

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Whilst the free market rules, the rulers deny freedom to China's workers

Brussels, 7 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): 2005 saw no let up in the unrelenting repression of independent trade unions in China with no progress made towards freedom of association, according to the ICFTU's annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations, released today.

The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) remains the only trade union allowed to operate and independent efforts to organise workers were increasingly met with often violent suppression. In October 2005 the survey details the events in Chongqing when some 10,000 protesting workers were dispersed by police in a confrontation that reportedly killed two female protestors.

"The millions of workers who are responsible for China's economic miracle are still denied even the most basic right to organize without interference and oppression", Guy Ryder, the General Secretary of the ICFTU said today. "Their rights remain subjugated to an overwhelming desire for profits and the interests of officials and business people who operate in a culture of impunity. Serious occupational hazards go unchecked and excessive working hours remain the norm despite domestic legislation outlawing such practices". He added, "Indeed the failure of the Chinese government to implement its own laws remains one of the most serious failings in the country's reform path".

Privatization, often characterised by widespread corruption and cronyism continues to be a major cause of labour unrest. Millions of workers have been negatively affected by the embezzlement or misappropriation of factory assets and funds set aside for redundancy and other benefits during the ongoing restructuring of state-owned enterprises' (SOE). Many of the larger protests mentioned in the survey can be traced back to the issue of corruption, the non-payment of earmarked funds for workers and the widespread flouting of local or national regulations on pensions, health care and redundancies.

Despite some reforms in other areas there is a total lack of reforms aimed at freedom of association - this paralysis is partly driven by the government's fear that worker rights may lead to an erosion of China's low wage "competitive advantage" for investors.

"The Chinese government should realize that denying basic trade union rights will only hamper progress in the long run and is not the solution to ending social instability. With the number of protests on the rise the Government would do well to learn from the experiences of other autocratic regimes - eventually people gain their freedom. The choice is in their hands as to how this occurs, " Ryder concluded.

The continuing ineffectiveness of the ACFTU to represent workers - and in many cases the ACFTU's active collusion with security forces in

suppressing protests - is also revealed in the ICFTU survey. For example, 10,000 workers from the Uniden Electronics factory in Shenzhen, a supplier to Wal-Mart, staged a strike in April 2005 in an effort to win the right to set up their own trade union in the factory. The strike was prompted by the dismissal of an active organiser of an earlier strike when workers demanded the right to set up a trade union as well as sick pay and other related demands. According to one worker involved, an official union was later founded in late July, but was controlled and led by Uniden management and affiliated to the ACFTU

Despite all odds, in a new development, Chinese gemstone workers with silicosis took the brave step of uniting with unionists and other groups in Hong Kong in order to protest against the lack of compensation and OSH standards in their Hong Kong-owned factories. The survey details the efforts taken by these workers and others in calling for adequate compensation to cover medical treatment.

The survey also covers the many other cases of workers who were arrested and convicted during 2005 in China. One of the good news received in 2005 was the long awaited release of Wang Wanxing, who was involved in the Workers Autonomous Federations during 1989. Wang Wanxing had been incarcerated in a "secure ward" in a mental institution for reported "political monomania".

-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>

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