

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

International Textile, Garment & Leather Workers' Federation

International Union of Food Agric. Hotel, Rest. Cater. Tobac. & Allied Workers Association

For immediate use

September 26, 2005

Unions lodge ILO complaint in latest bid to free trade union leaders held in Eritrean secret prison, further action planned

The international trade union movement today stepped up the pressure on the Eritrean government to obtain the release of three trade union leaders held without charge in a secret prison in Asmara.

The ICFTU, ITGLWF and IUF today filed a formal complaint against the Eritrean Government with the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO). The complaint, jointly filed before the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association says that Eritrea is in violation of ILO Conventions by imprisoning trade unionists **Tewelde Ghebremedhin, Minase Andezion and Habtom Weldemicael**.

In addition, the three internationals vowed to use "all available means" in order to secure the rapid release of the union leaders.

The three, held since early spring, are being held incommunicado and without charge, contrary to the 48 hour time limit within which arrested persons must be brought before a magistrate according to Eritrean law. It is believed they are being held in a secret security prison in Asmara.

"In addition to the ILO complaint, we are exploring other vehicles for pressure on the government to secure their immediate and unconditional release," said Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ICFTU.

There are several EU projects in Eritrea financed by the European Development Fund (EDF) worth 156 million euros for the 2002-2007 period. A core part of this agreement is that the Eritrean government must respect human rights in order to receive this assistance.

Ghebremedhin and Andezion were arrested by security police on March 30. At the time of their arrest, they were the elected leaders of the national agro-food, tobacco and tourism union federation (affiliated to the IUF) and the textile and leather workers federation (affiliated to the ITGLWF). On April 9, police arrested Habtom Weldemicael, head of the Red Sea Bottlers Coca-Cola Workers Union and a member of the food and beverage federation executive.

The government has repeatedly failed to respond to international demands for their release or reveal the charges against the men.

"The fact that these men are being imprisoned without charge and without access to lawyers or their families is not only a massive abuse of their fundamental human rights, it also contravenes Eritrean law. The government of Eritrea would do well to release these men if it is serious about its international reputation," said Neil Kearney, the General Secretary of the ITGLWF.

Eritrea has become increasingly repressive under single-party rule. According to Amnesty International (which has also urged action in support of the three imprisoned union leaders) thousands of the government's critics are languishing in jail, some having been there for several years.

None of the prisoners have been taken to court, charged or tried. In some cases, panels of military and police officers have reportedly handed down prison sentences in secret proceedings that flout basic standards of fair trial.

According to Amnesty, the use of torture has become "systematic". Former leaders and activists in the national liberation struggle, ex-Ministers and journalists are among those currently imprisoned without due process.

"These arrests mean that the circle of repression has now widened to include the labour movement. The union internationals have warned the government of Eritrea that they hold it responsible for the physical and psychological wellbeing of the three union leaders," said Ron Oswald, the General Secretary of the IUF.

September also marks the 4th anniversary of the illegal detention of Dawit Isaac, a journalist and Swedish citizen, who along with 12 other independent journalists has been detained incommunicado, without charge or trial, since September 2001 when the government shut down independent newspapers. No charges are known to have been filed against any of them. The International Federation of Journalists is seeking meetings with the Eritrean ambassador to the EU to urge his immediate release.

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The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions represents 145 million workers in 231 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories.

The International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation is a global union federation bringing together 220 affiliated organisations in 110 countries with a combined membership of 10 million workers.

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is an international trade union federation composed of 353 trade unions in 125 countries with an affiliated membership of over 2.7 million members. It is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

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