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**Solidarity with unions in Swaziland**  
**Global day of action**  
**6 September 2011**

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## **Swaziland: independence doesn't mean freedom**

Today, 6 September, is Independence Day in Swaziland. But the trade union movement there is taking action all this week to demonstrate against the last feudal dictatorship in Africa. Independence, sadly, has not meant freedom for ordinary people in Swaziland, which is one of the poorest countries on the planet and has the highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection anywhere.

As part of a global day of action, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber has written to the Swazi High Commissioner in London calling on the regime to allow peaceful protests by trade unionists, rather than respond with the sort of violent repression which has seen Swaziland sanctioned by the UN and the ILO. Here is a copy of the letter which will be handed into the Embassy today as part of a protest by Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA):

Dear High Commissioner

### **Independence Day: Renewed call for fully-fledged human and trade union rights in Swaziland**

On 6 September, Swaziland commemorates the day it became independent and joined the international community as a sovereign country. The TUC wishes to seize this opportunity to draw your attention to a number of issues.

Unfortunately, Swaziland's people currently do not have a lot to cheer about, as their lives continue to be marked by problems in the field of democratic and human rights. These include extrajudicial killings by security forces, mob killings, the use of torture by the police, beatings and the use of excessive force on detainees, police impunity, arbitrary arrests and lengthy pretrial detentions, restrictions on freedoms of assembly, association, and movement, prohibitions on political activity and harassment of political activists, discrimination and violence against women, the harassment of labour leaders, and restrictions on worker rights. On a number of occasions throughout last year, the police forcibly dispersed demonstrators, which resulted in injuries. Your Highness personally appoints the judiciary, thereby limiting judicial independence; and minimum wages do not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

As denounced by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) time and again, trade union rights remain a matter of particular concern in Swaziland. Among many other violations and problems, Swazi trade unions suffer from surveillance of their activities by hired security officers, both at the workplace and outside. They are confronted with the use of workers' councils stacked with employer-picked representatives to prevent genuine worker representation. Police officers with the rank of subinspector or higher have the authority to conduct a search without a warrant. The police enter homes and businesses without judicial authorization.

On 23 June, only five days after the conclusion of the International Labour Conference (ILC) in Geneva, where the Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS) deplored the numerous violations of Convention 87 on Freedom Association in your country, police raided the home of Barnes Dlamini, President of the ITUC-affiliated Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) and an internationally acknowledged and well-respected trade unionist. The search warrant specified the "removal of any bomb-making materials", but during the raid, the police confiscated political literature.

On the occasion of last year's Independence Day, on 6 September 2010, the police dispersed meetings of political and labour activists, detaining and later releasing members of civil society. It banned political groups, trade unions from Swaziland and South Africa, and a local journalist. Among the labour leaders and activists arrested by the police were Vincent Ncongwane, Secretary General of the Swaziland Federation of Labor (SFL); Wandile Dlodlu, President of the Swaziland Youth Congress (SWAYOCO); Sikhumbuzo Phakathi, Deputy President of the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO); Sibusiso Lushaba, General Secretary of the Swaziland National Association of Nurses (SNA); Musa Hlophe, head of the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organisations (SCCCO); and Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) Country Manager Muzi Masuku.

Furthermore, the police detained five South African trade unionists, including Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) Deputy International Relations Secretary Zanele Mathebula, and its Head of Campaigns, George Mahlangu, and expelled them across the South African border.

On 12 April 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations were again met with violence and arrests. The protests, which were announced correctly and well in advance, and conducted in a peaceful way to support legitimate demands for more democratic rights for Swaziland's citizens, were suppressed by heavily armed police and military, which occupied the city of Manzini as well as other important centres with ostentatious display of power. They used teargas against protestors, arrested hundreds of people, among which at least eight trade union leaders, and reportedly even fired live ammunition. In Manzini, paramilitary police in full riot gear, including shields and rifles, marched through the streets. Hundreds of people

were arrested, including eight trade union leaders. Other union leaders were threatened or placed under house arrest. Everyone wearing a political party T-shirt or cap was arrested. Students at the Swaziland Kwaluseni Campus were confined to the campus, which amounts to arrest. Teachers were barricaded inside the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) offices to prevent them from marching. The police used rubber bullets to disperse the crowds.

On 28 July 2011, hundreds of trade unionists marched through Swaziland's cities to protest against your government's plan to lower the salaries of civil servants. Some 400 people joined the demonstration in Mbabane, while about 300 marched in Manzini. In Manzini, some 500 armed police stood guard, almost twice the amount of demonstrators. The unions had only won the right to protest just the day before, after a court overturned a government order that would have prohibited their strike.

On 23 August 2011, dozens of lawyers joined civil society and marched in the streets of Mbabane. The march was remarkable, given that until then, judicial personnel had not taken part in popular protest actions.

On 24 August 2011, students protesting about the closure of the University of Swaziland were viciously attacked by the police and forcibly dispersed. Activists were detained without reason, and – indeed – transported to far corners of the country and dumped without resources in remote areas. Young student union leaders were detained. The TUC hereby wishes to inquire whether they have in the meantime been released and, if this is not the case, insists that this should be done as soon as possible.

Your Highness, it was exactly this kind of brutal repression and violation of human and trade union rights which was exposed and for which your government was reprimanded during the discussion on the application of Convention 87 on Freedom of Association in Swaziland at the 2010 International Labour Conference, and again in 2011.

In solidarity with our Swazi friends and colleagues, we urge you, finally, to take into account their legitimate demands for constitutional reform, multiparty democracy and the full respect of trade union rights. Further violence and oppression will certainly not alter their plight or lead to any solution for the many problems outlined above.

Yours sincerely

Brendan Barber

General Secretary