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Swaziland: Trade Unionists Arrested

Brussels, 18 September 2008 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC strongly protests against the arrests of trade unionists and prominent politicians today in Mbabane, Swaziland, while they were proceeding to the Swazi-South African border in protest over the worsening political, economic and social crisis in Swaziland. Jan Sithole, secretary general of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU); Mr Mario Masuki, PUDEMO president; Mr Jabulani Dlamini, acting deputy secretary general, PUDEMO; and Mr Theodorah Malindzisa, deputy general secretary, were part of the group arrested. The protests took place on the eve of sham national elections in which candidates are not allowed to stand on behalf of political parties.

Jan Sithole, who has been subjected to intense harassment by the authorities for several years, was most recently arrested on 18 August by following a recent march organized by trade unions and other civil society groups against the participation of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and King Mswati III of Swaziland in a meeting of Southern African Development Community (SADC), which took place in Johannesburg on the 16th August 2008 (see previous ITUC online).

King Mswati rules Swaziland with absolute authority, and life expectancy in the impoverished country has fallen to an average of 31 years during his rule. The huge costs of Mswati's recent lavish birthday celebrations and of a shopping trip to Europe and the Middle-East by nine of his thirteen wives in a chartered jet provoked outrage in the country. Two-thirds of the population live in deep poverty, and Swaziland has one of the world's highest incidences of HIV-AIDS.

In a letter sent to the authorities, http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/18_September_2008.pdf, the ITUC urged Prime Minister Dlamini to ensure the immediate release of those arrested. The ITUC called on the government of Swaziland to respect ILO Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise and Convention 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining, which Swaziland has ratified and is obliged to observe.

"The trade unionists arrested must be freed without delay," said Guy Ryder, ITUC general secretary. "Their right to protest against appalling political and economic circumstances and in favour of democracy and development has once again been grossly violated," he added.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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