Protesting textile workers killed by Lesotho police

Our correspondent
14 November 2003

Two workers were killed and more than 100 were injured when police opened fire on a 20,000-strong demonstration of striking textile workers in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, on November 10.

The marchers, who were on a one-day strike, were heading for the offices of the Employers' Association of Lesotho to deliver a petition protesting against the 5.5 percent wage offer made by the employers in response to their demand for a 15 percent increase. Lesotho Mounted Police (LMPS) intercepted the march, which was organised by the Factory Workers' Union (FAWU), and opened fire with rubber bullets and tear gas.

A spokesperson at Queen Elizabeth II Hospital said at least one person had been shot dead and 120 wounded. The hospital's acting superintendent Mpolai Moteetee said, "We treated and later discharged 106 of the 120 patients." Five of the injured are believed to be in a very serious condition.

Sam Mokhele, regional coordinator of the FAWU, told IRIN that one woman was trampled to death when the police fired on the marchers. A man died of his wounds in hospital the following day. "There is absolutely no justification for the violent reaction of the police, considering that the union leadership had gone through the proper channels to ensure that we received the go-ahead from authorities to stage the protest. We are disturbed, and call on the minister of public safety to explain the actions of the police unit," Mokhele said.

FAWU denies a police claim that they only decided to shoot when the crowd turned unruly and some marchers began throwing stones. "There is no basis to the police claims [of public disorder and property damage], and we promise to sue the police services for their unjustified actions," Mokhele said.

After the shooting Billy Macaefa, FAWU secretary general and member of Lesotho's parliament, was arrested by 50 heavily armed police. Two days later Willie Matheo, Macaefa's deputy, was arrested at the union's headquarters. Both men are expected to face charges of organising an illegal demonstration and causing public disorder and damage to property. An undisclosed number of marchers were arrested and later released.

Lesotho is one of the world's poorest countries. The textile industry, with 40,000 workers, is its biggest employer. The industry is largely foreign owned and is geared to the American market under the US Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA).

AGOA has resulted in a substantial increase in the export of textiles to the US. But Daniel Maraisane, a shop steward at Reflex Knitwear, one of the factories designed for AGOA exports claimed, "This [export] growth must be seen against the backdrop of the appalling working conditions in the textile industry which are characterised by poor wages and unduly long working hours," said.

Employees are often forced to work a seven-day week and complain of low wages and poor working conditions. They have no death benefits, no housing allowances or medical aid scheme.

The companies blatantly ignore the country's labour laws. Last year, Billy Macaefa told the BBC's *World Business Report*, "Taiwanese companies together with ministers in our government who are shareholders are running the companies, so it is very difficult to enforce the law."

The demonstration which was attacked by the police on November 10 was Lesotho's first nationwide protest action this year. The marchers, who were mostly women, came from Asian-owned textile factories in Maseru, Leribe and Mafeteng districts.

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There has been widespread condemnation of the shooting. A spokesman for the Congress of South African Trade Unions said, “We are absolutely shocked at the unprovoked shooting at a peaceful march in support of a wage claim. We believe that action must be taken against those who have violated a fundamental right of workers... On behalf of all South African workers we send condolences to the family and friends of the worker who died and our best wishes to the many injured workers for a speedy and full recovery.”

The Media Institute of Southern Africa has called the incident tantamount to the throttling of the factory workers’ right to express themselves.

On the day after the shooting police were patrolling the areas where the factories are situated.

There are unconfirmed reports that at least five workers were killed, but the death toll could not be verified.

See Also:

Reply to a defender of the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party [11 October 2003]

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