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126/171005

ICFTU Annual Survey: Government interference mars European labour rights landscape

Brussels, 18 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Attempts by governments to stifle independent trade unionism in countries such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are a prominent and disturbing feature of the European labour rights landscape according to the ICFTU's Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations, released today. The survey also highlights the widespread occurrence of assassination attempts, kidnappings and intimidation against independent trade unionists.

Belarus stood out as the most anti-union country in the region, with the Lukashenko regime stifling independent trade union activity with the full force of the state, including assuming state control of the FPB national trade union structure. A Commission of Enquiry of the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) into Belarus concluded that there was systematic government interference in trade union affairs, and catalogued an extensive series of union rights violations in its report. Several workers were dismissed or subject to disciplinary procedures by the regime for giving evidence to the ILO inquiry. Union official Ivan Roman was attacked and left unconscious in the snow on the same day he was invited to give testimony to the ILO.

Similar government attempts to take charge of trade unions took place in Moldova and in Ukraine. The Moldovan government tried to coerce workers in several industries into leaving independent unions and joining the government-controlled "Solidaritatea" organisation. The Health Ministry organised a concerted campaign to destroy the health workers' union, and ordered senior officials to stage pro-Solidaritatea meetings with their staff.

The Ukrainian security services, under the then government, kept independent unions under close and continuous scrutiny, against a background of employer harassment of mine-workers and public employees. When Andriy Volynets, the son of the Chairperson of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, was abducted and badly beaten, the authorities did everything in their power to obstruct investigation and media coverage of the case.

The Georgian national trade union centre GTUA was subjected to a wide-ranging campaign of interference by the country's government. The GTUA and its leadership faced public humiliation, threats, obstruction of trade union activities and detention by the authorities. The government also seized GTUA assets, despite a Supreme Court ruling in the GTUA's favour.

Harassment of trade unionists by employers was widespread, including in European Union member states. German public service employees are forbidden from taking strike action by that country's legislature. German supermarket chain Aldi suppressed union activity in its operations in the southern part of the country, while its competitor Lidl implemented a comprehensive anti-union policy throughout its stores. Violations in the Czech Republic included the dismissal of trade union representatives in the manufacturing industry, and in a mine and steel company. A Slovakian paper company sacked 19 workers involved in founding a union, and harassed employees, warning them to keep away from the union. Several Croatian employers, including the Pevec retail chain, pressured workers not to join unions, while other companies prohibited any union activity on their premises. Legal restrictions on trade union activities, in contravention of ILO standards, included

restrictions on the right to strike in Belgium and in Germany, as well as a ban on "secondary action" in the United Kingdom. Poor enforcement of legislation in several countries, notably Hungary, also features in the report.

In the Russian Federation, one regional trade union leader suffered two attempts on his life, while another local union leader was severely beaten because of his union activities. Several other cases of anti-union action by Russian employers are documented in the Survey.

The survey notes some positive moves in several of the ten states which joined the European Union in 2004, as legislation was changed due to the countries' accession to the EU.

In Turkey, which is currently seeking to join the EU, the survey details a spree of trade union rights violations, including serious limitations on the right to strike and on collective bargaining. Severe penalties can be imposed on workers participating in strike action which falls outside the narrow limits allowed by the law, and 85 union members, including senior officials, were faced criminal charges arising out of work stoppages in the health sector. Other violations in Turkey included administrative obstacles imposed on workers seeking to join unions, and government intervention in support of employers violating workers' rights.

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