

## ICFTU OnLine...

121/171005

### ICFTU Annual Survey: Grim global catalogue of anti-union repression

Brussels, 18 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Being a trade unionist is becoming more dangerous with a total of 145 people worldwide killed due to their trade union activities in 2004, 16 more than the previous year, according to the ICFTU Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations. The report, which covers 136 countries from all five continents, also documents over 700 violent attacks on trade unionists, and nearly 500 death threats.

Trade unionists in many countries continue to face imprisonment, dismissal and discrimination, while legal obstacles to trade union organizing and collective bargaining are being used to deny millions of workers their rights.

"This year's Survey reveals just how far many governments and employers are prepared to go in suppressing workers' rights to seek a competitive edge in increasingly cut-throat global markets," said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder, adding "Globalisation must be put on a completely different path, with social concerns and ending exploitation at the centre, rather than at the margins".

New statistical charts in the Survey point to different patterns of repression in different regions of the world. The Americas stand out as the region with the highest number of murders and death threats, while the Asia-Pacific region has the highest number of trade unionists behind bars. In the Middle East, where trade unions are totally banned in some countries, 11 workers were killed due to their union activities - 7 of these in one incident in Lebanon when the army fired live ammunition at participants in a trade union protest march. In Europe, where the situation is less dramatic overall, authorities in several former Soviet states are actively trying to take control of trade unions.

Once again Colombia was the deadliest country for trade unionists, with 99 murders, and hundreds of death threats set against a background of systematic efforts by the government to undermine the trade union movement. A further 15 killings were documented in other Latin American countries.

Alongside Colombia, several other countries feature prominently in this year's Survey, including Belarus, Burma, Cambodia, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Iran, Nigeria, the Philippines, Turkey, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

14 people were killed in the Philippines when a bulldozer and armoured personnel carriers were used to break through a picket, and in Cambodia, the government is accused of a high-level cover up following the murders of labour leaders Chea Vichea and Ros Sovannareth. A perceived threat to the country's share of global trade was apparently the motivation for the killings.

Government interference in trade union affairs was a feature in several countries, including in former Soviet states. In Belarus, the authorities under President Lukashenko tried to exercise total control over the trade union movement. A report by an ILO Commission of Inquiry describes the difficulties faced by independent trade unions, and the intimidatory tactics, including violence, used against witnesses called to appear before the Commission (which found Belarus guilty of serious violations of freedom of association). In the Ukraine the security service (SBU) paid particular attention to independent trade unions, often visiting trade union offices, questioning members and even visiting their homes. At present, it is too early to tell whether the country's "orange revolution" will lead to a substantial change in this pattern. Georgia is also highlighted in the Survey, due to harassment and detention of union representatives, detention of leaders, obstruction of union activities, and illegal seizure of trade union assets by the government.

Workers in the world's export processing zones (EPZs), most of whom are women, were confronted by continued anti-union repression. In Namibia attack dogs were used to subdue workers at a Malaysian-owned textile factory, where one of the female employees was severely bitten during the protest. The same factory has a history of violating fundamental workers' rights. The Survey includes cases from EPZs in Fiji, India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, highlighting the effect of fierce and unregulated competition in global markets on trade union rights. In Bangladesh women workers who attempted to form a union in a garment factory received death threats from the managing director, who subsequently hired criminals to beat up many of the women, leaving 25 of them badly injured. Thugs were also used to deny entry to the factory to 186 unionised workers.

In the Americas, EPZ workers in Haiti, Nicaragua and several other countries also faced anti-union repression. Employer tactics in the Ouanaminthe zone on the Haiti/Dominican Republic border included banning workers who were elected as union representatives from using the toilets at work, sacking 34 members of a newly-formed union and marching them out of the factory at gunpoint, and the violent beating and subsequent dismissal of union leader Ariel Jérôme.

On the African continent, the Cameroon government continued efforts to divide the union movement by favouring workers' organizations which it saw as being easier to control whilst refusing to register trade unions which it saw as too independent. Similarly, in the Republic of Congo, the government continued its interference in the affairs of the CSTC, by favouring those sections of the union movement which it believed were most loyal to it.

China is one of the countries identified in the Survey's Foreword as a major cause for concern. Freedom of association is still denied to the country's vast workforce, by a government which only recognises the official union that once again proved ineffective in protecting workers' rights. Two people received lengthy prison sentences for advocating independent trade unions on the internet,

numerous workers' protests were dealt with violently by the police, with many participants facing detention. The health of two prominent trade union leaders imprisoned since March 2002, Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yungliang, badly deteriorated after they were denied medical treatment.

The Survey also puts a number of industrialized countries under the spotlight. Australia comes under fire once again for its drive to replace collective agreements with individual workplace agreements, and for tabling new legislation aimed at severely curtailing the right of union representatives to visit workplaces. Several employers have threatened to sack workers for refusing to leave the union and sign individual agreements. Other industrialised countries cited in the Survey, primarily for serious deficiencies in labour legislation, included Canada, Germany and Japan.

The United States - which has yet to ratify the core international conventions on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining - is again cited for widespread violations. Employers routinely engaged specialist union-busting companies to deter workers from voting for union representation, and used "captive audience" meetings of workers as a platform to threaten that workplaces would be shut down if the workforce opted to join unions. Some employers took matters even further, with Wal Mart, which has turned union busting into an art form, interfering in a union election by engaging in surveillance of the employees' union activities, interrogating them about union support, moving employees in and out of departments to dilute union support, and offering incentives to workers to vote against unionisation on the eve of union elections. Notwithstanding Wal Mart's fierce opposition to its employees organising, Canadian unions managed to organise the first-ever unionised Wal Mart store in Jonquière, Quebec, in September 2004.

Notably absent from the Survey are the Nordic countries with their strong trade union traditions. The strength of these countries' economies in global markets shows how respect for workers' rights can be a foundation for economic success, and a cornerstone for democracy.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories ([www.icftu.org](http://www.icftu.org))

The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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