

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Barnes Dlamini (SFTU-Swaziland)

"Their main objective is to instil fear in people"

Brussels, 16 January 2012 (ITUC OnLine): Trade union activities are being repressed with ever greater ferocity in Swaziland. Repeated arbitrary arrests, intimidation and beatings are used to silence activists. Barnes Dlamini, president of the SFTU (Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions) has been arrested several times over the last year. He gives us an overview of the situation.

Swaziland is notorious for its serious trade union rights violations. How did this situation come about?

Swaziland's social problems date back to 1973 when the king at the time, Sobhuza II, issued a decree banning all political activities in the country. This legislation is still in force today. A return to political freedom is needed, as in the current context, it is the trade unions that are dealing with such matters, given the close relationship between social and political issues.

We are also confronted with the Public Order Act of 1963, which gives the security forces the power to break up any meeting thought to be in any way political. They abuse this power, to the point that we are no longer able to hold meetings or have access to the media. When this law was passed, it was targeted at political parties, but now that these no longer exist, it is used against trade unions.

In this context, there is no genuine social dialogue in Swaziland.

Social dialogue requires respect for trade union rights, but the situation has deteriorated...

There have been many protests over the social and economic situation in Swaziland. The global economic crisis has led countries all around the world to take drastic measures, but in Swaziland, following the IMF's advice, the government announced it was going to cut 7,000 jobs in the public sector. It is still hesitating over whether to go ahead with the cuts, mainly because there are elections scheduled for 2013, but the unfortunate example of Greece shows that governments are still following this kind of "advice" from the IMF. At the same time, the King and the authorities spend huge sums of money on useless things that are of no benefit to the citizens of Swaziland. Cuts should be made to that kind of spending before any drastic measures are taken. We would like to have been involved in the decision-making process, through credible social dialogue, but as this was not the case the trade unions held protests, which were repressed by the police and army.

I was arrested on several occasions, along with some of my trade union colleagues. A number of union meetings were broken up and the participants were detained for two or three days. Those taking part in protest actions were taken away in trucks and abandoned in remote, faraway places, in the middle of nowhere, after having their mobile phones confiscated. Even elderly people were subjected to this. The leaders were arrested, beaten and held without charges.

What were the most notable arrests in 2011?

We held protest marches from 12 to 14 April 2011, for example, against the wage cuts in the education sector. There were around 1,500 people in the streets of the capital, but the police and army intervened. They don't dare to beat us up in public, because people may take pictures with their mobile phones and publish them online, so a group of around ten police officers encircle you and take you away. Many of our members were intimidated, beaten, taken to faraway places, etc.

I was arrested, along with other union leaders. First of all, representatives of the security forces came to my home on 11 April, at around 3 o'clock in the morning, asking to search the house, even though they didn't have a warrant. I let them carry out their search and then they left. On the morning of 12 April, the first day of the march, they stopped me as I was on my way to the protest and took me to the police station where they held me in detention for around nine hours. They then took me home and four police officers were stationed in front of my house for three days to make sure that I didn't leave.

On 14 May, during a meeting connected with the founding of the single union federation, 14 police officers showed up to tell us that the meeting wasn't legal. I was arrested once again and held until 5 p.m.

During the Global Week of Action on Swaziland, from 1st to 6th September, demonstrators were beaten as of the second day of the protest. A number of colleagues that had come to support us from South Africa and Zimbabwe were arrested and deported.

In October, the police went as far as to ban a prayer vigil we had organised prior to a day of protest, on the pretext that we needed a permit... to pray for our cause!

Are you ill-treated whilst under arrest?

They are verbally abusive. They take you out of the cells one by one, and you find yourself in a room surrounded by police. On 14 May, I insisted that they should only arrest me. I called the Labour Minister from my mobile phone, threatening to denounce everything to the International Labour Office (ILO) if they did not stop this intimidation. He said that he would call the minister in charge of the police, which is the prime minister. They started to ask me stupid questions, questions about my father's identity, who they know. I responded that they should first tell me why I was under arrest, and then we could talk, but if they insisted on asking me these stupid questions I would not say anything.

Are these arrests a form of intimidation?

Yes, these arrests are aimed at intimidating us. But their main objective is to instil fear in people, to make them feel that this is the type of treatment they will receive if they follow the unions. They also try to create fear within our families. I have a wife and children, so if you come to my home at 3 o'clock in the morning you are going to wake up my whole family; my children are going to wonder what is going on and will be frightened.

Are ordinary members treated more harshly than the leaders?

Yes. They are very tough on those who are not at the top of the trade union hierarchy. Some are beaten by plainclothes police, when they are taken into the forest, for example.

Is the trade union movement united in the face of this repression?

The two big trade union federations in Swaziland, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions and the Swaziland Federation of Labour, embarked on the process of merging three years ago, with the help of the British union Unite. A founding congress of a unified federation is due to be held at the beginning of 2012. We are a small country, with a population of just over a million people, so we do not need different organisations.

Sipho Jele, a trade unionist, died whilst in custody shortly after his arrest during May Day 2010. Has there been an inquiry into his death?

Yes, but it was not independent, as it was headed by a former police officer. The inquiry concluded that he had committed suicide, but no explanation was given as to how he supposedly managed to hang himself. We have asked the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to press the government of Swaziland to conduct an independent inquiry. The ILO is following up on our request, which gives us hope.

What has happened to the 7,000 people who lost their jobs following the "advice" of the IMF?

They have not lost their jobs yet, but they are under threat. The IMF will not release the loan until this process is initiated. The problem is that when you lose your job in Swaziland it can take four or five years to find another one, because the unemployment rate is around 77%, and the government has not introduced any kind of social security net. Poverty is widespread. We have seen many company closures over the last three years, without any credible companies being set up in their place.

A number of Taiwanese business people have invested in the garment sector in Swaziland. What benefits has this brought the workers?

These Taiwanese manufacturers have favourable access to the United States market thanks to AGOA (1). We have organised a meeting with the U.S. union AFL-CIO regarding these agreements and we want to raise consciousness at the U.S. Embassy in Swaziland, because these are not genuine investments: all the workers are underpaid and the Taiwanese factories contribute nothing in terms of development or growth for the people of Swaziland. They are not based in export processing zones, but everything is managed in much the same way as in EPZs, even though we have succeeded in organising two unions there.

When the Taiwanese invested, the Labour and Trade Ministers at the time promised them that labour costs were very low in Swaziland. We wanted to talk to them, but they refused to meet with us, on the pretext that they had been invited by the government.

A large part of the labour force in these factories is formed by internal migrants from rural areas. They are not able to survive on the wages they are paid, especially given that there is no accommodation or transport in these industrial zones. There has been a significant rise in prostitution in these areas.

Swaziland has one of the highest HIV rates in the world. Are trade unions active in this area?

The most recent prevalence rate announced was 38% of the population. NGOs are very active in this area. The government, meanwhile, does not do enough, as the budgets allocated to health are extremely low. Essential medicines are missing in some hospitals. Yet interrupting the treatment of a person who is HIV-positive can have drastic consequences. At union level, we have received support from Norwegian and Danish partners, and we have introduced policies in the public and private sectors, but we now want to have them incorporated into collective bargaining agreements. Every year, during our negotiations with the employers, we want to add one or two new binding clauses regarding the policy on HIV, such as the provision of medicines, for example, or non-discrimination of HIV-positive persons in the workplace.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) African Growth and Opportunity Act

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