

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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The powers that be continue using brute force to suppress labour rights in Africa

Brussels, 18 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Already crippled by the burden of poverty and underdevelopment, the African continent carries the added weight of trade union repression. Whilst Africa's workers struggle to scrape a living wage from jobs that generally offer no social protection, the powers that be remain brutal in their oppression of trade union rights, responding to attempts to improve conditions with violent intimidation, arrests and dismissals. Collective bargaining continues to be very limited on the continent and the export processing zones developing in the wake of globalisation are simply inflating the scale of exploitation.

In Zimbabwe, trade unionism continues to go hand in hand with harassment, intimidation, arrests, dismissals and persecution. The long list of workers' rights violations committed under President Mugabe's regime over the last year confirms the country's sad reputation as the leader in human and trade union rights violations on the continent. Several trade union leaders have suffered the consequences, such as ZCTU General Secretary, Wellington Chibebi who was arrested together with four of his colleagues for organising a trade union workshop, Raymond Majongwe, the General Secretary of the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe who was the victim of an assassination attempt and Lovemore Matombo, President of the ZCTU, who was dismissed along with several members of the Communications & Allied Services Workers' Union for attending a meeting of African trade unions.

In Nigeria, the government, not content with its relentless union bashing, has introduced a bill aimed at deregistering the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), a trade union centre reputed for its activism. At least three people died as a result of police brutality at demonstrations organised by the NLC, and over a hundred more were arrested on account of their trade union activities.

Freedom of association and the right to strike flouted

In Sudan, Egypt and Libya, trade union rights are simply nonexistent; only the government-controlled unions are authorised. In Equatorial Guinea, although trade union rights exist in theory, the situation in practice is very different, with the government refusing to recognise independent trade unions. In Djibouti and Senegal, unions cannot be legally registered without government approval, whilst in Cameroon and DR Congo, the governments will only deal with the unions under their sway.

Respect for the right to strike is equally lacking. In Botswana, 444 miners striking in protest against discriminatory wage review were dismissed and many were forcibly evicted from their homes. In Kenya, 188 tea plantation workers were fired for taking strike action following the employer's failure to respect a wage agreement, and in South Africa, 150 porters lost their jobs three weeks into a strike. The financial bank of Benin dismissed 40 union members, including 10 executives, for taking part in a protest strike. Trade union leaders in Senegal were also sacked following industrial action at a cement works.

Striking forest workers in Youande, Cameroon, suffered brutal injuries in an attack by some thirty police officers armed with truncheons. In Malawi, police fired real bullets in the air and used tear gas to rout

tea plantation workers striking to support their claim for redundancy pay. The survey also chronicles a similar incident targeting former railroad workers in Mozambique who had assembled to discuss their redundancy pay.

Export processing zones, unbridled exploitation zones

In the EPZs - the symbol, par excellence, of the unbridled competition dominating the global market at the expense of social and labour rights - employers remain resolute in their opposition to any form of organising or trade union activity, particularly in Malawi, Mauritius and Nigeria. Across the continent, in the numerous zones stretching from Morocco to Madagascar, abuse is common currency. In Kenya, a workplace representative at a textile factory in the Athi River EPZ was dismissed and blacklisted after asking the company to pay the wage increases set down in the collective agreement signed the previous year.

In Namibia, a Chinese worker at a Malaysian-owned textile plant reputed for its anti-union practices found herself in hospital following an attack by a dog used by security guards during a demonstration organised by the Chinese workers. They were protesting their working conditions, the inedible food and the medicals imposed at their own expense. Four hundred Bangladeshi workers were evicted and had their work permits confiscated after protesting against the appalling living conditions. At the end of September, the court ruled that the company had to pay 66 of these workers ten months wages, their flight home and part of their legal expenses. An inquiry held by the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) revealed that the Bangladeshi workers had paid recruitment agencies up to 21 million dollars without receiving any proof of payment, opening the door to serious suspicions of human trafficking.

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

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