

# Review

## *Solidarity with the people of Swaziland and Zimbabwe* (Workers World Media Productions, Cape Town, 2009)

Reviewed by Kally Forrest

In the 1970s and 1980s there was intense debate about how to make information accessible to workers and people in townships who often had low literacy levels and who were reading in English as their second language. This led to a range of well illustrated, accessible, informative and educative booklets, pamphlets, newspapers and magazines.

Through these accessible texts the idea that information was power was given active expression and slogans like Education for All, Each One Teach One and Power to the People were given real meaning.

Sadly such debates and attempts have faded away in our new democracy and important information that ordinary people may well enjoy and benefit from is locked away in dense texts. The Workers World Media Project (WWMP) however has made it their business to revisit this way of communicating with its recent production of short, plain language booklets, including its *Solidarity with the People of Swaziland and Zimbabwe* published in 2009.

Although not stated, this booklet is primarily aimed at South Africans and was published in the wake of the xenophobia that swept our land in 2008. Its aim is to spread information which will promote understanding, empathy and solidarity with the struggles of the people in these countries. And it does not pretend to be neutral.

The booklet is short, easy to read in reasonably large print and spacious layout, amply illustrated with lively and relevant images (the beginning section is a bit jargonistic

with unexplained terms like 'semi-feudal', 'imperial accumulation', 'neo-liberalism' but the text reverts to accessible language and these terms are unpacked as the booklet proceeds).

The aims of the booklet are clearly stated to guide reading and it is well structured to keep the focus on solidarity. It would be an ideal book to discuss in a study circle, so popular in the past, or in a workshop.

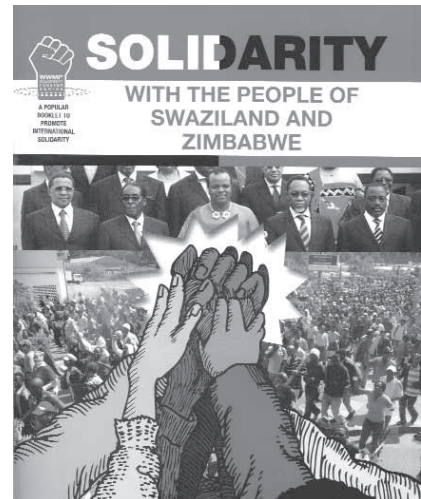
The plain text does not mean that the ideas put forward are simple. The booklet clearly traces, and brings together when relevant, recent developments and useful background which illuminate the politics of Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

The first chapter highlights the pretence at democracy in these two countries. It covers the hollow elections in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe it highlights the farce of the current unity government and the inept response of SADC (South African Development Community) and South Africa to a continuing crisis.

In Swaziland it explains the tinkhundla system (see also *SALB 30.1*) in which the monarchy and male patronage reigns supreme and an empty constitution has allowed for the suspension and banning of political parties.

The second chapter 'The history of colonialism and resistance' is full of interesting and relevant background history as it traces the circumstances that have brought these countries to their knees.

In Zimbabwe it describes the people's resistance to colonialism



which ended in the troubled Lancaster House agreement. It also unpacks IMF (International Monetary Fund) structural adjustment interventions in the country and how President Mugabe ultimately responded with permitting land invasions by military struggle veterans and the middle-class elite.

It then gives a history of the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) in Zimbabwe with its initial radical worker agenda and explains how it altered to become a popular party accommodating many different political persuasions.

It continues with the lesser known colonial history of Swaziland. Here the British appropriated the land of the indigenous people through the imposition of taxes which forced Swazis to seek work on the mines in South Africa.

It goes on to explore the emergence of Pudembo (People's United Democratic Movement) in 1983 which has survived despite political parties being banned. On its

formation it developed a programme to bring together the peasantry and the working class in its democracy struggle. Because trade unions are not banned the union movement has played a large role in Pudemó's mobilisation.

Throughout the 1990s Swazi unions embarked on strikes, protests and border blockades. This resulted in the Swazi parliament introducing stringent anti-union laws such as the provision that union organisers can be slapped with ten years in prison or R10 000 for inciting a strike. In 1996, 100 000 workers responded to these laws with a nine-day general strike to which the state replied with massive repression.

However, losses incurred by business together with the unstable political climate created a more cooperative environment between labour and capital in an effort to break the political deadlock.

In 1997 the Swaziland Solidarity Network (SSN) was formed to which a wide range of organisations both from within and outside Swaziland affiliated, including Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions).

The following chapter 'Building a regional mass solidarity movement' is probably misnamed as it mainly deals with South Africa as a dominant regional economic power. It traces South Africa's economic interests all over southern Africa. South Africa is also the rich neighbour to which economic migrants and cheap labour flood from all over southern Africa.

Yet despite migrants' contribution to growing the wealth of South Africa the government's response to such economic migrants has been tainted with xenophobia. The blame for the xenophobic violence in South Africa in May 2008 cannot only be laid at the door of poor township communities.

The message the South African government gives is that African migrants are not welcome. In the

face of corruption the attainment of documentation to become legal in the country, constant police harassment, and the unrelenting confiscation of goods sold by migrants to eke out a living, the South African government has remained silent.

Also, the South African working class has been much weakened in recent years and this combined with the government's poor response to protecting migrants, has meant a sad undermining of South Africa's progressive traditions.

The chapter concludes that instead of migrancy weakening the South African working class, the presence of so many African nationals presents the possibility of building Africa-wide unity.

The final chapter titled 'The need for solidarity' points to the many ways in which the working class in South Africa could be united and has in fact already engaged in unifying activity.

It reminds South Africans of the substantial solidarity lent to them by African states during the apartheid struggle and that solidarity has the powerful ability to cross borders between organisations and struggles in order to combat injustice.

Solidarity activity has recently been expressed through visits, pickets, marches, press releases, border blockades, meetings and conferences and Cosatu has been particularly active in this.

The booklet emphasises that while it is important to remove the repressive regimes in Swaziland and Zimbabwe, their simple replacement with another set of neo-liberal governments will not significantly change the lives of ordinary people. It calls for the building of an anti-capitalist, pro-democracy regional perspective.

This general call is a weakness in the booklet. Such statements are so broad that they can be discarded as

too easy, too simplistic and can simply be ignored. Southern African solidarity movements need to take part in the drawing up of alternative detailed policies and blue prints on how current neo-liberal, repressive regimes can be transformed.

More research and analysis is needed on Pudemó and MDC programmes. How do they plan to rebuild their countries? Are they poor? Are their programmes realistic and implementable? It is not enough to call for democracy and the downfall of current regimes. If the interrogation of Pudemó and MDC policies reveals a lack of depth in their political thinking, progressive solidarity forces need to push them to produce detailed political programmes.

In fairness the booklet is attempting to get discussion groups going on these critical issues. It suggests a return to study circles popular in the 1980s and gives useful topics to kick-start discussion.

The booklet ends with a plea for regional solidarity and suggests various routes to go which include education (indeed this booklet falls into this category), protest action, pressure on our own government and complicit capitalists, boycotts and blacking action, material support, and regional collective bargaining in South African companies who operate in southern Africa such as Shoprite to ensure parity of conditions and a living wage.

This is an important and accessible booklet that will allow anyone picking it up to quickly come to terms with the issues in these countries and to consider the possibility of solidarity. LB

*'Solidarity with the People of Swaziland and Zimbabwe' is available from WorkersWorld Media Productions for R25. Order from: [reception@wwmp.org.za](mailto:reception@wwmp.org.za)*