

South Africa's National Union of Metalworkers will join call for Mumia's freedom

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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ILWU attends South African Conference commemorating the 1973 Durban strikes



David Newton, NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim, and Jack Heyman in South Africa.

Representatives from the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) gathered with union leaders from Namibia and South Africa at a Jan. 26 - 28, 2023, conference in South Africa to mark the anniversary of the 1973 Durban strikes that preceded the formation of South Africa's powerful trade union movement.

At the conference were international and local activists, academics, and leaders of the Revolutionary Transport Union of South Africa (RETUSA) and the General Industries Workers Union of South Africa. A goal of the Durban conference was to tackle issues currently facing dockworkers.

The event marks the 50th anniversary of the Durban strikes, where some 100,000 African and Indian workers downed their tools to demand better wages and working conditions. The strikes impacted a wide range of production, from textile firms and brick factories to metal and chemical plants.

The 1973 Durban strikes were followed by the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions in 1979 and the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985. The union movement played a pivotal role in the liberation struggle against apartheid.

The ILWU's campaign against apartheid

In 1984, members of ILWU Locals 10 and 34 in San Francisco refused to offload South African cargo for 11 days, inspiring a community and labor anti-apartheid movement that spread across the country. When Nelson Mandela spoke at the Oakland Coliseum in 1990, he recognized Local 10 for its historic solidarity.

Retired Local 10 past Secretary-Treasurer Clarence Thomas, speaking at a Durban media briefing, said: "Dockworkers hold a strategic position in the global economy.

Dockworkers have more leverage than any workers in the world by working at the point of production of the global supply chain. We shut down shipping, rail, trucking, and cargo flight schedules when we strike. The food we eat, the cars we buy, the fuel we put in them, the computers and handheld devices we use, and the shoes and clothes we wear all come off of ships. No workers in the world understand capitalism better than longshore workers. If the cargo doesn't come off the ship it cannot be sold

Thomas spoke of how unions globally should organize to fight against privatization.

RETUSA General Secretary Joseph Dube welcomed the collaboration between unions.

"We are fighting privatization as you are. We need to learn from each other and make our unions an active fighting force for permanent jobs, democratic workers' control over the harbor facilities, and above all to fight for a living wage for all." Dube said.

The National Union of Metalworkers will protest for Mumia's Freedom

On Jan. 24, 2023, Jack Heyman, Local 10 retired, and David Newton, Local 10 dispatcher and executive board member, met with officers of NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa.)

General Secretary (G.S.) Irvin Jim of NUMSA (364,000 union members) commended the ILWU for international solidarity actions at the meeting. NUMSA officers reviewed Local 10's revolutionary actions against South African apartheid.

When the ILWU delegation informed G.S. Jim that they wished to build international actions calling for Mumia Abu-Jamal's freedom on Feb. 16, he offered to organize NUMSA to mobilize for a mass demonstration at the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria.

Furthermore, G.S. Jim said he would write a letter to Judge Lucretia Clemons, the judge presiding over Mumia's case, calling for his freedom. In gratitude, the ILWU invited NUMSA to visit Local 10 on May Day 2023.

NUMSA was presented with a signed copy of Clarence Thomas' book, which includes the history of the ILWU's role in fighting apartheid, "Mobilizing in Our Own Name: Million Worker March." NUMSA union polo shirts were exchanged with Million Worker March tee shirts and other union gear.

