

ICFTU OnLine...

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Bahrain, a bright spot in an otherwise dismal landscape of persistent labour rights violations in the Middle East

Brussels, 18 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Barring the improvements registered in Bahrain, timidly followed by Qatar, the Middle East continues to stand out as the region where workers' rights are the least respected, particularly among the immigrant workforce exploited on a wide scale in the region.

Bahrain shows the way

Although there is still only one national union recognised in Bahrain and other rights remain limited, the ICFTU warmly welcomed the holding of the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions' founding congress, prior to becoming the first organisation in the Gulf States to affiliate to the ICFTU and playing an active role in the tripartite talks on labour legislation.

In Qatar, where trade unions were hitherto prohibited, a new labour code was adopted in 2004 authorising the formation of trade unions, although with the significant restriction that it only applies to Qatari nationals, barely a quarter of the working population, to the exclusion of immigrants, who form the majority of the workforce in the country.

Trade unions remain prohibited in Oman and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait still has a single-union system, as do Yemen and Syria, where the General Federation of Trade Unions remains firmly under the control of the ruling party. In Jordan, the government continues to meddle in the affairs of the single union.

Repression and violence in Iran

Any protest against dismissals, wage arrears or attempts to carry out independent trade union activities in Iran remain highly perilous, as demonstrated by the four killings at the hands of the police and the dozens of arrests, accompanied in some instances by torture and raids. Trade union leader Mahmoud Salehi, who had already been harassed by the authorities on several occasions, has once again been targeted along with six other union leaders and could face the death sentence if the charge of collaborating with a banned left-wing organisation is upheld.

In Lebanon, the army killed seven people and injured 50 others during a protest march organised by the General Federation of Workers. The violence ravaging Iraq is taking a heavy toll on workers' rights in the country, where restrictions on trade union freedoms had still not been completely lifted by the end of the 2004. One trade union federation did, however, receive official recognition. In Palestine, where trade union rights are legally recognised, the prevailing violence and the practices of the Israeli occupier, together with the absence of an institutional framework, constitute a serious obstacle to any genuine trade union activity.

In Israel, workers' rights, hitherto largely recognised by law and in practice - in the case of Israeli nationals at least - have been seriously compromised by the bill concocted by the government to restrict the right to strike.

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

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For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2
224 0245 or +32 476 621 018.

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