

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

Swaziland: Sugar Workers Pay the Cost of King Mswati's Greed

Brussels, 26 October 2016 (ITUC OnLine): Thousands of workers in Swaziland's sugar industry, which exports hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sugar to Europe and within Africa and is dominated by Swazi King Mswati III, face gruelling and unhealthy working conditions, poverty wages and violent suppression of effort to organise unions according to a new ITUC Report, King Mswati's Gold <http://www.ituc-csi.org/king-mswati-s-gold-workers-rights> released today. The report includes widespread evidence of forced evictions of rural communities to make way for sugarcane plantations, deaths and herbicide-caused illness in the fields, child labour, dismissals and harassment of union representatives, and work schedules of up to 60 hours per week without overtime. Women who become pregnant are excluded from the industry, often resulting in abject poverty.

King Mswati's autocratic rule over the country means that it has one of the worst global reputations for repression of workers' rights while the King himself and a small coterie around him amass increasing wealth in one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Mswati is believed to be worth around US\$200 million, while sugar cane workers earn as little as \$5.30 per day.

While many sugarcane producers are certified under the "Fairtrade" system, the ITUC research which was done with the help of local researchers, found a series of serious violations of Fairtrade's Small Producer Organisation standards, and weaknesses in the standards themselves and the private inspection systems which are supposed to ensure compliance. The ITUC is in discussion with Fairtrade about how it should change the system to ensure that the trade is indeed fair.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary said, "Swaziland's autocratic ruling elite are ripping off their own people, using laws on sedition, subversion and anti-terrorism to suppress workers. King Mswati himself keeps a firm grip on the sugar sector, not for the benefit of the people but just to increase his personal wealth. This example of egregious greed underlines that there is no substitute for the international rule of law in supply chains, and that political and economic pressure from the European Union and Swaziland's African trading partners are needed to ensure that the whole country can benefit from the wealth of the sugar sector."

The ITUC represents 180 million workers in 162 countries and territories and has 333 national affiliates.

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