

**Christian John Makgala and Ikanyeng Stonto Malila, *The 2011 BOFEPUSU Strike: A Story of the Fight for Restoration of Workers Purchasing Power***

Cape Town, Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2014, vi+255 pages, ISBN: 978-1-920287-63-4.

This book presents the 2011 Botswana Federation of Public Service Unions (BOFEPUSU) strike as ‘an eye-opener to those interested in the country’s socio-economic dynamics’ (p.20). The authors admirably knit together the pieces of a complex and fast-moving event into a readable prose. They call this strike ‘a marathon public strike’ (pp.xiii) and ‘historic’ (p.65) because it was ‘the longest strike the country has ever seen’ (p.75). Before this strike, Botswana had a labour force which was deemed ‘non-militant’ (p.19). The government took this as an advantage as it believed that a ‘docile’ workforce would assist in luring the much-needed foreign direct investment (FDI). The status quo, however, swiftly changed in 2007 when several civil associations transformed into real trade unions. The government of Botswana had no chance but to grudgingly allow this to happen ‘because of global trends’ (p.28). These civil service trade unions came under one umbrella, BOFEPUSU. The government tried to de-register it leading to litigation, which the labour federation won. ‘This atmosphere of antagonism was the context in which the 2011 strike unfolded’ (p.30).

This historic strike emanated from the failed negotiations over salary increment between the civil servants and their employer. After about three years of no salary increase for the civil servants, in April 2011 they were disappointed when the employer refused to increase their salaries citing the global economic recession. But BOFEPUSU, supported its demands with convincing economic analysis, insisting that the economy was in a position to cater for the salary adjustment. The result of the impasse was the ‘mother of all strikes’, which commenced on 18 April and ended on 18 June 2011. BOFEPUSU had demanded a salary adjustment of 16% but later revised this down to 12%. But the employer insisted on 5%, and later went down to 3% to be effected in September 2011, only ‘if the economy showed signs of recovery’ (p.75). The BOFEPUSU leadership message to the workers and sympathisers was: ‘The Fight for the Restoration of Workers Purchasing Power’. The authors adopt it as a sub-title of their book. Though a novice in organising a strike of this magnitude, the authors say that BOFEPUSU executed the industrial action well.

They give a useful historical perspective to the strike. Until 2007, only the ‘blue collar workers’ were unionised under the Manual Workers Union which explains why fully-fledged strikes by government employees had been quite rare. The Manual Workers Union had staged a nationwide strike in 1991.

During the 2011 strike, President Ian Khama overtly opposed the workers’ demands and insistently argued that there were many unemployed people, yet those with jobs were ungrateful and unpatriotic. The employer was unwavering and used all means, including threats, security agencies, and dismissal of workers but BOFEPUSU remained steadfast. Service delivery was badly affected in government facilities including hospitals as doctors joined the strike.

Interestingly, the strike coincided with the ‘Arab Spring’ (p.31), a revolution instigated by the youth in the Arab world. Initially, BOFEPUSU had focused on the workers’ concerns, but later included similar demands as in the Arab Spring such as ‘regime change’ (p.30). Opposition politicians and some ruling party parliamentarians backed BOFEPUSU. This displeased government and hardened President Khama’s position. The employer pronounced teachers, diamond sorters and veterinary officials as essential service workers who would not go on strike but BOFEPUSU saw this as a move to weaken it, and instituted legal proceedings.

The government media was accused by the workers of bias, while the government viewed the

private media as fuelling the strike. The strike was suspended in June 2011, and the second phase was to include a 'go slow' approach to work. The authors argue that the success of the strike should not be judged on whether the workers got the 16% raise, but on the basis in which they managed to shake the government.

This book is cleverly written and readable. It significantly adds to the history of labour movement in Botswana.

*Reviewed by Boga Thura Manatsha*