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SUPPORT DEMOCRACY IN SWAZILAND

Today, Thursday 12th April 2012 which marks the 39th anniversary of the Tinkhundla regime in Swaziland, the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) joins the workers and pro-democracy forces of Swaziland as well as progressive forces around the world calling for an end to dictatorship and arbitrary rule in Swaziland. The late king Sobhuza 11 issued this Proclamation to serve as the country's fundamental law on 12 April 1973, thereby establishing the Tinkhundla regime.

In April 1986, Prince Mswati III, the son of the late King, 18 years at the time; was enthroned as King of the country and has continued to administer the monarchy with an iron fist under the Tinkhundla regime.

The country has the highest HIV infection rate in the world. Sixty three percent of its population of 1,370,424 live under the poverty line and gets by on less than 1.25 USD a day. King Mswati III, however, lives in abundant wealth: in July 2010, Forbes Magazine estimated his personal fortune at 100 million USD. His daughters take his private jet to go shopping in Europe.

Meanwhile, everyday life in Swaziland is marked by serious violations of democratic, human and trade union rights. These include extrajudicial killings by security forces; mob killings; the use of torture by the police; the use of excessive force on detainees; police impunity; arbitrary arrests and lengthy pre-trial detentions; restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and movement; prohibitions on political activity and harassment of political activists; discrimination and violence against women; harassment of labour leaders; and restrictions on workers' rights.

The international trade union movement has, time and again, denounced the incessant violations of trade union rights under the king's harsh rule.

Till present, the formation of political parties remains prohibited in spite of the adoption of a new Constitution in 2005. The constitution in itself is still highly ineffective in preserving fundamental democratic rights, including trade union rights. Trade union activities are systematically labelled as political and severely repressed. This sadly culminated in the death of Siphon Jele, a trade union activist who was arrested for wearing a T-shirt from a political party at a 2010 May Day celebration, and who subsequently died in police custody in suspicious circumstances.

On numerous occasions, the Swazi government has been called to account for this state of affairs by the International Labour Organisation's Committee on the Application of Standards (ILO CAS). For a number of years continuously, this Committee has exposed the Swazi government for serious breaches of workers' rights as enshrined in ILO Convention 87 (on Freedom of Association). It is one of the rare cases in which the workers find an ally in the employers' federations, who are equally fed up with the undemocratic arbitrariness of the regime.

In spite of the circumstances, our Swazi trade union colleagues have upheld the struggle for fundamental workers' rights. In a development which was closely followed and warmly encouraged by the international trade union movement, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) and the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL), together with the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT), undertook to merge into one strong and unified national trade union centre; the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland (TUCOSWA). This new organisation, with an estimated membership of fifty thousand, held its first congress from 9 to 11 March 2012.

However, barely a month on, the Swazi regime has decided to repeal TUCOSWA's registration.

Today, Thursday 12 April 2012 as the country celebrates the 39th anniversary of the Tinkhundla; we can no longer stand by and watch the rights of our fellow workers in Swaziland being trampled on day after day.

We join our comrades who together with other civil society organisations seize the occasion to demand the establishment of a fully-fledged democracy.

May the voice of the people be heard!

ITUC-Africa - Lome, 12th April 2012