

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Middle East: Deadly Violence in Iraq and Unrelenting Repression in Iran

Brussels, 7 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): After being ruthlessly tortured, Hadi Salih, International Secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU, was assassinated on 4 January 2005. On 18 February, Ali Hassan Abd of the Oil and Gas Union, was murdered in front of his children and six days later, Ahmed Adris Abas, of the Iraqi Transport and Communications Union was murdered. Meanwhile, in the Mechanics, Printing and Metal Workers' Union, the murder toll among its members reached at least ten. Although still the throes of renewal since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the trade union movement in Iraq struggled through 2005 under the scourge of extreme daily violence.

In Iran, any attempt to protest against dismissals or wage arrears, or to embark on the most minor form of independent trade unionism, remains extremely dangerous. The numerous protests throughout 2005 were inevitably met with brutal repression. Workers at the automobile plant, Iran Khodro - the largest auto producer in the Middle East (51 per cent controlled by Renault) - went on strike in protest at their precarious conditions. On 12 April, the company's security officers arrested and bashed worker, Parviz Salarvand, for merely expressing sympathy with the strikers. He later "disappeared" and then reappeared as a prisoner at the Evin jail in Teheran, a renowned torture centre. He was finally released following an international campaign. The ICFTU's Annual Survey Trade Union Rights Violations in 2005 reported many cases of violence against strikers. For example, Farshid Beheshti Zad of the "Kurdistan Textile" factory, was arrested and severely beaten and 500 strikers from the Fumanat textile factory were attacked with clubs by police. The collective action supported en masse at the Teheran bus company was also met with extreme violence. One of the leaders, Mansour Osanloo, was injured when an attempt was made to cut his throat. He was later arrested. After a sham trial, the seven trade union activists imprisoned in May 2004, received scandalously harsh sentences of up to five years in prison.

Migrant workers still exploited and deprived of basic rights

Migrant workers represent the bulk of the workforce in many countries in the region, such as Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar or Saudi Arabia. Despite their numbers, they are highly vulnerable and often exploited. The situation of women working in domestic help is particularly grave. In Jordan, foreign workers do not have the right to join a union, to strike or to take part in collective bargaining. Over 100 Bangladeshis were forced to work non-stop for 48 hours at La Shahed garment factory and were each given just two pieces of bread to eat. Those daring to demand payment of their wages were beaten up. In Kuwait, over 60 Indian workers protesting against their miserable wages were arrested and deported to India. In the United Arab Emirates, migrant workers held several strikes throughout 2005 to protest against mistreatment and

wages arrears stretching back up to 16 months. About 130 construction workers, who were striking in protest at the non-payment of their wages, were brutally assaulted on 17 October by thugs hired by their employer. They were then arrested and prosecuted for incitement to strike.

Qatar, a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak year for trade union rights in the region

Following in the footsteps of Bahrain last year, Qatar has passed a labour code authorising the formation of free trade unions. Despite this step forward, Qatar still falls far short of international standards on trade union rights. Similarly, in Bahrain, the hopes expressed in the ICFTU Survey last year have been dashed by new, more restrictive legislation. Whether under the reign of the single national unions, such as in Syria and Kuwait, or the total ban on unions, such as in Saudi Arabia and Oman, the Middle East remains a dark spot on the world map of trade union rights.

In Palestine, everyday trade union activities continued to be hindered by the ongoing insecurity and political instability.

-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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