

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Exiled Union Leader: Workers 'Demanding Democracy' in Eswatini

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Sticks Nkambule, general secretary, Swaziland Transport, Communication and Allied Workers Union (SWATCAWU)

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers. And welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau.

We've explored on this Podcast the powerful role unions play in upholding and fighting for democratic freedoms that so many of us just take for granted, like the right to speak freely. In Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, the authoritarian government knows the collective strength of workers and their unions can build democracy. And so they seek to repress this vital voice.

Back in 2014, I remember when President Obama convened the first African Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C. And hundreds of heads of state from across the continent, plus civil society leaders and union leaders converged on the city, including unions from Swaziland, as it was known then. Our brothers and sisters from Swaziland were appalled by the role their government was playing in the summit, pretending to be for democratic freedoms and rights while repressing folks at home. And so, they organized a small protest targeting their own government in front of the White House.

I went to that protest and I remember the next day the headline in the newspaper in Swaziland, their local paper, read, "Strangle Those Unionists." This repression against these brothers and sisters, the brave union leaders of Eswatini, is long-standing.

My next guest is on the front lines of the fight for democracy in Eswatini. Sticks Nkambule is general secretary of the Swaziland Transport, Communication and Allied Workers Union. He was driven out of Eswatini for leading a strike in January to improve working conditions. He speaks to us as representatives from several Southern African countries are now going to be gathering at the end of this month in Zambia for a democracy summit where participants will redouble their focus on moving forward democracy in countries like Eswatini.

It's an honor to be able to talk to you today, General Secretary Sticks Nkambule, General Secretary of the Swaziland Transport, Communication and Allied Workers Union.

Sticks Nkambule:

In Swaziland, we do not have an official political descent. You do not have an image in area that seeks to challenge anything on the field of human rights. It could be labor, it could be social issues or even hardcore political issues.

It is for that reason that a trade unions then becomes the only vehicle that is recognized within the arid view of the labor law in the country, but also even internationally. If inside the country nothing works out, then you have a fallback to go outside and expose those things.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You're a young man. Who were some of your early mentors, who inspired you as you got involved in politics and the labor movement?

Sticks Nkambule:

I mean when you talk of labor in Swaziland, labor rights issues, you cannot finish that conversation without mentioning Comrade John Tole who led the National Center in Swaziland in the earliest times, and for more than two decades. Any gains that labor is having in the country, including human rights

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issues of several benefits. It has been the fruits of what Comrade John did for the people of not just labor but he extended the agenda beyond labor issues. There are tangible benefits today in the country that are being enjoyed as a result of his efforts with the collective of the leadership that they were working with then.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I know the labor movement in Eswatini, previously Swaziland, has been active in promoting the rights of workers and for democratic participation in the country for decades. We often hear in this Podcast and other conversations with trade unionists around the world that labor movements create tangible benefits for workers. And yet governments and employers are very frequently at odds with workers and the gains they want to make.

Sticks Nkambule:

There is a concern to say when the general attitude of the government lacks respect for workers, that ordinarily translated to unacceptable conduct to certain employers. That is why when we deal with labor rights issues in more ways than one, we extend beyond labor because the problems that normally face are faced by workers. They not come from outside the state order of things at national level. That is why we are persistent in that call. And to some of us, it has been made very much unfavorable from the regime. But we're not here to serve the regime, we're here to serve the workers. Workers are happy you are going to carry on with that conversations.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Some of the most inspiring and brave labor movement leaders I have actually met in my 20 years of working globally have been from your country. I'm familiar with some of the forms of retaliation that you experience from the armed forces, from the government, legal as well as physical repression of trade unionists and activists in the country. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with the repression of the state?

Sticks Nkambule:

Well, Shawna, this is a very, very, very, very disturbing eventuality that we face in Swaziland. We are facing a very autocratic and now a very, very, very dangerous regime. Last year in November, we led several jobs stay-aways. And the response by the regime it has been to unleash its army and firing of live bullets. And the streets of Manzini were painted red with blood of workers.

We are not just talking history. The current events that are happening suggest that the regime is really crazy in terms of using excessive force. Yes, it is a current position. A lot of activities and critical voices against the regime have been driven out of the country.

Those that remained in the country, they live under constant surveillance, repression and aggression that are being furthered by the regime. But what is quite inspiring is that the people of Swaziland are determined to be part of the conversation that is going to change their discourse. It is a reality in activists. And not just labor, beyond labor. They are leader to outside the country.

Inside the country, we are burying our own comrades each and every month. Even this past week there has been burials for people that have been killed by the regime.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

What's it like to experience losing comrades, friends, activists in the country when you yourself are in exile?

Sticks Nkambule:

That is the most painful thing, Comrade Shawna. I think it's more painful than even death because when we are dead, you don't have any feelings. For me to hear that my own lawyer, my own friend, that we have been together in the trenches for the longest time, a celebrated human rights lawyer, and then award-winning one, Thulani Rudolf Maseko. To only follow about his death and his burial without going there myself to bury him—that's a very, very painful experience. But we draw strength that they are those of our own uses. They are going to lay their lives for the liberation of our people. That's what gives us courage. That's what gives us the ability to go on.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Can you tell us a little bit about our brother, the legal advocate lawyer, Thulani, who we lost in that brutal killing? Tell us a little bit about his dedication to the labor movement. A little bit about your friend.

Sticks Nkambule:

You see, Thulani has been a comrade even at these stages. And he has remained true to the cause of the struggle even when lots of his peers were being engaged in a very improper and irregular ways—being recruited to be judges, being engaged by the state to do certain jobs and functions.

And yes, we do have quite a number of candidates who chose to side with the regime. But Thulani remained true to the revolution until his last days. And even when it comes to labor, we had a challenge with our own national center in 2012, where the government de-register it after it pursued a very strong position around democratization of the country to say Swaziland is not a democracy and we are going to fight and push for a democratization of the country. The only response the king's government did was to de-register that federation.

Even when we were struggling to get an attorney to take up that matter which was being viewed as a popular one, Comrade Thulani became available to take up that matter. Even only a few days before his assassination, which we believe it has been engineered and planned by the state, there has been one young lawyer who came to him after being intimidated by the state to say he mustn't represent certain people that are deemed to anti-state who went to report back to Comrade Thulani.

While he was still working on that one, he met his death. He has been one figure that inspires all of us in terms of saying, no matter the difficulties, we shouldn't abandon the cause of our people.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

When I hear you talk about the cause of the people and I listen to the decades of movement-building work that the labor movement and comrade lawyers like Thulani have helped support. But also in the rest of civil society. When I hear about that collective movement for democracy, I'm really curious to understand more in your vision and your view, all of you collectively, what are you fighting for? What does Eswatini look like when you win?

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Sticks Nkambule:

Shawna, it's very much unacceptable, now that this present day you would have a state that has ratified all good-looking international agreements, treaties, conventions that commit to respect of workers' rights and civil liberties. And then it goes back home. The models and the structure of the government is just a family arrangement--it's all interconnected into the institution of the money. It fully controls the legislative arm of government, the judiciary and the executive. And the people has have no control over the government. Yet the government survives and lives through the people, in particular the working class, which are making contributions towards the setting up the state and resources that comes through.

The only thing that we want to see change in Swaziland, it's a people-centered government, that is going to listen to the challenges and critical aspects of government and the cries of the people. And be accountable to the people. And the people should have an ability to form the government and also to change the government.

At the state that we are at, we are just demanding the basic of what could be defined as democracy. A government that is formed by the people and serving their interests. It is a pity that calling for such basics around democracy and calling these things which the country has signed and agreed to say, "This is what we're going to do back home." And then, we are counting the number of deaths around that question. It's so unfortunate.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Tell me about who works in coalition with the labor movement in Swaziland to help raise the voice of civil society despite the repression. Who are some of labor's allies?

Sticks Nkambule:

What is good about the Swazi people is that they are just one nation. And there is little that divides us than what connects us. Which is why the mode of engagement in such matters cuts across the society. It involves labor, it involves civil society organizations. It involves faith-based organizations.

Business, of course, with the weaknesses that they have, but yes, they do form part of the conversations. And what is very much inspiring, Shawna, is that Thulani Maseko has been leading such an umbrella formation, following the massacre that was done by the regime to our people in June 2021 where over 200 people were killed at the order of the king's government. He formed that organization where it was representative of trade unions, political parties, all our receiving society organizations. Faith-based, including business.

Always inside the country, we are just one unit. And then outside the country it does show up in a haphazard arrangement. We do not have one. It's safe to say of the recent times, we have been very much happy to see even the diplomatic missions responding to this issue and making practical commitments to say certain things must change. Or was quite interesting as well was to see a drastic decision that was taken by the EU Parliament on the Swazi question.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Are there other actions you'd like to see from neighboring African nations? You've mentioned the EU Parliament decision. Other international bodies that, what are some actions you'd like to see them take,

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governments and other international bodies in order to put some pressure or send a signal to the government of Eswatini?

Sticks Nkambule:

The position that we would want to see and that we are engaging our own comrades to push to, it's the calculated action duty ruling alert. Because those guys, if they feel the peace today, they will take the decision tomorrow. But any other decision that is going to suggest sanctions, this and that, they can still live from our blood and sweat. But we will be the first ones to hear such pressures and difficulties that come with it. And also, we would like institutions like the SADC, the AU, BUN to hold such member states accountable for what they do.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You mentioned that we're having this conversation while you are attending a conference of the International Transport Federation, the global union federation that brings together workers from transport around the world. How important has international labor solidarity been to your movement, the labor movement of East Eswatini?

Sticks Nkambule:

Shawna, the only thing that the labor movement and the working has taught us very well, it's solidarity. And solidarity at times without even paying any cent around it. We've been a member of the ITF, International Transport Workers' Federation, from 1990. And we can count quite a number of gains we've got around it.

Even gains where the regime met to retreat and abandoned some of its decisions it has taken for. And they in a way even now, but they have got to reconsider some of the decisions they have taken because of the noise that labor is raising and practical solidarity that is being offered.

And then, they are becoming very clear to say, "These people, they're not alone. We touch them, we touch the global community." They will have to review and calculate the decisions and the actions they have taken, I guess.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, to my brother, Comrade Sticks Nkambule, general secretary of the Swaziland Transport, Communication and Allied Workers Union, I can tell you that you are not alone. Thousands and thousands of individual workers and hundreds of union organizations around the world stand with you in solidarity with your struggle and your fight for fairness, justice and democracy for workers and all the people of Eswatini. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that you'd love to share with our listeners before we go?

Sticks Nkambule:

We can only say workers of the world, they must unite. And institutions like Solidarity Center and some other global labor formations, they should accelerate such efforts. I mean to even hear that there are people who are available out there, thinking and sharing the pain and atrocities that you go through, it just turns such things into an inspiration and a hope for a better tomorrow. We would want to even

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commit to our comrades to say we're going to be with them in happiness and in sorrow and in the trenches. We are going to continue with the revolution. We are not going to abandon them.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

“We draw strength from those who lay down their lives for liberation.” What a powerful description of how people in Eswatini are willing to risk everything for freedom, for democracy, for basic human rights. We heard how repression, harassment and even violence are being unleashed on workers and their unions. Because the authoritarian regime understands that unions not only stand up for democracy, they embody it.

By bringing together the collective voice of all workers, unions fight for decent working conditions, but also for the freedom's fundamental to all democratic societies. As Sticks told us, unions work toward these goals in partnership with other human rights groups, in Eswatini, across Africa and throughout the world, to ensure global democracy will thrive. At the Solidarity Center, we stand with the brave people of Eswatini who inspire us to intensify our efforts to do everything we can to support them in their struggle for democracy.

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The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, they work to ensure a righteous future for workers fighting for dignity, freedom, equality and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.