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Spotlight interview with Jan Sithole, general secretary of the SFTU (Swaziland)

"Average GDP figures hide a poverty rate of 70%!"

Brussels, 26 February 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Defamation, imprisonment, death threats... Jan Sithole, general secretary of the SFTU (*) embodies the courage of the trade union movement in its fight against a ruthless dictatorship. In Swaziland, under the yoke of the absolute monarch Mswati III, the unions are confronted with fierce attacks from the government. Trade union rights violations (especially in the export processing zones), poverty and inequality, HIV-AIDS... Jan Sithole describes the numerous challenges facing the movement and insists on the importance of international trade union solidarity.

What is the situation regarding workers' rights in Swaziland?

Swaziland excels both when it comes to ratifying international conventions and violating them in practice. Human and workers' rights violations are common currency. In the export processing zones (EPZ) for example, there is no right to organise unions, employers are authorised to pay below the minimum wage and labour inspection is seriously limited. All types of abuse are committed in these EPZ, where the majority of the garments produced are exported to the United States. Workers becoming shop stewards or joining a union are fired on the spot. Anyone taking part in a strike is also dismissed, even if the action is legal. Some employers use physical punishment as a disciplinary measure in the textile sector. Such practices are an attack on human dignity and more pressure needs to be placed on the government to ensure that EPZ workers enjoy the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Conventions ratified by Swaziland. Physical punishment is illegal, but the employers are not sanctioned.

Thanks to the pressure brought to bear by the US union centre AFL-CIO, which is able to press for the withdrawal of Swaziland's preferential access to the US market under the Generalised System of Preferences, we have secured improvements in the labour legislation, but we still have to fight to see them put into practice on the ground. Any improvements in the working conditions of EPZ workers are attributable to the auditors sent by the buyers and not the government's labour inspectors.

How strong is your trade union at present?

Membership has declined, and currently stands at 65,000 (of which 38% are women), owing to the mass redundancies and factory closures. Many companies were folded and relocated following the end of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC). We are also heavily dependent on sugar exports, but the European Union has cut its price by 39%, which has also led to numerous lay offs in the agricultural sector, the main income generator in Swaziland.

What are your main demands?

Our country is not a democracy, and workers can have no hope of being

truly respected without democracy. We are fighting with the rest of civil society for a democratic space. Once we have a democratic government, we will have the guarantee that the voice of the masses, including the workers, will be heard and that problems will be debated.

As regards our economy, we are considered to be a middle income country, but it's a delusion: 70% of the active population still lives beneath the poverty line, the unemployment rate is as high as 40%, 33% of the population depends on food donations, and the rate of HIV/AIDS is 42.8%, the highest rate in the world. The country is still very poor, but if one only looks at the GDP, Swaziland is a middle income country. Our export revenues are huge for a population of 1.2 million inhabitants, but 60% of our economy is in the hands of 10% of the population, so this revenue is very poorly distributed.

Is the national trade union movement involved in the fight against HIV?

Yes. We are setting up a programme, with the support of LO-FTF (Denmark), to secure collective agreements that include binding clauses reflecting the practical guidelines of the ILO on HIV/AIDS. These clauses will provide guarantees against discrimination and stigmatisation, as well as providing help with the treatment of HIV/AIDS. The government does not take this problem as seriously as the trade unions do. Our trade union has HIV educators in every company with union representation, and we have managed to convince the employers to offer free condoms and advice leaflets, etc. Changing behaviour patterns is a cultural challenge: our culture promotes polygamy, so a great deal of information and communication is needed to make people aware of the risks, because a cure doesn't yet exist.

What expectations do you have from the newly founded ITUC?

Unity is strength. Uniting gives us a stronger voice, and thus greater impact and greater influence when it comes to reaching our goals both nationally and globally. Swaziland has been ruled by decree for far too long, and the fact that we have survived until now is not only thanks to the internal effectiveness of our union but the solidarity we have received from other national and international trade unions (such as AFL-CIO, COSATU, etc) and the ILO. The ITUC now brings together all the voices of the former ICFTU and WCL, along with the voices of other unions who were not previously affiliated to them. It speaks on behalf of 168 million workers, which is highly significant.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(*) SFTU - Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions

Founded on November 1 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

<http://www.ituc-csi.org>

For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 477 580 486.

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