

Working with public service unions in southern Africa

Report back from the **UNISON-ACTSA 2009** delegation to the region

UNISON's commitment to working with sister unions in southern Africa stems from our support for the struggle to end apartheid, and continues today as we strive to build a transnational trade union movement to strengthen public services, promote workers' rights, and fight HIV/AIDS.

The UNISON delegation to southern Africa in March 2009 aimed to strengthen relationships with our sister unions in Malawi, South Africa and Swaziland. By involving representatives from UNISON regions and branches, the delegation enabled the union to take forward its

international work on public services and international development at national, regional and local level.

The delegation enabled UNISON members to deepen their understanding about the priorities and challenges faced by sister unions organising in the public sector in the region; learn more about UNISON's HIV/AIDS project; and establish relationships with key representatives of our sister unions – which will be vital in developing the union's international work.

Over 12 days the delegation travelled to Swaziland, then on to South Africa and finally to Malawi.

In the UK, UNISON will continue to lobby the UK government to promote policies that strengthen public services in developing

countries. UNISON also calls for an end to World Bank and International Monetary Fund economic policies that undermine public services and limit pay and conditions for public service workers.

Who was on the delegation?

Shaukat Dhali: *Eastern Region*
 Sam McCartney: *UNISON Scotland*
 Anne McCormack: *North West region*
 Ray Mouratsing: *Greater London region*
 Maurice Rennie: *East Midlands region*
 Lorraine Roberts: *West Midlands region*
 Pam Sian: *Yorkshire and Humberside region*
 Brian Walter: *South East region*
 Helen Jenner, Kevin Naylor & Jessie Russell: *members of the UNISON NEC and international committee*
 Sharon Sukhram – *UNISON officer*
 Jonathan Freeman – *UNISON officer*
 Mark Beacon – *ACTSA*
 Tony Dykes – *ACTSA*



UNISON-ACTSA delegation with UNISON HIV/AIDS project staff at their offices in Johannesburg, South Africa.

**In Manzini, Swaziland,
the delegation met:**

**Swaziland Federation of
Trade Unions (SFTU)**

**Swaziland Federation of
Labour (SFL)**

**Swaziland National
Association of Teachers
(SNAT)**

**National Public Services
and Allied Workers Union
(NPSAWU)**

**Swaziland Water
Corporation Workers
Union (SWCWU)**

**Swaziland Nurses
Association (SNA).**

**The Swaziland United
Democratic Front (SUDF)**

**Ngwane National
Liberation Congress
(NNLC)**

**The People's United
Democratic Movement
(PUDEMO)**

**“Only loose women
join trade unions.”**

**According to trade unions,
intimidation in Swaziland can
take many forms.**

Swaziland

The trade union movement is at the forefront of the struggle for democracy in Swaziland – playing a lead role in the Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF). The SUDF is fighting for multi-party democracy and a new constitution for Swaziland. The delegation met with the SUDF as part of UNISON and ACTSA's ongoing work to raise the issue of trade union rights, human rights and democracy up the political agenda in the UK.

At present, all political parties are banned in Swaziland and the SUDF says the absolute monarch “rules with an iron fist”, controlling parliament, legislature and the judiciary. In Swaziland, unlike Zimbabwe, the delegation was told that there is not the overt intimidation and brutality associated with Mugabe's regime, instead, there is persistent, low level intimidation and a climate of fear. The introduction of the Suppression of Terrorism Act in 2008 has escalated this sense of fear. Political leaders and trade union leaders who speak out in the name of democracy have been arrested and some have been labelled as terrorists.

Intimidation and coercion come in many forms, for example, people are less willing to join trade unions for fear of the consequences of being associated with an organisation

seen to be anti-government or anti-monarch. According to the trade unions, women in particular may be vilified, being told “Only loose women join trade unions”.

The SUDF is fighting back; trade union members and the wider population are being educated and gradually more people are mobilising to demand multi-party democracy. International links, such as those with UNISON and ACTSA, have been forged, in order to increase pressure for change.

The political situation in Swaziland affects all trade union activities, from organising and recruiting, being able to negotiate with government departments, to government failing to implement signed ILO conventions and collective agreements.

But each of the public sector trade unions the delegation met with have their own priorities and challenges. NPSAWU spoke about the double whammy of privatisation and HIV/AIDS, where some workers may not declare their HIV/AIDS status and are less likely to access the necessary treatment for fear of being the first to be laid off when services are privatised. SNA informed the delegation about the devastating effects of health worker migration on their health system. And the delegation learned about the lack of



“We lost 23 members because of HIV/AIDS in January and February 2009.”

Joyce Dlada, national HIV/AIDS co-ordinator, NPSAWU



Shaukat Dhali (left) making a presentation to Bheki Mamba, general secretary, SNA

transparency in tendering contracts when services are privatised or outsourced, meaning unions cannot negotiate equal terms and conditions for workers when services are transferred.

The high incidence of HIV/AIDS in Swaziland is a serious challenge. One union lost 23 members in January and February 2009. However, those unions involved in UNISON's HIV/AIDS project at least have access to resources, information and training to build their capacity to respond to the disease.

Sister unions identified a number of areas where support from UNISON would be welcomed. These included: training more shop stewards; educating members about their rights; improving their negotiating and bargaining skills; and developing their infrastructure to organise more effectively.

UNISON also met with banned political parties in order to better understand the struggle for democracy and what role UNISON and ACTSA could play.

“In broad terms... the delegation was eminently successful in achieving its goals. All the meetings were informative, thought provoking and generated much discussion.”

Kevin Naylor, NEC and national international committee member



***“United we stand,
Divided we fall,
United we stand
And never wish to fall.***

***Forward forever,
Backward never,
United we stand,
And never wish to fall.”***

***UNISON-ACTSA delegation,
SNAT, STFU and SFL singing
SNAT's anthem***

In Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa the delegation met with:

National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU)

South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU)

Police and Civil Rights Union (POPCRU)

Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA)

Democratic Nursing Association of South Africa (DENOSA)

Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)

UNISON HIV/AIDS project staff

PSI Southern Africa

UK Department for International Development (DFID) Southern Africa

Staff at Kalafong Academic Hospital and Steve Biko Academic Hospital

“Even though NEHAWU is self-sufficient, UNISON has continued to provide support.”

Nomthandazo Sikiti, international officer, NEHAWU

South Africa

The delegation visit to South Africa coincided with the feverish preparations for the national elections in April 2009 and no conversation could be had without mention of them. A number of UNISON's sister unions were busy campaigning for the ANC in the regions and provinces, educating members and encouraging them to vote.

Trade union support for the ANC is not unconditional; unions are demanding greater accountability and policies that improve public service delivery and benefit poorer sections of society.

Trade unions have fought against services privatisation and some battles have been won. The wholesale privatisation of water, rail and other municipal services was halted following two general strikes organised by COSATU; and some services have been taken back under public ownership after privatisation failed to deliver. 90% of services remain in public hands. However, privatisation by the back door, that is outsourcing and casualisation, remain threats to public service delivery.

Other challenges faced by public sector trade unions include racism; corruption; sexual harassment; international migration of health workers; and organising in the private sector. Stigma attached to HIV/AIDS is a persistent problem, but the unions, all of which are involved in UNISON's HIV/AIDS project, are working hard to educate members and the wider society.

Meeting UNISON's HIV/AIDS project staff enabled delegates to better understand the regional and country context of HIV/AIDS. The main cause of infection in the region is through heterosexual sex, except in Mauritius, where intravenous drug use is the main cause. A key objective for unions involved in the project is to develop and implement their own HIV/AIDS policies to help create a workplace environment where rights are respected and promoted. Union policies can also play an important role in negotiating with government and employers, and influencing legislation.

UNISON's DFID-funded HIV/AIDS project works with unions in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia,



Nursing staff at Kalafong Academic Hospital, Pretoria, South Africa

South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. So far, national seminars have taken place in Malawi and Mozambique creating space for training, discussion and planning future HIV/AIDS work. The project is in the process of setting up an information centre to service the training and education needs of sister unions; several unions have received funding to run their own small HIV/AIDS programmes; and specialist support services to provide training are being developed.

Sister unions in South Africa are keen to develop twinning relationships with UNISON branches and regions. They are also keen to share information, experiences and best practice on issues such as privatisation and outsourcing; equal pay; work to promote LGBT rights and gender equality; and Agenda for Change. Working together on joint campaigns is another area of future

work that UNISON and sister unions could take forward.

The UNISON-ACTSA delegation was able to meet with representatives from DFID in southern Africa. Here the delegation raised a number of issues including: strengthening the implementation of DFID's guidelines on working with trade unions; consulting and involving public sector trade unions in plans to strengthen health systems; supporting the public delivery of water and sanitation services, and public-public partnerships to strengthen public sector capacity in this area; the UK using its influence to end World Bank and International Monetary Fund economic conditions; and the UK government having more proactive involvement in the struggle for democracy and eradicating poverty in Swaziland.

The delegation was pleased to be able to visit Kalafong Academic Hospital and Steve Biko Academic Hospital.



The delegation meets Bongani Masuku, international relations secretary, COSATU

“90% of services are still in public hands.”

Steve Faulker, international officer, South Africa Municipal Workers Union



A shortage of incubators has led to an innovative way to care for premature babies. Kangaroo Mothercare Unit, Kalafong Academic Hospital, South Africa



A state school raising awareness of HIV/AIDS, Soweto, South Africa

In Lilongwe and Blantyre, Malawi, the delegation met with:

Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU)

Civil Service Trade Union (CSTU)

Malawi Municipal Workers Union (MAMWU)

Water Employees Trade Union of Malawi (WETUM)

National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi (NONM)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID Malawi

“Union. Yes!

Solidarity for ever and ever!

An injury to one is an injury to all!”

Malawi Municipal Workers Union chant

Malawi

Public service trade unions in Malawi, like those the delegation met in Swaziland and South Africa have some similar priorities and challenges to UNISON: recruiting and organising, training and educating members, and fighting against the privatisation and outsourcing of services. However, sister unions and public services in Malawi face considerable capacity and practical challenges, making their work far more challenging.

Meeting with the minority government has been difficult for the unions and they were optimistic that following the election in May 2009, that the situation would change for the better. In addition to the above, union priorities and challenges include strengthening their women's structures; mainstreaming health and safety regulations; and training and educating members. International migration of healthcare workers was again mentioned as a matter of great concern. Low pay and poor conditions are little incentive for nurses and midwives to stay in Malawi, where they may have to work in the dark due to electricity cuts, and even fetch water from nearby streams.

The delegation was also informed that the civil service in Malawi is

There is a tacit threat – “if you don't perform, you'll be privatised.”

Olivia Kunje, general secretary, Water Employees Trade Union of Malawi

the lowest paid and most highly taxed in southern Africa – they too are trying to negotiate better terms and conditions. In the water sector, employee salaries have not increased despite inflation and workers have been told that this is because the water boards are not making profits as expected by the World Bank, which is leading the reform process. According to WETUM, outsourcing is a threat; security and cleaning services have already been outsourced and workers feel there is a tacit threat hanging over them – “if you don't perform, you'll be privatised.”

All the unions the delegation met are actively involved in UNISON's HIV/AIDS project and are developing their own programmes and activities to train and educate their members.



“Without UNISON’s support many of these achievements would not have been achieved.”

Olivia Kunje, general secretary, Water Employees Trade Union of Malawi

Sister unions in Malawi spoke positively about their working relationships with UNISON and future support for capacity building around: recruiting and organising; lobbying and campaigning; strengthening women’s structures; and developing their infrastructure and IT capacity would be valued.

With support from NONM, the delegation visited the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Blantyre.

The delegation was hosted by the high commissioner at his residence, which also provided the opportunity to meet with DFID Malawi. The UK government is one of the major donors to Malawi. The delegation was informed about the work that the UK government is doing to strengthen democracy and improve governance. Previous work with Malawian trade unions has been limited, but the FCO and DFID said that they recognise the role that trade unions can play in holding governments to account, developing legislation and fighting poverty.

“No gloves, no work!”

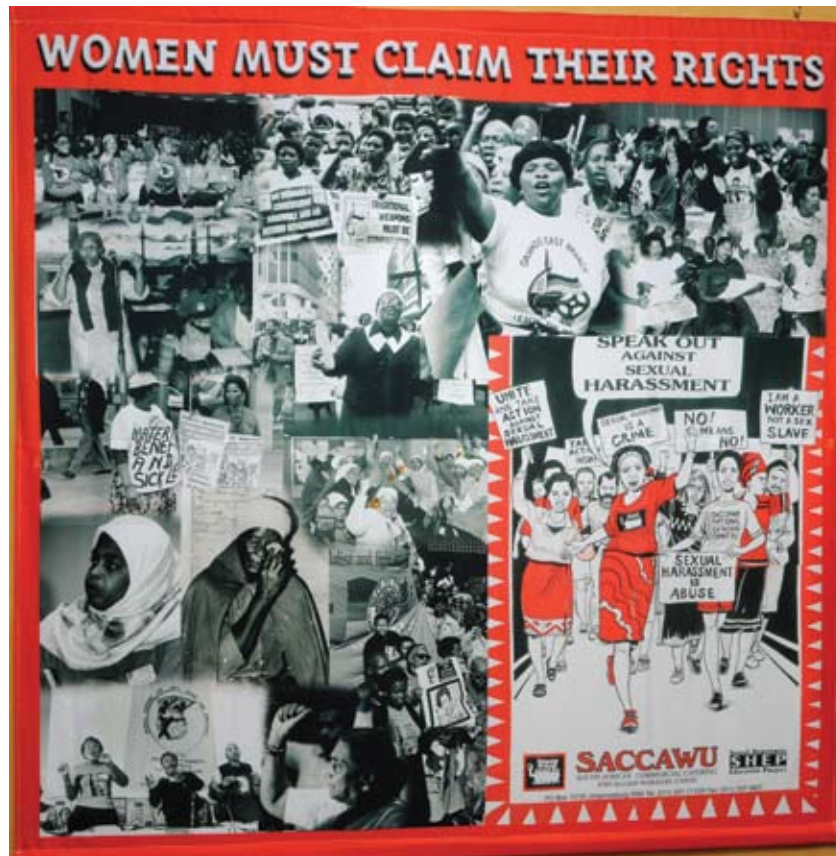
Campaign slogan, National Association of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi



Billboard supported by NONM

“We have a major healthcare worker crisis.”

Dorothy Ngoma, executive director, National Association of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi



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How UNISON branches and regions can get involved

Is your branch and region interested in:

- Twinning with a sister union in Malawi, South Africa or Swaziland? This is an important way to share skills, knowledge, information and best practice on areas of common interest. An informal or more formal twinning arrangement is a key tool in capacity building and strengthening the international trade union movement.
- Inviting a speaker over from a sister union?
- Assisting with building sister unions' IT and infrastructure capacity?
- Signing campaign actions promoted by UNISON to strengthen public services in developing countries?
- Supporting ACTSA's work and affiliating to ACTSA? Action for Southern Africa campaigns for justice, rights and development in solidarity with the people of southern Africa. ACTSA works closely with trade unions in both Britain and southern Africa. For more information visit www.actsa.org

Then please contact the international relations unit at: I.Relations@unison.co.uk



For more information call 0845 355 0845

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