

ICFTU OnLine:

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Brutal Suppression of Workers' Rights Detailed in Worldwide Report

Brussels, 7 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): 115 trade unionists were murdered for defending workers' rights in 2005, while more than 1,600 were subjected to violent assaults and some 9,000 arrested, according to the ICFTU's Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights violations, published today. Nearly 10,000 workers were sacked for their trade union involvement, and almost 1,700 detained.

Latin America remained the most perilous region for trade union activity, with Colombia once again topping the list for killings, intimidation and death threats. 70 Colombian unionists paid the ultimate price for standing up for fundamental rights at work. Other countries under the spotlight for violence and repression against unionists include Iraq, Iran, El Salvador, Djibouti, China, Cambodia, Guatemala, Zimbabwe and Burma. Some Arabian Gulf countries continue to ban trade unions altogether, while in several other countries including North Korea, government-controlled "official trade unions" are the order of the day. In Australia, the government rushed through new laws depriving the country's workforce of the most fundamental protections.

"This year's report reveals deeply disturbing trends, especially for women, migrant workers and those who work in the public sector", said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder. "The death toll was slightly lower in 2005 than the previous year, but we are nevertheless witnessing increasingly severe violence and hostility against working people who stand up for their rights," he added.

Alongside the 70 killings, 260 Colombian trade unionists received death threats, in a climate of continuing impunity for the assassins, and deliberate targeting of trade unions by armed groups. The education sector was a particular focus for repression, contributing to a growing phenomenon of violence against women workers.

Elsewhere in the Americas, eight rural worker's rights supporters were killed in Brazil, and in Honduras, regional trade union coordinator Francisco Cruz Galeano was slain last December. In Guatemala the pervasive climate of violence and fear, especially against women workers, continued with workers in education, banking and agriculture amongst the primary targets.

The Bush Administration continued its efforts to undermine freedom of association and collective bargaining in the USA, helping to ensure that union-busting remained rife. One of the most notorious anti-union employers in the US, WalMart, spread its practices into Canada. Several provinces in Canada also took further steps to weaken workers' rights. In common with other regions, systematic violations of workers' rights in export processing zones was a prominent feature in Mexico and the Dominican Republic in particular, with multinational companies profiting from low wages and exploitative working conditions, especially in supply chains in the textiles and metals sectors.

Export processing zones in several Asian countries, notably Bangladesh,

India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka were highlighted for anti-union action by employers, often with government complicity, as part of the relentless drive by many global companies to undercut their competitors.

In Burma, ten underground organisers of the outlawed Federation of Trade Unions of Burma were caught and sentenced to prison terms of up to 25 years as the military junta reinforced its stranglehold on the country. Kim Tae-hwan, of South Korean trade union centre FKTU was one of 17 Asian trade unionists killed during 2005, run over by a truck driver who was following police orders to drive through a picket line at a cement works. Anti-union violence by police and security forces was repeatedly documented in India, Cambodia, China and several other countries.

Nepalese trade unions were at the centre of a civil society movement to restore trade union and human rights following the coup mounted by King Gyanendra, while workers were subjected to strict government control in North Korea, Laos and the Maldives, as was the single Vietnamese national union federation. Dozens of Chinese trade union activists remained in prison, and the authorities brutally repressed protests by workers in many different locations, with unconfirmed reports of the deaths of two demonstrators.

The conservative Australian government rushed a new wave of anti-union laws through the country's parliament at the end of the year, including heavy restrictions on workers' rights to trade union representation. Protection from unfair dismissal was removed from most Australian workers, and provisions were introduced for heavy fines against union officials and workers for even asking employers to provide paid leave for union-delivered training or to guarantee not to sack workers without good reason.

In the Middle-East, a series of protest actions by Iranian workers, including in the transport sector, met with heavy-handed police tactics and reports of torture and violence against strikers. Attempts to form a union by workers at the Iran Khodro auto plant, producing for Renault, were prevented by the authorities, and many of them were dismissed for protesting against non-payment of wages. One worker was taken away by company security staff, viciously beaten, and reappeared several weeks later in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. The conflict in Iraq made trade union activity extremely difficult, with 13 union representatives killed as a direct result of their union activities, including Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions official Hadi Salih, who was brutally tortured and murdered by assassins who invaded his home on 4 January.

Migrant workers suffered extreme exploitation in several Middle-East countries, including Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Jordan. In a number of these countries, unions were still totally outlawed, or subject to heavy legal restrictions. In the United Arab Emirates, 130 construction workers were violently attacked for going on strike, and some migrant workers remained unpaid for up to 16 months. In Bahrain, hopes that the government would take some positive steps towards bringing the law further into line with international standards were dashed with the promulgation of a new legal disposition which is in fact more restrictive. A positive move was made in Qatar, where a new labour code, although deficient in several respects, allowed for the creation of free trade unions.

In one of the worst incidents on the African continent, police in

Djibouti shot one driver's union member dead and wounded several others, while a strike of dock workers in the same country was met with 170 arrests and 70 dismissals. Zimbabwe's trade union movement was subjected to continued harassment by the government, with death threats against trade union leaders, arrests and detentions of union members, and several cases of physical violence against trade unionists.

Rubber bullets and teargas were a feature of police responses to protests by workers in South Africa, two of whom were hospitalised as a result of police actions, while new laws in Nigeria placed heavy restrictions on the right to strike and totally banned trade unions for certain types of worker. The Ethiopian authorities targeted the journalists union for repression and maintained their ban on the country's teachers' union, several of whose members were detained and accused of high treason, and further anti-union action in the education sector occurred in Algeria and Cameroon. In Sudan, Egypt and Libya, only government-controlled national trade union centres were permitted.

In Europe, the heaviest repression against trade unions occurred in Belarus, where the Lukashenko regime failed to implement any of the recommendations of an ILO Commission of Enquiry, moving instead to consolidate the position of the government-controlled FBP organisation and maintaining high-level interference in the affairs of independent unions. The Moldovan government also attempted to coerce health and education workers in particular into joining the authorities' "preferred" trade union structures.

The Turkish authorities were also responsible for acts of violence against education sector workers, and more than 500 Turkish workers were dismissed for their union involvement. Within the European Union, interference in and surveillance of trade unions was reported in Poland, while the German government refused to lift a ban on strikes by civil servants. The Lidl supermarket chain in Germany remained virulently anti-union, while the Gate Gourmet catering company was also singled out for its actions in Germany as well as in the UK.

To read the full report: <http://www.icftu.org/survey2006.asp?language=EN>

Link to the press release on Africa::

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223813&Language=EN>

Link to the press release on Americas:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223815&Language=EN>

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Link to the press release on China:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223809&Language=EN>

-To see the audio/ video materials covering the ICFTU Survey 2006:

http://www.icftusurvey.org/audio_video/en/

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. <http://www.icftu.org> The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions. <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018.

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