

Limping with wounds and winnings

Swazi textile strike

Swazi workers, mainly women, recently embarked on a rare industry-wide textile strike. They were met with ferocity by the state. **Alex Fakudze** an organiser from the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers' Union told Kally Forrest about the strike and some surprising outcomes.

“As a union, we were only thinking that we were putting pressure onto the investors. Alas! We did not anticipate what was awaiting us. The workers were hit with tear gas canisters, beaten heavily with batons and shot at with live rounds.” This is how Alex Fakudze an organiser in the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers' Union (Smawu) describes the reaction of the Royal Swaziland Police to a textile workers industry-wide strike.

Through the assistance of the ITGLWF (International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation), the Danish 3F and the US Solidarity Center, Smawu was able in 2004 to establish a Joint Negotiation Council (JNC) with employers in the Textile & Apparel Industry, 90% of them Taiwanese. Says Fakudze, “We are an affiliate of the ITGLWF due to the size of the textile sector assuming 70% of all membership and honestly ITGLWF continues to play a major role in the life of textile workers in Swaziland.” The first round of negotiations under this arrangement took place in 2004.

Under the JNC Smawu tabled proposals and started negotiations at the end of May 2007. Its immediate demands were for a 10% wage increase (inflation is running at 10.67%), a housing and travel allowance, as many workers live very far from factories, and transport costs are high, and 18 days annual leave. The mainly women textile workers were earning R467 a fortnight and were granted 10 days annual leave

Smawu also made other longer-term demands. These included a 40-hour week as Swazi law bases full-time employment on a 48-hour week and workers frequently do a 10-hour day, an annual bonus, pension, medical aid, an end to casualisation and an increase in maternity leave from 30 days to three months.

In August last year, negotiations deadlocked. The union then issued a notice of its intention under Swazi labour laws to engage in a protected industry-wide strike

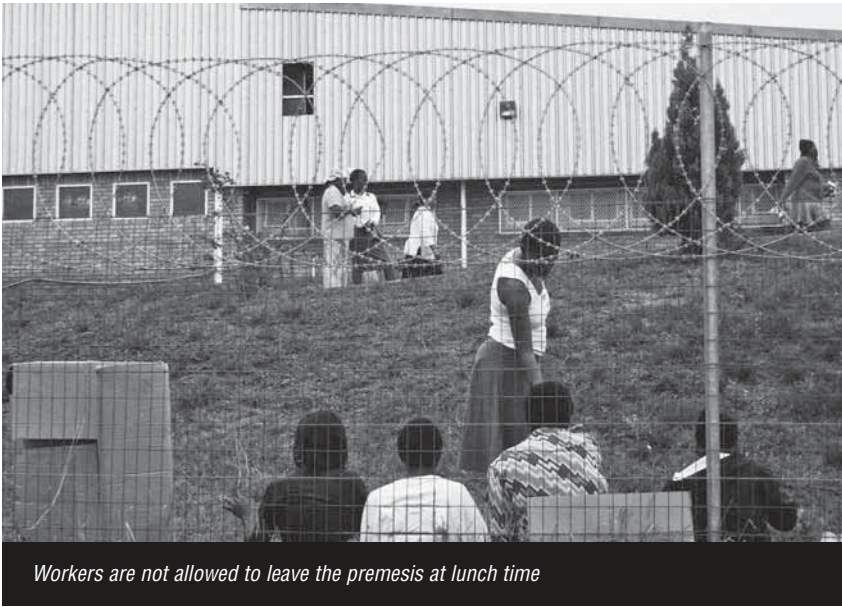
starting on 3 March 2008.

Smawu has about 12 000 textile members with a potential membership of 20 000. When the strike began in March over 16 000 workers participated. This was a sign of these women's desperation. “The Taiwanese/Chinese investors in Swaziland are more of harvesters as compared to genuine investors. They were so unwilling to pay up to the cost of living wages. To us, they are more of slave trade pushers,” commented Fakudze.

In some factories women workers are not allowed to leave the premises at lunch time. Their work environment is extremely noisy and unventilated. At night women work with windows and doors closed in temperatures often over 30 degrees while office workers enjoy air conditioning. The Department of Labour inspectors ignore union complaints and only speak to the employers.

According to Fakudze, Taiwanese investors are looked up to as equal to the highest-ranking officials in Swaziland because of the donations they make to royal events. This meant that workers were “more like fighting the authorities of the country when the strike was engaged into.”

And the authorities responded as if it was war. Strikers obtained permission from the municipality to march to scattered factories along particular routes. The police accused them of blocking traffic and told them to move off these designated roads. Peacefully singing, dancing and protesting workers refused to move. Police started arresting Smawu leaders and marshals and some were



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charged with jay walking.

Two weeks into the strike, frustrated that strikers continued to walk along the road, the police launched into workers beating them with truncheons and releasing tear gas. Some workers responded by throwing stones and this was the signal for the police to open fire with live bullets. Over 40 people were injured and taken to hospital. At least six were shot and needed operations to remove bullets. One was shot with three bullets. Three were shot in the back and one through the neck. A street vendor trading on the side of the road was also shot in the back.

Smawu immediately petitioned the prime minister and the houses of parliament to reign in the police who were becoming a law unto themselves. Police even came to workers who had been treated in hospital and confiscated their medical files and reports. The union is now trying to get these reports returned which means the Swaziland Federation of Labour, to which Smawu is affiliated, engaging with the Minister of Health.

The union is also trying to raise financial help in order to take victims to specialists and to sue the police and/or their employer for their actions against peaceful and law abiding strikers.

Under these circumstances Smawu decided to suspend the strike which had lasted for over two weeks.

Surprisingly however the strikers won some important victories. The Minister for Enterprise and Employment journeyed to Taiwan to engage with company head offices, such as Texray and Zheyg Yong which are the largest textile companies employing 8 000 and 4 000 workers respectively. They agreed to a 10% wage increase and two weeks annual leave. Taiwanese companies made some concessions as they were concerned about bad publicity in the US where they access markets through Agoa (African Growth and Opportunity Act whereby sub-Saharan African countries export duty free to the US if they use American yarn, thread or fabric).

In a surprising development the minister undertook to ease the load of Taiwanese employers by committing the Swazi government to meet two of the union's demands, namely travel expenses and a housing allowance. Comments Fakudze, "That was indeed strange to us and the first of its kind." The union is now corresponding with the Ministry of Enterprise with the aim of starting negotiations on these issues.

At this point the union has only signed a Memorandum of Understanding. It will only sign a full agreement once it has further negotiated other medium- and long-term demands and it reserves its right to restart the strike if necessary.

The Reed Dance

I had a dream

Twenty thousand

Bare breasted virgins

In one delicious revolting act

Threw their reeds into the air

And like javelins

They landed at one point

And a punctured monarch

Scampered into the bush

Like a frightened porcupine

Steve Faulkner

(This poem is dedicated to Dr Gabriel Mkhumane, deputy president of the People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo) who was assassinated in exile in Nelspruit, South Africa in April. He was a key player in a planned blockade on 12 April of the Swazi/South African border in protest at Swaziland's monarchy outlawing political parties. It is widely believed he was murdered by government agents.)