

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU Media Release

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Chinese government releases labour political prisoner but harassment continues

Brussels, 1 March 2006 (ICFTU OnLine) A labour activist, held in prison since March 2002, has been released by the Chinese authorities three weeks ahead of completing a four-year sentence. However, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has learnt that the persecution of Xiao Yunliang, a prominent independent labour activist from China's Liaoning Province, continues.

According to ICFTU sources, as of the 23rd of February when he was released, Xiao Yunliang has been under house arrest, and his apartment is currently being watched by four police guards and two police cars. Family and friends who have attempted to see him are being harassed and intimidated by police questioning, which has caused a number of them to turn back for fear of reprisal.

Xiao Yunliang was falsely accused of rioting and leading a violent workers' demonstration. He was sentenced in May 2003 together with Yao Fuxin, another labour activist, who received a seven year term.

The ICFTU calls for the immediate release of Yao Fuxin and calls on the authorities to stop harassing and intimidating Xiao Yunliang and his family.

"Both these men are in very poor health after having repeatedly been denied proper medical attention in prison. After watching their loved one suffer in prison, it is unacceptable that Xiao's family and friends are now having to deal with further harassment and victimisation. Most importantly Xiao is again being denied access to medical services due to his house arrest," said Guy Ryder, the General Secretary of the ICFTU.

Xiao Yunliang's diagnosed and reported ailments include: cystic disease of the kidney, arteriosclerosis of the aorta, intra-hepatic duct stones, chronic gastritis and conjunctivitis in his left eye. Since his release, he has experienced severe sleeping problems and coughs very often, which is believed to be the consequence of a tuberculosis condition he developed during his detention.

According to Xiao's family, on 28 February, his youngest daughter, Xiao Yu complained to the police that the family could not live normally under such conditions. A police official present at the family's home replied: "If you can't live like this, then jump from a high building!".

This comment is likely a cynical reference to a form of action by groups of workers protesting against unpaid wages, who have occasionally threatened to jump off tall buildings if their grievances were not heard by authorities.

Commenting on media speculation that Xiao's release might have been ordered as a political good-will gesture by Beijing ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States next month, Ryder said: "If this is the case, we would encourage President Hu to travel abroad much more often; there are currently several dozen independent trade union activists detained in Chinese prisons".

According to Ryder, the ICFTU will again call on the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to intervene in the case of Yao Fuxin who is not scheduled to be released until March 2009. The ACFTU has so far never acknowledged countless letters sent by trade union organisations from around the world urging Xiao's and Yao's release.

Ends

For comment contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0210 or +32 477 580 486.

Background Information:

Known as the "Liaoyang Two", Xiao Yunliang, a retired worker from Liaoyang Ferroalloy Factory, in Liaoning Province, and another local worker, Yao Fuxin, on March 2002 led around 2,000 workers from the same factory, along with a further 15,000 workers from five other factories in Liaoyang, in a series of major public demonstrations. The workers were protesting against corruption in the factory - which they argued had directly caused its bankruptcy - and calling for unpaid wages and other owed benefits, including pensions, to be paid.

Xiao was secretly detained on 20 March, 2002 and then formally charged with the crime of "illegal assembly and demonstration." Yet, the local authorities and ACFTU officials implicitly confirmed that the workers were merely exercising their rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining, as guaranteed by the International Labour Organisation's Convention No. 87 and 98. A local ACFTU official said the "Liaoyang Two" had never resorted to any act of violence during the protests. Tried at the Liaoyang Intermediate People's Court in 2003, Xiao and Yao were sentenced to four years and seven years in prison respectively. Both men have been plagued by serious health problems throughout their imprisonment.

Yao Fuxin, suffers from heart disease and has had several heart attacks, the most recent and major one occurring in August 2005. He is currently kept in Lingyuan No.2 Prison, Liaoning Province. Since their detention, the ICFTU has repeatedly launched appeals to Chinese authorities, calling for the immediate release and dropping of charges against Yao Fuxin and Xiao Yunliang. In March 2003, the ILO Governing Body called upon China's government to release all Liaoyang workers and to drop any

outstanding charges against them. The ACFTU, the only union organisation authorised in China, has consistently failed to acknowledge receipt of letters from the ICFTU, its affiliates and GUFs urging it to intervene in their case.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories (www.icftu.org)

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