

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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## Sri Lanka: Increasing risks and intimidation for trade unionists

Brussels, 2 March 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Intimidation and threats of abduction against trade unionists in Sri Lanka have been denounced by the International Trade Union Confederation. In a letter to the authorities

[http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Intimidation\\_abduction\\_of\\_TUiists\\_28-02-07.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Intimidation_abduction_of_TUiists_28-02-07.pdf)

the ITUC has protested vigorously against the increasing risks to which trade unionists are exposed in the country, while carrying out their legitimate activities.

The threats intensified after a number of independent trade union leaders led protests against the abduction, on 6 February, of three persons linked to a railway workers' union newspaper, "Akuna". Nihal Serasinghe, a contributor to Akuna, had been abducted near the Fort in Colombo as he left a printing office. Lalith Seneviratne, in charge of layout at Akuna, was seized at his home. His wife identified the abductors as plain-clothes police officers from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and lodged a complaint at a police station in Aturugiriya. Akuna's Editor, Sisira Priyankara, was taken from his workplace, a rail company electricians' workshop. He had earlier been involved in complaints lodged in Sri Lankan courts by trade unionists against salary hikes granted to senior government figures. The three abductions had been denounced at the time by "Reporters without Borders", based in France.

The abductions had also sparked a spontaneous protest the next day in front of the Fort Railway Station. Two days later, on February 8, the government declared that the three abducted individuals were in government custody, and that they were being interrogated on suspicion of collaboration with insurgents.

Since then, trade union leaders involved in that protest have become victims of a campaign that seeks to link them with terrorist insurgents. Posters branding them as traitors and terrorists and calling for their arrest have now begun to appear in public places across the country. Those targeted include: Anton Marcus of the Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees' Union (FTZGSEU), itself affiliated to the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), Sman Ratnapriya and Ravi Kumudesh of the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), Sampath Rajitha and Raja Kannangara of the Joint Railway Trade Union Alliance (JRTUA), and Joseph Stalin of the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU). Several of them had been involved recently in denouncing reported government attacks on the right to strike and arbitrary labour law reforms.

"We can not accept that trade unionists are assimilated to terrorists while carrying out their legitimate union activities" reacted Guy Ryder, ITUC General Secretary. "And illegal calls for their arrest must be withdrawn right away", he added.

Sri Lanka is a member of the International Labour Organisation and its government is therefore obliged to take measures in order to protect the exercise of trade union rights. The ITUC calls on the government to take immediate measures in order to: guarantee the safety of all trade unionists under threat, ensure an environment which is free of intimidation and is conducive to a normal development of trade union activities, investigate the complaints lodged by the trade unionists, guarantee their safety and ensure the due process of law in all acts of threats and intimidation.

Founded on November 1 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

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