaac 1969; Imbun 1999b). Exceptional organisations with the capacity for effective operation within the system of compulsory conciliation and arbitration included the PNG Teachers Association and the Waterside Workers Union. Unlike many other unions in the country, these two unions were exceptional in that they had competent leaders and a membership base, which understood the function of unionism and fulfilled its commitments accordingly.

In the two decades before the development of the Porgera mine, PNG unions remained generally weak and unable to use the industrial relations processes of conciliation and arbitration to their full advantage. Out of the total number of 1,278 disputes recorded between 1963 and 1982, only 18 per cent went to arbitration, while most were merely ‘ignored’ by the various employers and a few cases were solved at conciliation (Daley 1983:85). Between 1989 and 1992, the same pattern continued. Of a total of 55 disputes a third of the disputes were terminated without successful negotiation and the rest were settled with the frequent involvement of DLE industrial relations officers (DLE Industrial Dispute Statistics 1993:12). Much of this poor performance has been attributed to the weakness of unions which were unable to articulate their members’ grievances or bring them to the machinery of the industrial relations system.

In this dismal performance of the entire union movement, the mining unions became some of the most active industrial organisations in the country. Mining workers have not, however, attracted the attention of academic commentaries. While much has been written about the relationship between mining management and landowners, labour relations have been regulated. This article seeks to make a contribution to correcting that neglect.

The Porgera Mine

The Porgera Joint Venture (PJV) operated mine is located in Enga in the central highlands—one of the very least developed provinces of Papua New Guinea. Before construction of the mine began, only superficial infrastructure was in place, and the traditional lifestyles of the local Porgeran people were largely intact. Subsistence agriculture and alluvial gold mining dominated the pre-mine Porgeran economy. Subsistence agriculture is still the predominant activity and major source of livelihood. But the impact of at least four decades of contact with the gold economy is also evident. Like any mine, Porgera has undergone change as it moved through various phases. A snap-shot of how it was in the late 1990s gives an idea of its scale and work structures. At that time, the mine was the sixth largest in the world and it was managed by Placer Niugini, a subsidiary of the Canadian mining conglomerate, Placer
Dome, on behalf of three other equity partners, including the PNG Government.

The mine operated on a commuter roster of 21 days on-site followed by 10 days fieldbreak off-site for the expatriate, national, and Porgeran employees who made up the 2,100 strong workforce. Expatriate employees, mainly Australians, travel to and from Cairns, Australia, while the PNG nationals, other than Porgeran employees traveled to and from their province of origin. For non-Porgeran employees, the company used to provide mostly single accommodation units.

The establishment of the PMAWU was due to work done by a core band of organisers in 1989 and 1990. They risked heavy-handed management tactics and police arrest to convince workers in both the contractor workforce and operation workforce to join the union. Being aware of the successful history of union organisation during the construction phase of other mining projects in Papua New Guinea, the PJV management was vigilant to discourage activists (Imbun 1999b). Several workers who discussed the formation of a union were terminated ostensibly for work related reasons. The recruitment drive was headed by, Jethro Tulin, a young Engan man with a Grade 10 education. Before joining PJV he had a seven-month stint as a clerk with the Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress (PNGTUC), the peak trade union body in Papua New Guinea. In the short period, Tulin was groomed and quickly became familiar with the practicalities of running unions. The Porgera mine offered a challenge he could not resist. He recalled that, ‘I was really excited, I mean … shared the principles of the union movement and all I had to do was [to] round up the workers in Porgera mine to set up a union which could speak for rights of the workers’ (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000).

On the 28 April 1989, John Timbun, a Porgeran with experience as an official of the Bougainville Mine Workers Union, started work with PJV as a personnel officer. On Tulin’s return from work for the PNGTUC, he and Timbun formed a formidable partnership together and laid the necessary groundwork for the union. With the support of a group of ten assistants they established the premise of the PMAWU. Half of them worked for contractor companies and the rest for the mine operation. Several of them were Engans. All of them had previous experience in the cash economy as employees and in union activities before their employment at Porgera. This core group of union organisers took on the duty of convincing fellow workers to join the PMAWU.

Despite the eagerness of the organisers, management paternalism and stubbornness proved a hurdle in the beginning of the establishment of the PMAWU. The top expatriate management was hostile towards any establishment of trade unions and sought to establish tight control of the workforce. This mode of worker control was also evident in the other large PNG mines including Bougainville, Ok Tedi, Misima, Tolokuma and Lihir. In each of these a conservative management paternalism combined people oriented human resource management policies with tightly structured work organisation and control (Imbun 1999).
This strategy was held with the viewpoint that improvements in the effectiveness of production of ore materials was the primary objective. Work relationships built on a *macho* or *rambo* management style noted internationally in the 1980s (Sisson 1984) predominated coercing workers and their unions to accept managerial prerogatives and directives. In Porgera mine, the PJV management was accused by employees of hostility, exploitation, confrontation and intimidation, and seen as using heavy-handed tactics in their relations with the workforce and union activists (Interviews, P. Samson, Pogera, 12 September 1999; M. Tembe, Wabag, 16 September 1999). However, such tactics were supplemented with a paternalistic approach referred to by management as its ‘open door’ policy. In theory, this policy allowed workers to approach line managers about any issues. Close scrutiny, however, shows that the policy was used as a ploy by management to individualise issues and therefore serve as an alternative to the function of a union.

The PJV management seems to have harboured narrow views, which saw workers as first and foremost tribesmen rather than as members of an industrial working class (Imbun and Morris 1995). In interviews with the expatriate mine management it was evident that they viewed the unions as having less of the ‘same character’ as unions existing in their countries of origin such as Australia and Canada, merely because workers still had an overwhelming alliance with the co-existing tribal social system (Confidential Interviews 1999–2000). Such attitudes prevented them from acknowledging the coexistence of the union and tolerating genuine industrial activities. Such attitudes and actions evidently had an adverse impact on the effectiveness of the PMAWU endeavour to recruit workers and in many instances negotiate for workers conditions. PJV was not exceptional in this but followed a standard practice of foreign dominated mining management deeply hostile to the establishment of union organisations. At both the Bougainville and Ok Tedi copper mines early trade union activities were seen as ‘civil disturbance matters’ and police were often called upon to gaol organisers (Imbun 1997:48). At Porgera, Tulin and Timbun with the rest of the organisers felt they had to use clandestine means to recruit members to avoid possible arrest by the mine security guards and police (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000).

Attitudinal perceptions of mainly local Porgeran mineworkers were another obstacle to the establishment of the PMAWU. As had been the case at Bougainville in the 1970s those more willing to sign up for membership of the union had been employed before (Mamak and Ali 1979:33). At Porgera many illiterate landowner employees with little or no formal education firmly believed ‘it [union] is for the book people’. They also saw it as an adversary because ‘it is against our mine and boss all the time’ (Confidential Interviews 1999–2000). The misconception of the role of unions also applied to some section of the educated workforce where joining a union and the paying of dues did not come naturally as a result of solidarity. Some informants were specific in stating the view that joining a union was like buying...
shares in a company and expecting the payment of further dividends in the future (Imbun 1998:28).

Further, the union organisers found it hard to make headway amongst the white-collar workers in both the construction and operation areas of the mine, who saw themselves as independent professionals. Although they differed greatly in function and income, the white-collar workers developed an independent mentality that was chiefly characterised by the wish to be distinguished from the general workforce. Whether accountants, clerks or lab attendants—the most important thing for them was their status as ‘non-workers’ (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000). So the PMAWU became a manual workers’ union.

In spite of the obstacles, the recruitment drive for the formation of the PMAWU was a huge success with nearly 80 per cent of the total mine workforce organised in mid 1989. Of the 2,400 members about one-third were from the construction workforce. The clear absentees were amongst the landowner employees and the white-collar workers. The PJV management objected to the registration of the union. Its reason was that the mine was still in the construction phase and workers were not yet ready for unionism. In the end, upon pressure from the DLE, the company had very little choice but to acknowledge the formation of the union. The PMAWU was formally registered with the Industrial Registrar on the 23rd January 1990 (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000).

The PMAWU in action
Following the registration, the PMAWU held its first formal election of office bearers. All five executives elected were employees of the mine expect Tulin who was the full-time secretary. All were from Enga, except the treasurer, and all of them had some experience in unionised work areas before Porgera. In addition to Tulin, two were from the core organiser’s group. Timbun was the obvious omission in the union executive, as he declined nomination for the presidency and only wanted to play an advisory role in the organisation. The Engan domination of the executive of the PMAWU reflected the composition of the manual mine workforce of which had two-thirds were from the province. Tulin recalled, ‘The Engan connection worked well in keeping the members together and consolidating the base of the union organisation as we continued to convince our Porgeran colleagues to join the union and also to plan for bigger things for the union’ (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000). In a cultural context, Engan unionists were to provide effective leadership as culturally they were noted for their strident defense of perceived rights in inter-tribal disputes (Imbun and Morris 1995).

Within two months the new executive of the PMAWU with the assistance of PNGTUC brought a log of claims before the PJV management. They demanded amongst other things an increase in their hourly rate, adequate safety gear, training and localisation and leave entitlements. The management rejected the demands outright
responding that the mine was just in the process of beginning gold production after a lengthy construction period and any demand before recovery of investment was an added cost to the joint venture partners (Imbun, 1995, 1999a). Following a stand off between management and the PMAWU, a wildcat strike ensued and Tulin was arrested for instigating an illegal strike. He was held behind bars in Porgera station for two days. The strike subsided with the formal acknowledgement of the strike as an industrial dispute by the Industrial Registrar. After Tulin’s return from the police lock up he took over the negotiation with management. He proved a shrewd and tenacious negotiator as well as a strong public speaker. In comparison, management was ill prepared with expatriate human resource and mill managers having only superficial knowledge of employment conditions of workers in the mining industry. In the negotiation sessions they gave the impression of being mean and tricky and were overrun by a well-prepared and drilled union negotiation team.

In the meantime, the PMAWU executive rode high on its first major achievement. The long-term sustainability of the union organisation looked positive with the steady flow of union dues and active rank and file members. However, early 1991 effectiveness of the union was tested in a sudden series of sporadic wild cat strikes in key areas of the mine, especially the open pit and underground, with no control coming from the union executive. One explanation of these confrontations was the intense pressure put on the workforce by the management in an effort to increase productivity. Employees recall, ‘control of workers was formal and authoritative, which left little avenue for understanding and communication with the workers. This allowed workers to resist the constant supervision on the laborious and monotonous aspects of some mine work’ (Interview, T. Masen, Port Moresby, 9 August 2000). These incidents unfolded so rapidly that any meaningful communication between shop stewards and union executives became impossible. The management began a punitive exercise and sacked whoever they found to be guilty of resisting authority in the workplace.

Upheaval: the PMAWU faces tribal and ethnic challenges

The composition of union membership continued to cause problems for the PMAWU’s organisational efficiency. The dominant Engan membership of the union was an awkward problem for the executive in attempting to respond to the diversified demands of a heterogeneous workforce. It was seen by many members as not doing enough to serve the interest of non-Engan union members. In particular the disgruntled members thought that they did not challenge the management for the reinstatement of the non-Engan sacked mine workers. Other complaints made by non-Engan union members related to ‘mixing Engan politics with union matters’ and having lack of competence in the executive. They threatened to form their own union. One indication that these complaints were supported by the membership at large is that meetings at this time often failed to achieve a quorum.
While some of the complaints may appear to have been justified, the first union executive did make two long lasting contributions to union success. It achieved the first union award of 1990, the first executive was instrumental in getting the union affiliated with the Miners International Federation Board in the following year, which resulted in a number of unionists sent aboard for conferences in the subsequent years.

In June 1992, Tulin unexpectedly left for a three-month study trip to Israel sponsored by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The departure of the secretary was a blessing in disguise for a new group who was just waiting for an opportunity to challenge the existing the PMAWU executive. Surprisingly, this group included none of the disgruntled employees of other provinces but a new group of Engans who lobbied for a ‘non-partisan and unbiased representation of (union) members’ grievances’ (Interview, J. Tulin, Port Moresby, 27 August 2000). Spokesmen for this group included the PMAWU membership clerk, John Mukin, and Raka Yombon, vice-President, and other new executives.

From the beginning the new PMAWU union brigade began to make its presence felt by taking up a number of dismissal cases. One was the outstanding case involving four workers sacked over various confrontations with supervisors in the previous year. In meetings with management the union argued that the terminations were unfair, harsh, and unjust and that procedural fairness had not been followed when dismissing the workers. The arguments seemed plausible to the DLE conciliators who recommended that two of the sacked workers be reinstated. The union executive was credited with the positive outcome and the non-Engan workers began to cooperate more under the new leadership. The new general secretary, Mukin, stood out in the dismissal case with an aggressive and uncompromising negotiation approach, which paralleled the former secretary’s performance. In this situation, the new executive felt that there was hardly any issue too hard or big for them to take on (Interview, P. Samson, Porgera, 12 September 1999).

Upon seeing the emergence of a more demanding and aggressive new union executive, the PJV management began to make changes to its approach in dealing with the PMAWU. First, it began to consolidate its own capacity by recruiting an additional industrial relations officer and substituting the human resource manager with another expatriate manager from the community relations section. Further, in an unprecedented move, the mine management issued stern notices to the entire workforce to observe all rules and regulations of the mine, giving notice that rule breakers would be immediately dismissed and returned to their place of hire. The warning added that involvement in trade union activities was no guarantee of security where workplace rules were broken.

These ‘heavy-handed’ tactics of the management created insecurity particularly amongst the national staff who were not union members, as well as among the manual workers. In theory, PJV management operated an open door policy and
grievances procedure, but informants reported that in practice, complaining ‘workers are terminated and escorted to the buses and chopper without a fair appeal’ (Confidential Interviews 1999–2000). The result was that workers were fearful and reluctant to discuss any matter with their supervisors and line managers because they might be penalised for bringing things out in the open, let alone taking them to the union. Despite the tough stand by management, the PMAWU positioned itself as a no nonsense organisation that would utilise any strategy to achieve its aims (Confidential Interviews 1999–2000).

The 1993–95 Porgera Award Dispute

In 1993 the award fell due to renegotitations in this climate of frustration and suspicion. Not surprisingly it became one of PNG’s most prolonged award renegotiations. The dispute took some 17 months to resolve and involved a series of spectacular dramas, which saw landowners and squatters joining in to give moral support to workers, numerous standoffs in negotiations, and government intervention. This dispute has been documented elsewhere but worth revisiting because it illuminates fundamental factors which affect union–management negotiations not only at the Porgera mine but other workplaces in Papua New Guinea (Imbun and Morris 1995, 1998, 1999a).

A hefty wage hike topped the claim along with a demand for more training and localisation to occur rapidly. The company’s training and localisation policy was not impressive. The entire senior line management in the administration and technical areas were expatriates, with only a couple of semi-senior superintendent positions in community relations and security being held by nationals. This gave rise to a strong feeling of discrimination, which was reinforced by accommodation arrangements, which favoured foreign workers. For the union, the single most important issue was accommodation and it was prepared to concede on others if the company was willing to provide family accommodation for the workforce. This would provide the basis for a mining town, and would boost local economic activity. For PJV management, however, the accommodation issue was a non-award issue. Their argument was that had the company been required to provide such accommodation, the costs implicated would have influenced the final decision to go ahead with the project (PJV 1993). On the wage issue, management indicated its willingness to negotiate provided the union dropped its position to a ‘respectable’ figure. What followed was a marathon process characterised by a determined union and an equally unyielding management.

The PMAWU held a five day strike in May. During this period, several thousand Porgeran tribesmen and others turned up at the mine to demonstrate ‘moral support’ for the union. Also the PNGTUC and province’s politicians intervened in the dispute demanding the creation of a mining town. Amid the politicisation and atmosphere of intense furore over the dispute, PJV used some controversial and violent tactics including terminating employment of strike ringleaders and allowing riot police to
forcefully goal strikers to break the backbone of the strike.

The dispute zigzagged through a legal wrangle over some sacked striking workers. The PJV management then ignored decisions of the DLE concerning reinstatement of sacked employees following their participation in what was deemed to be a legal strike. The sacked workers were reinstated reluctantly by the management before the dispute hearing was shifted to a Port Moresby hotel at PJV’s expense to avoid further escalation of the conflict. A further three weeks of intense negotiations achieved the signing of a new award on February 1995. There were some increases in the wages and other conditions of work but to the dismay of union members and concerned Engan people the accommodation demand was abandoned as a non-award issue or political issue.

Most union members called the agreement reached between the PMAWU and PJV management a ‘raw deal’ and others saw it as a ‘cheap sale’ of the union position (Interview, J. Mukin, Port Moresby, 26 April 2000). Not surprisingly, in late 1996, Mukin and rest of the PMAWU executives were voted out of office by a union general meeting immediately after the award renegotiation dispute. Nobody actually acknowledged the work they did for the union and the struggles and obstacles they had to encounter to represent the aspirations of the workers. To say the least, most members in the union thought that their lengthy stay in Port Moresby hotels for the negotiations at the expense of the PJV was an indication that ‘a lot’ could have happened as a result of such ‘encounters’ in conducive environments. They thought that the union executive had been ‘bribed’ by the PJV management and therefore they did not negotiate well enough to represent the union members’ interest (Interview, J. Mukin, Port Moresby, 26 April 2000). However, there was little evidence to suggest there was bribery or other inducements given out by the PJV management to the union negotiators.

Dormancy: the PMAWU in the late 1990s and beyond

The new PMAWU executive under the presidency of Manso Tembe, a local Porgeran, has never really posed a challenge to the PJV mine management in terms of advocating members’ grievances. 1997 and 1998 were years of inactivity and clearly the PMAWU was in a position of malaise. The leadership lacked the knowledge and commitment to rebuild the union.

When the performance of the new union executive proved weak, a power wrangle began with an emergence of a splinter group headed by Litten Pandan, a heavy equipment fitter in the mine workshop. This group secured a vote of no-confidence in the executive. Despite the union membership revolt, the executive ignored the decision and declared that they were dully elected and still had the mandate to lead the union. In the meantime the dissidents elected an interim union executive headed by Padan.

The power wrangle in the union got the attention of the PJV management after the general secretary wrote to the mine site manager asking the company to intervene and settle the dispute. There followed immediately a series of meetings with the
industrial relations officers and human resource manager, Padan’s interim executive and the old union executive led by Tembe. Seeing no hope of settlement in the power struggle, the management declared the old union executive duly elected. Padan’s team was told by the PJV management not to organise any union meetings or engage themselves in any activity which might be seen as an endeavour to challenge the power of the current executive (Interview, M. Tembe, Wabag, 16 September 1999). The management’s endorsement and confidence in the old union executive was seen by Padan and other trade union activists as a biased decision which was tantamount to wholesale subjugation of trade union inactivity. They vowed to take the matter to the Industrial Registrar in Port Moresby for bureaucratic intervention in the dispute. However, the news of the meetings leaked out and got the attention of the PJV management, which terminated the employment of Padan and three of his supporters. The ostensible reasons for their termination were work related.

Along with the earlier changes of leadership these rivalries had a devastating impact on the effectiveness of the PMAWU. One result was that PJV management achieved its aim of a ‘tamed’ trade union. The current trade union executives have consciously or unconsciously submitted to the whims of the management and therefore undermined their own trade union integrity and independence. In doing so normal trade union activities such as recruitment drives, shop steward meetings and regular meetings with management ceased to take place and the effectiveness of the union was compromised by the defening silence of its leadership. The PJV management however continues to be hostile to any active trade union activity and uses intimidation and threats to control the workforce. Tembe and his executives continue to maintain that they are doing everything possible for the union members.

Conclusion

The genesis of the PMAWU and its subsequent fortunes show how difficult the task is that unions face in PNG. The prevailing social and economic environment, weak state institutions, workers’ ‘misconceptions’ as to the proper role of unions, leadership rivalries and management attitudes all obstruct unions from fulfilling the orthodox role of representing workers’ grievances. In the context of the PMAWU, an Engan domination of the workforce and union executive and a restless non-Engan group of union members complicated the situation. The rapid turnover of union leadership and the arrogant expatriate management meant that the PMAWU could not realise its potential in addressing workers’ issues. In such situations union effectiveness and efficiency seem a long way off.

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