

Country divided

Botswana's public sector strike

In April this year the public sector in Botswana engaged in the biggest strike ever witnessed in the country. **Carthage Tony Kenosi** describes how the strike divided the country, including students revolting against the closure of schools and politicians taking radically different positions on how to settle the strike.

In giving a message of solidarity to the striking public service workers in Ramotswa village the visiting Nehawu (National Education Health & Allied Workers Union) official noted that the public service unions in Botswana had been sleeping for a very long time but they had now suddenly woken up to stage the largest strike ever witnessed in the country.

ORIGINS OF STRIKE

The work stoppage which was called by the public sector unions under their federation, Botswana Federation of Public Sector Unions, started on 18 April 2011 and was called off on 13 June. The unions threatened to engage in an indefinite work stoppage. The original demand of workers was a 16% salary increase as they had not received an increase for three years. By the end of the strike it had become clear that the government was only going to give a 3% increase.

The public service trade unions noted that the economy had experienced a 7.2% growth after shrinking 4.9% in 2009. They argued that the economy had recovered from the recession while at the same time the rate of inflation was at 8.5% by March 2011. The government argued that it could not afford more

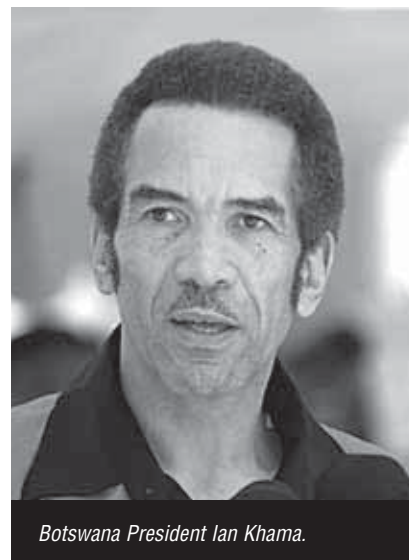
than a 5% salary increase and its main concern was how to cut the budget deficit which stood at 11.5%.

The strikers first targeted the border posts. They intended to disrupt the flow of goods and services over the Easter weekend in April. Most of the workers who are employed in these areas did not join the strike so this was soon abandoned.

The workers looked for salvation elsewhere, and they found this in the health services where many doctors, nurses and other health professionals voluntarily joined the strike. These were classified as essential services but they chose to ignore all government requests and threats not to join the strike. The result was that many hospitals and clinics around the country closed and many patients lost their lives due to poor medical care.

The government reacted by announcing that it had dismissed all essential service employees who were on strike. These were replaced by members of the security forces, such as the army and police, and other volunteers, such as the Botswana Red Cross Society.

Some of the dismissed employees however returned to work. Those who remained on strike were immediately issued with letters of dismissal. Those who returned to



Botswana President Ian Khama.

Sunday Standard

work had their dismissal letters kept secret. They were only issued with them at the end of the strike as letters of re-employment. This meant one group of workers was entering the workplace while others were being dismissed.

STRIKE VIOLENCE

For six weeks the strike was described as one of the most peaceful trial-of-strength strikes ever witnessed. There were however also comments to the effect that there has never been a peaceful strike.

The first group of people to become violent were the secondary



Police monitor students who protested the closure of all government primary and secondary schools by the Minister of Education and Skills Development, Pelonomi Venson-Motoi.

school students. They complained that they had been waiting for too long for their teachers to return to work. They raised other issues such as spending money on transport to school daily in vain as there was no learning taking place. They blamed the government for neglecting them and went on the rampage. They destroyed school property to make themselves heard.

The first student riot started in Molepolole village followed by Ramotswa and the student action spread like a bush fire to the many schools scattered around the country. From the schools the students went out into the streets and vented their anger on the business community where they looted shops and street vendors selling outside the shops.

The government reacted by closing all secondary and primary schools. The secondary students had also moved around to force students in primary schools to join them in the protests. Some students as young as ten years were arrested and detained by the police and some students were expelled from school. The students also marched to the main kgotla (administration centre for tribal leadership) in the village as they wished to inform their chief about their plight.

Even after the strike suspension students in some schools continued

to revolt over the injustices they suffered.

Following student violence came that of striking civil servants. There was fighting between workers and the police as workers engaged in illegal marches. The workers had applied for permits to march to the kgotla to inform the chief about the ongoing strike but the police refused to issue permits saying that they did not have the means to provide an escort for strikers as required by such permits.

Government reacted by deploying many soldiers and police around the country in areas which had been identified as a threat to national security. Many workers were arrested and charged for various offences, such as being a public nuisance meaning that they were dancing in the streets, and also for violent behavior.

Workers were charged with laws that denied them freedoms such as the freedom of speech and expression. The law identified workers' actions and solidarity messages as inciting others to revolt. Some workers claimed they made fires inside their union premises to warm themselves, but they were charged with burning tyres.

Some workers were arrested for photographing strike events.

The unions dismissed these charges as actions which were calculated to intimidate and instill fear in workers.

Government also instructed chiefs not to have any dealings with striking workers. Some chiefs obliged but others like the paramount chief of Balete, Kgosi Mosadi Seboko, refused to obey government orders and accepted the workers into her kgotla.

In addressing the workers she blamed the government for undermining the traditional leadership by not informing them about the strike. She insisted that she had the legal right to attend to any problems that were brought to her by anybody who fell within her jurisdiction.

She also rebuked the workers for failing to include the tribal leadership and the community at large within their trade unionism. She informed workers that many people in the village did not understand what a union was all about and yet they were negatively affected by the activities of the trade union movement. She advised them that they should involve the community in future in whatever they would be doing.

As the strike continued cabinet ministers made attempts to use the kgotla in order to communicate the official government position on the strike. These efforts largely failed as ministers had to flee the Kgotla in fear of irate striking workers who accused them of double standards and that the ministers did not have a monopoly over the use of the kgotla.

The kgotla is usually a traditional tribal administrative centre where issues affecting the tribe can be debated. But the president of Botswana, Ian Khama, did not use it like this. He addressed people at the kgotla over the strike, but in all instances the public service unions were not allowed to take part. He chose to address the issue with people who did not even know that there was a strike in progress. He refused ever to meet with the unions or to dialogue with them.

Some chiefs accepted the ministers into their kgotla though it was clear that no striking workers had attended these meetings.

GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA

The government reacted by controlling what was reported in the state media on the strike. The public only heard government's version of events. The unions were never given the opportunity to give their side of the story.

Daily the government made statements on the strike and the unions accused government of denying them the freedom of expression contained in section 12 of the Constitution. In addition, other freedoms were very limited. It is ironic that in the past many African countries have come to Botswana seeing it as a model for how a government should operate and to duplicate Botswana's success in their own countries.

STAKEHOLDERS INTERVENE

The business community reacted to the strike through the Botswana Confederation of Commerce Industry and Manpower. It noted that because of the strike there had been delays in the supply of drugs to hospitals and pharmacies. The strike also affected businesses through a lack of garbage collection.

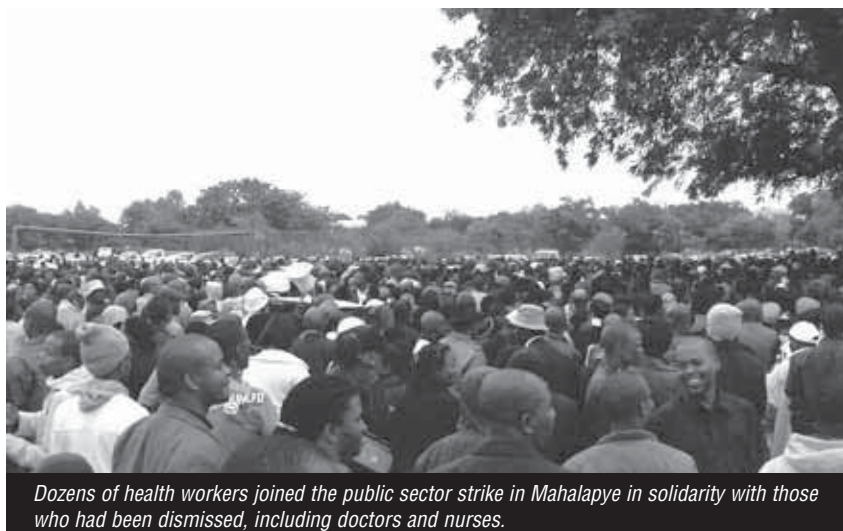
The Botswana Council of Churches also intervened and it called the employer and unions together to talk. Here they apparently reached an agreement but the government later refused to honour this.

The former president Dr QKJ Masire also tried in vain to convince the government and the workers to reach an agreement.

Of particular interest was the intervention of the International Monetary Fund whose demand that government should cut its wage bill, was accepted by government.

POLITICAL FALL-OUT

The ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) was negatively affected by the strike.



Dozens of health workers joined the public sector strike in Mahalapye in solidarity with those who had been dismissed, including doctors and nurses.

Over the years the BDP had managed to sell itself as a model of democracy and good governance to the international community. It had the highest economic growth rate on the African continent and suddenly this was all coming to an end. It experienced some deep divisions amongst its members.

There were those who supported the demands of workers and those who were against them. As a consequence some BDP members resigned from the party and more importantly some resigned from their cabinet posts. Some also resigned from BDP party structures especially in the youth wing and as members of parliament from Maun.

At first the party argued that the strike was ineffective, but later it changed its position and agreed that it was having a multiplicity of negative effects. They accused opposition political parties of being behind the strike.

According to the ruling party opposition political parties should not become involved in labour issues and workers should not have any relationship with these parties. Opposition parties were giving fiery speeches at workers' rallies where they urged the removal of Ian Khama from office since he was incompetent. They encouraged workers to replicate the revolutions taking place in Arab countries.

CONCLUSION

The unions finally reached a conclusion that it was pointless to continue the strike since the government was resolute that it would not give way to any of the union's demands. The strike had also become violent. Shops were being looted and students were vandalising school buildings all over the country. The police were daily arresting strikers and students and the union leadership was largely engaged with assisting to release workers.

Many workers were angered by the decision to end the strike blaming the union leadership for not receiving a mandate to do so. The announcement to return to work was made on Friday 17 June and those workers who failed to report to work the following Monday were dismissed for striking illegally.

As soon as the strike was suspended the government reacted by changing labour laws. This included a law which declared teaching an essential service together with all other education support staff and services. ^{LB}

Carthage Tony Kenosi is a trade unionist in the education sector and is currently doing an MA with the Global Labour University (GLU) through the University of the Witwatersrand.