

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine:

091/070606

Trade union repression intensifies in Africa

Brussels, 7 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): The ICFTU's 2006 survey of trade union rights violations reveals an intensification in the violent repression of workers' rights in Africa, the world's poorest continent. Among the most striking manifestations of the rise in repression was the failure of most governments to respect the rights of their own employees - the right to organise, to strike or bargain collectively. The widespread restrictions on the right to strike, both in the public and private sectors, pushed workers outside the law when taking collective action to defend their interests. The resulting repression is increasingly brutal and, in some instances, deadly.

According to the survey, public sector employees in Ethiopia are deprived of even the basic right to form a union. Despite education being essential to the eradication of poverty, teachers were particularly hard hit by the surge in repression during 2005. The Ethiopian Association of Teachers was again a prime target. Its members were arrested, imprisoned and accused of high treason. The attacks on this sector were not limited to Ethiopia. In Algeria, a strike by university lecturers was declared illegal on three occasions and leaders of the teachers' union in Cameroon were the victims of intimidation.

Teachers were not the only public sector workers to have their rights violated. Many other sectors were also affected by what appears to have become the norm in Africa. In Botswana, several leaders of a local government service association were placed under tight surveillance by the national security forces and had their calls tapped. Intimidation was also directed against the President of the teachers' union, who received a "forceful" visit from the army.

The ICFTU survey reports numerous attacks on the right to strike. In Ghana, at least three miners suffered bullet wounds when police opened fire on protestors. In South Africa, it is not unusual for police to use tear gas and rubber bullets to "resolve" any problems caused by striking workers. Examples of such excesses abounded in 2005. Fifteen bus drivers suffered brutal consequences when 3,000 of them took part in a protest to support their claim for a wage increase. Seven members of the metal workers' union were also injured during a strike, with one requiring hospitalisation.

Repression of the right to strike has all too often fatal consequences. In South Africa, again, two people were killed and a third injured in April at MCE engineering when the employer decided to open fire on the workers during a wage dispute. In September, one person was killed and several others injured when security guards at Kenhym Estates shot at striking workers.

According to the survey, Djibouti was the setting for similar tragedies. In September, at least one member of the drivers' union was killed and several others seriously injured at the hands of police during a demonstration. Drivers were not the only victims of anti-union repression in Djibouti. Dockworkers, for example, will not easily forget their strike that led to 170 arrests and 70 dismissals. Another sector singled out for repression was the postal service. A new provision of the labour legislation stipulates that any postal worker who forms or joins a union will be sacked.

Anti-union sentiment is also high in Nigeria, which has passed new laws severely restricting the right to strike and outlawing it in a range of key services. Hundreds of health workers were dismissed for taking part in a strike. Their dismissal caused disastrous consequences for their hospital because it no longer had enough staff to function properly. In the oil industry, about 170 workers were dismissed after pressing for better working conditions. Similarly, the management of an oil drilling company called in police to repress a strike organised by its employees. The leaders of the Nigeria Labour Congress, an ICFTU affiliate, have been placed under constant pressure by the national authorities, making it virtually impossible for them to fulfil their task of defending workers.

In Zimbabwe, the ZCTU (Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions), affiliated to the ICFTU, continues to be the victim of systematic harassment. The confederation's leaders, including the President and the General Secretary, have received death threats, suffered physical assaults, and many have been arrested - simply for being union members. Zimbabwe was also the scene of brutalities, such as the torture of a teachers' union leader and the beating of telecommunication workers who were protesting against an unfair dismissal.

Numerous African countries, such as Sudan, Egypt and Libya, forbid the formation of democratic and independent trade unions. Only national unions controlled by governments are permitted.

-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> ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions.

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

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