

1994 saw a wave of worker action in Swaziland. KUSENI DLAMINI* argues that the balance of forces has shifted firmly in labour's favour, but that a long-term strategic vision is needed to consolidate these gains.



The old order is dying:

worker militancy in Swaziland

For Swaziland's trade union movement, 1994 was a year unlike any other in its history.

The year began with a massive national strike in support of 27 demands put to the government by the country's biggest union federation, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). This landmark strike shifted the balance of forces in the country in favour of the union movement. It boosted workers' confidence and determination to engage employers and the government. A series of militant strikes in many sectors of

the economy throughout the year followed the historic strike.

SFTU, which has 13 affiliates with a total membership of 55 000 workers, called the two-day paralysing national strike. It was a great success for the trade union movement and took place on 21 and 22 February.

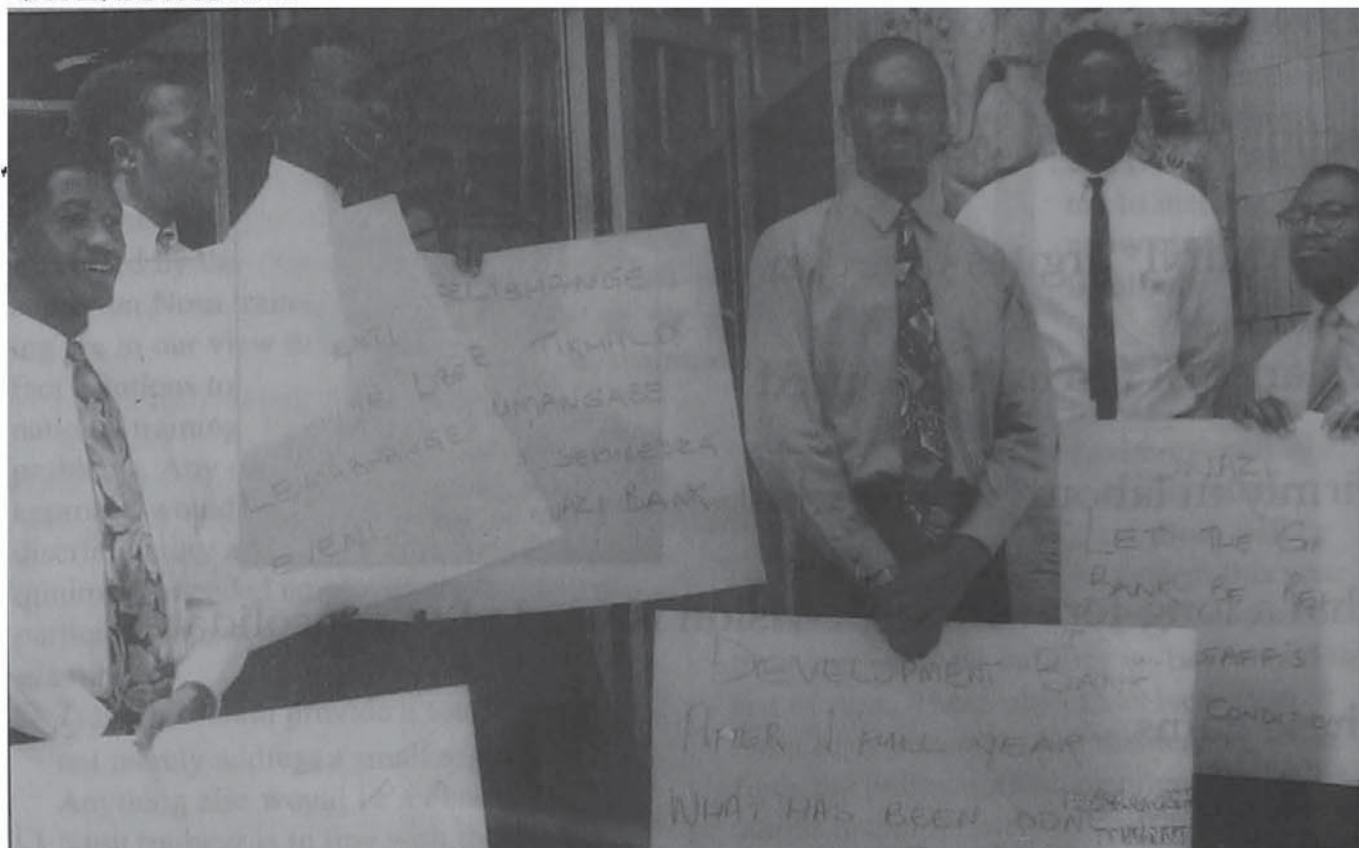
Rallying round 27 demands

Most of the grievances raised by the national strike reflect the skewed employer-employee power relationship embodied in the laws regulating labour relations in Swaziland. Major demands were:

- A review of the Industrial Relations, Wages and Employment Acts of 1980, which SFTU argues favour employers and government.

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** All photographs in this feature by the *Times of Swaziland*.



Swaziland Development Bank workers on strike

- ❑ The introduction of a reinstatement clause to empower the Industrial Court to order the reinstatement of unfairly dismissed workers.
- ❑ May Day as a worker holiday in acknowledgement of workers' contribution to the economy and society.
- ❑ A moratorium on retrenchments and sub-contracting without consultation.
- ❑ Implementation of affirmative action to speed up the localisation of jobs.
- ❑ An end to racial and gender discrimination at the workplace.
- ❑ The right to strike and organise without state repression and intimidation.
- ❑ The unbanning of political parties, freedom of association, freedom of the press and the right to assemble, march and demonstrate.

Swaziland's industrial relations legislation was enacted at a time when unions were still banned in the country. Unions and political parties were outlawed in terms of a King's Proclamation in April 1973. While political parties are still banned, unions were

unbanned in 1982 in line with the 1979 Wiehahn reforms which granted South African unions some space to organise. However, state repression of union activities is still the order of the day, and striking workers routinely face the wrath of government security forces. The demand for free political activity has received the backing of Amnesty International, which has repeatedly called for the lifting of the 1973 proclamation.

Workers are also demanding an end to corruption and the misuse of public funds by the regime. There is concern about the king's excessive spending on his annual birthday celebrations. Workers have denounced the state's purchase of a multi-million rand Fokker 100 aircraft from the Netherlands. The king has also built a multi-million rand palace at Nkoyoyo, 5 km west of the capital city, Mbabane. Workers are demanding transparency and accountable government.

Employers, who face the spectre of rising union militancy, have engaged in a variety of union-bashing activities. Unfair dismissal of union activists is common practice, as are retrenchments and sub-contracting. Despite

more than two decades of independence, job reservation is still in place, with companies arguing that certain positions cannot be occupied by locals. SFTU says job reservation for racist white personnel and managers can no longer be tolerated.

Racism at the workplace has triggered many strikes. Parliament recently ordered the Minister for Labour and Public Service to investigate charges of racism against Simunye Sugar Company, one of the kingdom's biggest sugar plantations.

Taking gender seriously

While the move against gender discrimination is laudable, the union movement needs to prove it is serious by fighting gender disparities within its own ranks. Women play a very important part in the Swazi economy, particularly in the agricultural sector, yet SFTU's executive is predominantly male. This is despite the presence of active and militant women at rank-and-file level. The only woman in the SFTU office is the secretary! A women's wing exists only on paper. The country's other union federation, the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL) is also male dominated.

Gender discrimination in terms of promotion, remuneration and training opportunities is also widespread in the public and private sectors. Workers are calling for measures to outlaw this.

Thousands stay away

On 21 February more than 10 000 workers from different parts of the country hired buses to Manzini's International Trade Fair grounds, where they held a mass rally. From early that morning Manzini's streets were patrolled by armed members of the Royal Swaziland Police (RSP). They were also deployed in towns throughout the country to crush the strike.

Those workers who could not make it to Manzini staged marches and demonstrations in their local towns. Thousands of other workers just stayed at home. In the villages and on the buses, ordinary people were very

sympathetic to the workers' cause. In the words of one unemployed person, "I support the strike. The government fails to build schools, clinics and open jobs for us, but it can afford big celebrations, big overseas delegations and big aeroplanes. We are sick and tired of it. The unions must fix it."

In Manzini the mood was tense. Speaker after speaker at the rally expressed the suffering inflicted on workers by employers in collusion with the government. Some workers even called for the dissolution of the government, saying that it was "undemocratic and imposed on the people". Workers mandated their executive to go and call the prime minister, Prince Mbilini, to come and address them. They wanted him to account for why his government had not met their demands, despite having been given sufficient time to do so. The premier didn't turn up — a daily newspaper later reported that he feared for his life. Workers were very angry. They passed a vote of no confidence in him.

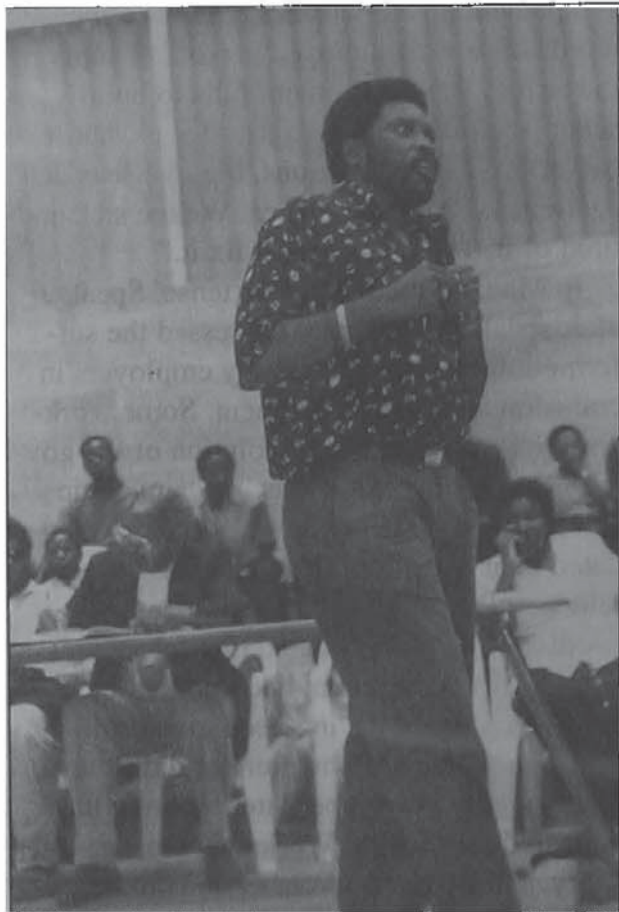
Workers chanted and sang political songs as they toyi-toyed their way to the city centre. Pandemonium ensued as workers tried to stop workers who had not joined the action. The city came to a virtual halt as workers marched through the city and defied orders from the police to stop.

The mood was one of anger, empowerment and disciplined aggression. It was clear to all and sundry that the days of the submissive and respectful Swazi worker were over.

Worker militancy rises

The stayaway ended the next day, although some workers felt it should continue until their demands were met. The prime minister and his labour minister were forced to set up a tripartite forum to look at the 27 demands and make recommendations. This forum included representatives from the Federation of Swaziland Employers (FSE), SFTU, SFL (the other union federation) and the government. This was a major victory of the stayaway. Worker leaders, for the first time, bargained over workers' rights.

Whilst the tripartite forum was looking at more general grievances, shopfloor battles



Jan Sithole — SFTU General Secretary

continued. An unprecedented number of sectoral strikes occurred. No sooner had one strike ended than another began.

The longest and most violent strike was at Mhlume Sugar Company in June and lasted 24 days. It was over wages, overtime, racism at the workplace and the dismissal of shop-stewards. Several workers were severely assaulted by the police during the strike. The Swaziland Agricultural and Pulp Workers' Union (SAPWU) laid a charge and publicly condemned this action by the police.

SAPWU mobilised and called on its members to embark on a solidarity strike. The industrial court issued a court interdict against SAPWU's solidarity strike. SAPWU called on its members to defy the interdict and, indeed, they did. SAPWU also had successful strikes at the Simuniye Sugar Company, Tabankulu Estate and at Umbombo Ranches.

Numerous strikes occurred in the banking sector over wages and working conditions. The manufacturing, retail and public sectors were also hit by a series of strikes. The pow-

erful Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) embarked on a week-long national strike in late June and early July over salary increments and teachers' housing. This strike led to a massive student protest in support of the right to learn. Students hijacked buses and ordered the drivers to drive to Mbabane, where they demonstrated, chanted, sang political songs and toyi-toyed their way to the education minister's offices to deliver a petition.

The education minister, Prince Khuzulwandle, allegedly escaped through a back door and the petition was received by a senior ministry official. After the petition was delivered, pandemonium ensued in the city as students looted major shops as they toyi-toyed their way to the buses. The OK Supermarket bore the brunt of the looting.

In most strikes workers achieved their demands. SFTU also won a major victory in preventing the dismissal of workers who had participated in the stayaway. As a result of an SFTU ultimatum to employers, no workers were fired — another first in Swazi labour history.

Another stayaway looms

The tripartite forum submitted its report and recommendations to the government in September. SFTU secretary general Jan Sithole says the federation was happy with the recommendations and eager to see them implemented. But as with other commission reports, the government just shelved the report and did not release it to the public.

SFTU was angered by this. It soon mobilised its forces for battle, in the form of another national stayaway. This one was set for 1 November and was to continue until government gave in to workers' demands.

Employers step in

Employers had already incurred heavy losses during the previous strikes. In some industries strikes were continuing. Faced with the prospect of further industrial action, FSE executive director Musa Hlophe warned the government that events were escalating to a degree where business would be forced to take a position on the crisis facing the coun-



Women play an important role in the Swazi economy, but are poorly represented in unions

try. Business confidence in the government was waning. Worker militancy had driven a wedge between state and business.

The government capitulated a day before the stayaway was to begin. It gave in to more than 60% of the demands. The remainder were not immediately met for technical reasons. Government said it is still to refer them to parliament in the form of Bills.

The Bills include the provision of a reinstatement clause under the Industrial Relations Act of 1980, proof of economic decline prior to retrenchment, one month compulsory paid maternity leave and secure deposit of wages.

The stayaway was suspended, not called off, to allow government to attend to demands which needed parliament's attention.

Looking forward

Ruling class ideology portrays striking as "unSwazi". Being labelled "unSwazi" is a heavy stigma in traditional circles. The Swazi ruling class appropriates Swaziness in the same way Mangosuthu Buthelezi's IFP is appropriating Zuluness in KwaZulu Natal.

In 1994, workers in Swaziland began

challenging this appropriation. In the past year they have learnt about the latent power of organisation and militant engagement in the struggle for better wages and working conditions.

The gains made by South African workers are reference points for workers in Swaziland. The capitulation of the state and the victories won boosted working class morale and sustained the strike mood.

The rise of the militant union movement is undoubtedly a turning point in the history of labour relations and the broader union and democratic movement in Swaziland.

Labour's success, however, will be determined by the extent to which it develops a long-term coherent strategic vision for itself around issues of worker participation, industrial democracy and the democratic transformation of Swaziland, which remains a dictatorship geopolitically surrounded by democracies.

The union movement also needs to come to terms with issues of union democracy, gender disparities in union leadership as well as decentralisation of the two centralised administrative machines of the union movement. ☆

Trade unionism in Swaziland

According to SFTU secretary general Jan Sithole, 55% of the 100 000-strong workforce in Swaziland is unionised. Of those employed, 40% work in agriculture. The agricultural sector, on which 70% of the population depends on for a livelihood, has the highest level of unionisation in the country — 80%. This includes those employed in the big sugar and timber plantations. However it excludes thousands of unorganised workers employed on private farms with no union rights.



Strikers toyi-toying

There are two union federations in Swaziland: SFTU and the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL). SFL was formed in 1993 by a group of unionists who felt SFTU was a sell-out organisation. Its secretary general, Vincent Ncongwane, is also secretary general of the Swaziland Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers (SUFIAW), which organises in the banking and insurance industries. SUFIAW is one of the strongest unions in the country.

Swaziland has 19 industrial unions, 13 of them affiliated to SFTU. However, at the time of writing, some of these unions had many years of outstanding subscriptions owing to the federation. The strongest and biggest of its affiliates is the Swaziland Agricultural Pulp and Plantation Workers' Union (SAPPWU), which organises in the agriculture industry.

SFTU's second biggest affiliate is the Swaziland National Association of Civil Servants (SNACS). The Swaziland Transport and General Workers Union (STGWU), Swaziland Post and Telecommunications Workers Union (SPTWU), the Swaziland Catering, Hotel and Allied Workers Union (SCHAWU) and other small unions are also affiliated to SFTU.

SFL has four affiliated unions — SUFIAW; the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU), the third biggest union in the country; the Swaziland Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SCAWU) and the Building and Construction Workers Union (BCWU). The powerful Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) is not affiliated to any of the federations as it sees itself as an association of professionals.

SFL initially opposed the stayaway call. It accused SFTU of opportunism and lack of consultation. SFL leaders felt they were being pre-empted by SFTU and questioned the timing of the action. However, it was clear that both federations felt, as did most workers, that something ought to be done to confront the regime to enforce changes. Despite SFL's initial stance, most of its rank and file participated in the strike action and the leadership eventually changed its attitude.