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Swazi Unions Demand Democracy

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GENERAL STRIKE

On the 22 of January this year [1996], the SFTU again called a general strike. The government had not delivered on the workers demands for industrial rights, unbanning political parties and a democracy. The strike lasted a week.. In a number of cases the police violently attacked strikers and a few workers were killed. Three SFTU leaders were arrested on the first day of the strike.

Despite this police intimidation, virtually the entire workforce participated in the stay- away. Workers forced the government and the bosses to their knees. Swaziland was brought to a halt and electricity workers even cut off the power supply to the capital. After a number of mass workers meetings, SFTU decided it should suspend the strike on 29 January and enter into negotiations with government around workers demands.

WORKER POWER

The Swaziland strike illustrates that unions are mass worker organisations that have the power to fight the bosses and the State. Through mass action they can advance and defend ordinary peoples basic political and social rights. In South Africa workers power smashed apartheid. In Swaziland, workers power can smash the monarchy and the bosses profit system.

If current negotiations fail to deliver, workers must mobilise for a tough battle. They must strengthen links with the unemployed and hawkers. They can escalate their struggle by occupying workplaces and locking the bosses out, rather than just staying away. SA unions should show maximum solidarity with their Swazi comrades.

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In 1994 the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) called a two day general strike for the 21- 22 of February. More than 10 000 workers participated. The Swazi economy was paralysed. The strike also received support from the unemployed and hawkers. The SFTU put 27 demands to the government. These demands includes a repeal of oppressive labour laws and the removal of the 1973 royal decree which banned political parties. Workers also called for the end of corruption and demanded a democratic and transparent government.

SUCCESS

The general strike marked a turning point in Swaziland's labour history. It was a success and boosted workers confidence in their ability to take on the bosses and the state. Workers mood was militant and an unprecedented number of strikes occurred in almost all the sections of the economy. Almost all the strikes were won.

The general strike had forced the government to set up a tripartite forum to look at the 27 demands and make recommendations. In September 1994, the forum submitted its recommendations to the government. SFTU accepted the recommendations. But the government shelved the report and did not release it to the public.

SFTU rejected this government action. SFTU decided to flex its muscles again and called another general strike for 1 November, 1995. SFTU said that this strike would continue until all their demands were met. Under pressure from the bosses (who had incurred large loses in previous strike actions) the government backed down on the day before the strike. The government gave into most of the workers demands and said that it would refer them to parliament.