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Swaziland: International Solidarity Actions

The Kingdom of Swaziland is a small land-locked mountainous country in Southern Africa. It gained independence from British colonial rule on 6th September 1968. The country inherited a multiparty system at independence, which was replaced by an absolute monarchy (the Tinkhundla System) in 1973 under which political parties were outlawed.

The country has a population of about 1.1 million. Agriculture is the backbone of Swaziland's economy with sugar, timber, citrus, textiles and beef constituting the main agricultural exports. The country also exports coal, concentrates, coca-cola, and zip fasteners. About 70% of working people earn less than 2 USD a day. More than 300,000 Swazis depend on donor food aid. Unemployment is estimated at 33% and it is likely to increase in the years to come, while there is no social security safety net.

About 26% of the population is living with HIV, the highest rate in the world. The hardest hit are the economically and sexually active members of the population between 15 and 49 years of age. The ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic have aggravated the poverty situation in the country. The recent global financial and economic crisis has worsened this situation. The Kingdom of Swaziland has ratified many labour-friendly treaties, including the ILO Core Conventions. The country is nevertheless also notorious for violating and abusing the rights of workers and the organisations that defend their interests. Many complaints concerning violations of workers' and trade union rights have been filed against the government of Swaziland during the past ten years.

In an effort to raise awareness and attract attention for the human and trade union rights abuses and the lack of democracy, the

Swaziland federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) and ITUC-Africa, with support from the ITUC, undertook Solidarity Exchange visits to six African countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya. Also, the Swaziland Democratic Campaign (SDC), which was launched in February, and which is led by COSATU and strongly supported by ITUC affiliates and other progressive organisations in Southern Africa, has been active in championing this cause.

In 1973 when the King declared a public state of emergency, banning all political parties, the rights of workers to assemble unless authorized by the Commissioner of Police, introducing a 60-day detention without trial, and vesting all powers (legislative, judiciary and executive) unto the King. To date, the King reigns and rules, appoints the Prime Minister, the entire cabinet, all envoys, 66% of the members of the House of Senate, 20% of the members of the House of Assembly, the entire House of Chiefs, all Commissioners, all Regional Administrators, all Judges, all Public Commissions and all his advisers.

The Constitution cannot be amended unless he consents. The King also controls all the land, minerals and water resources. Press freedom is highly restricted, and the Press is largely state-owned. It is unprofessional, politically biased, tightly controlled and closely censored by the Monarchy. The Press does occasionally criticize the government but never traditional authorities or the Royal Family.

The entire social dialogue process is heavily manipulated. Mass meetings that are organised by civic groups are regularly banned, broken up or invaded by the police, who often use excessive force. A new Suppression of Terrorism Act has been used to further suppress legitimate dissent. Certain political parties have been

proscribed and one of their leaders imprisoned from October 2008 until September 2009. The suspicious death in detention of Comrade Siphon Jele, a trade union leader and activist, after this year's violently interrupted May Day celebrations, has drawn loud and wide condemnation by the global trade union community.

The international workers' movement wants Swaziland

- to have a genuine and transparent constitutional reform
- multiparty democracy, with a true separation of powers
- full implementation of ILO working standards in full consultation and participation of trade unions

To continue to press for the realization of these demands, workers all over the world will be staging International Solidarity Actions for the struggle and cause of our brothers and sisters in Swaziland on 6, 7 and 8 September 2010. The beginning of these actions will therefore coincide with the anniversary celebrations of Swaziland's independence on 6 September.