

"What happens in Zimbabwe affects us"

Union hounds Chinese arms

South Africans have recoiled in shame over recent xenophobic attacks, but we are capable of behaving differently. **Azad Essa** and **Martin Jansen** recount an act of solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe when South African Transport & Allied Workers Union dockworkers refused to off-load Chinese arms bound for Zimbabwe.

A few weeks ago, a group of Durban dockworkers performed an act that entered them into international political folklore. Together with their union leadership of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu), and supported by their global union, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), they managed to turn away a shipment of arms from China destined for the repressive government of Zimbabwe.

At the time Sandile Gasa and Bushy Shandu, Satawu shop stewards based at the Durban docks, thought that the shipload of armaments may have made it to Zimbabwe via Angola. "I am very disappointed if Angola has allowed this to happen. They have now contributed to the disastrous situation in Zimbabwe," said Sandile.

It was very uncertain whether the An Yue Jiang, a Chinese ship laden with 77 tonnes of arms and ammunition, was going to sail back to Shanghai, after the hostile reception it received at Durban's harbour. After all, it had sailed halfway across the globe to help settle the outcome of the recently contested Zimbabwe elections with bullets. Both China and Zimbabwe would not give up that easily.

SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

The valiant efforts of South African civil society including church and human rights groups and the labour movement, stood in solidarity with the Zimbabwean people in spite of the South African government's tacit support for the transfer of the cargo.

Said Gasa, "As South Africans, by standing up and refusing to off-load these arms, we are proud that we know we have not contributed to increasing the violent situation in Zimbabwe... We, as Satawu could not be part of this. It makes us proud to be part of an organisation that thinks beyond our own issues... What happens in Zimbabwe affects us, it doesn't matter if we are in South Africa."

The arms shipment was deflected from country to country around the southern African coast for five weeks, seeking friendlier harbours across the region. The delay in delivery of the arms to Zimbabwe could certainly have prevented a complete onslaught against opposition supporters to Robert Mugabe's repressive regime.

Workers' actions have revived belief in the power of international workers' solidarity. By downing tools and refusing to 'shut their eyes and pass the arms', they took an

active political position which shifted solidarity beyond the realms of union resolutions, press statements and memorandums. This was solidarity in action.

Union leadership was applauded across the political and social spectrum in South Africa and internationally for this simple action. It raises the question of why trade unions in South Africa and elsewhere are not utilising their power more to fight against oppression and exploitation, especially in the context of neo-liberal capitalism that has eroded the living and working conditions of the world's workers.

Here was an action that went beyond the narrow confines of trade union collective bargaining to have an important impact on violence in Zimbabwe. This was a rare action in post-1994 South Africa.

HOW IT HAPPENED

"In the planning department of the receiving department, we are normally the first to know about any ship. With the Chinese vessel, our suspicion mounted when the documents and contents did not match," commented Gasa.

Following the discovery of larger than normal containers on the



The An Yue Jiang was unable to dock at Durban harbour (left) or Maputo harbour (right).

vessel, in contrast to the regular sized containers described in the ship's documents, the South African Police Services were called in to conduct an investigation, and the huge containment of arms was discovered.

Gasa continued, "We arranged an urgent meeting with other shop stewards at the Durban Container Terminal about the suspicious ship, and considering the volatile situation in Zimbabwe, we passed our concerns to our head office."

With the sensational news breaking across the globe, the South African government stood firm in rejecting calls from civil society, churches and advocacy groups that the weapons should not be offloaded and transported through South Africa to Zimbabwe. Deputy Defence Minister, Mluleki George, argued that if documents were in order, China and Zimbabwe were sovereign states conducting business, and South Africa would not interfere.

The South African government did not consider it important that three million rounds of ammunition for AK47s, 3 000 mortar shells and 1 500 rocket propelled grenades would be used against the people of Zimbabwe.

A church group managed to secure a court order to prevent the ship being offloaded, but it was Satawu's resolve not to off-load the

cargo that captured the world's imagination. It was a strong image that countered the vague rhetoric of Mbeki's 'quiet diplomacy' which the government has embraced for over a decade. This act of solidarity by dockworkers and civil society groups highlighted how effective such combined action can be.

In reality the decision not to off-load the vessel had to be implemented immediately, and some workers were not fully briefed on the exact content of the cargo and the political nature of the action. According to Gasa, "workers knew on the whole that a political decision had been made, but I would say that only workers on the front line knew the precise reasons for not off-loading the ship."

When the ship left the Durban harbour the ITF (International Transport Federation) worked with the Mozambican government and the local transport union in Maputo to conduct similar solidarity. SADC (Southern African Development Community) chair, Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa, urged the region not to allow the transfer of arms, but it seemed the Angolan government may break ranks.

Misleading SABC TV news broadcasts reported that the oil-rich MPLA government of Angola, an ally of Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF party, had enabled the arms cargo

to be transported by air to Harare. Upon learning about this, Gasa spoke for all of the Satawu dockworkers in Durban when he said, "If this is the case, it tears my heart."

However, according to ITF's Sam Dawson, the ship docked in Luanda but unloaded no arms. Local trade unionists affiliated to the ITF watched the ship off-load cement and construction materials and nothing else.

The ITF, because of its international network and experience was able to track the ship's movements and is certain that the arms were still on board and returned to China. The ship also made no further port calls apart from Luanda.

Reports in the South African media were incorrect and were based on a boast by Zimbabwe's Department of Information head, Minister Bright Matonga, that Zimbabwe had received the arms. This claim was later contradicted by Zimbabwe's Defence Minister who admitted that the claim was untrue.

Sprite Zungu, ITF coordinator based in Durban who assisted the workers' solidarity efforts confirmed this, "... the ship was not carrying just weapons. Sources say that the ship had cargo for South Africa as well. And when it docked for an hour and half, it off-loaded building materials. The weapons were not

off-loaded. This is just a rumour.”

The timing of the arms shipment was also fortuitous as it coincided with an ITF congress where it was decided to organise globally to prevent the arms shipment from reaching Zimbabwe.

REBIRTH OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY?

The Durban dockworkers may have revived the international workers’ solidarity of nearly 150 years ago, with the formation of the First International in September 1864, with Karl Marx as leading figure. This meeting of the International Workingmen’s Association was the first major socialist effort at building international working-class solidarity based on socialist principles.

Sadly in South Africa, barely a month after the heroic action of the Durban dockworkers, the country’s richest province of Gauteng experienced a raging tide of xenophobia against black foreigners from Zimbabwe and other African countries.

Perhaps these latest events will serve as a wake-up call to South African and international trade unions of the need to actively revive the socialist rallying call of ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ Solidarity is important’, observed Satawu shop steward Shandu, “and we urge people of Africa and abroad to do the same in saving people’s lives who are still oppressed by their countries.” LB

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Ghostly Galleon

*A ghostly galleon plies the seas
that give and take, build and break
on Africa’s ex-colonies
on Mozambique, Namibia,
(sometimes mild and sometimes wild),
Angola and South Africa*

*Bang, bang, bang, the An Yue Jiang
is looking for a port,
but workers on the Durban docks
said, “Nothing of that sort!”*

*“Take your AKs somewhere else,
your mortars and grenades;
they’ll use those bullets on working folk,
boys with dreadlocks and girls with braids,
waiters, vendors, gardeners, maids,
labourers with picks and spades,
farmers dragging the oxen’s yoke”*

*There is a ghostly galleon
that plies the southern seas,
it carries death for working folk,
cannons and RPGs*

*It tried to dock in Durban
to drop its deadly load
but the Durban Dockers’ Union
upheld the workers’ code*

*Well it’s a bang, bang, bang, the An Yue Jiang
is sailing round the Cape
with toys for the boys that make a loud noise,
that kill and maim and rape*

*Salute the Durban dockers
Salute those workers bold
they save a thousand comrades
from misery untold.
they saved a thousand comrades
but only for a day
the ghostly galleon will be back
terror is here to stay.*

*John Eppel
(Satawu worker poet)*