

>>> ITUC Press <press@ituc-csi.org> 19.09.2007 14:47 >>>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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157/170907

Zimbabwe: Assault and detention of ZCTU officials ahead of today's strike

Brussels, 19 September 2007 (ITUC OnLine): As the ZCTU begins its two day peaceful protest at the devastating effect on their members of soaring inflation (now above 7,600%) and 80% unemployment, as well as the government's recent wage freeze, the repression has already begun.

The ITUC has strongly protested to President Mugabe in a letter (http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Assault_3_ZCTU_activists_on_17_9_07.pdf) following the assault and detention of three ZCTU leaders on 17 September. Michael Kandukutu, the ZCTU national Organizer, Tennyson Muchepfa from the National Engineering Workers' Unions, and Justice Mucheni from the Food Federation were attacked and beaten at around noon on Monday in Harare's Workington industrial area, while distributing information about the peaceful strike planned for 19 and 20 September. They were then abducted. The ZCTU suspects that members of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) were responsible. While they were trying to find out what had happened to their officials, the ZCTU received a mobile phone message from one of the detainees to say they were being held at Mbare police station.

The ITUC was later informed that the three were taken to Harare Central Police station for interrogation, although no charges had been brought against them. ZCTU lawyers went to the police station but had not had access to the three detainees at the time of writing. At one point the three were being denied food, but that situation has now changed.

In its protest the ITUC warned the government against any further repression of the peaceful protest strike, and urged it instead to listen to what the protestors had to say. Memories are still fresh of the violent repression of a similar protest last year in which hundreds were arrested and the ZCTU's General Secretary, Wellington Chibebwe, President Lovemore Matombo, and Vice-President, Lucia Matibenga were all severely beaten.

No sooner was the protest letter sent, however, than information arrived at the ITUC about further arrests. Isaac Thebethebe, the ZCTU Central region secretary and Charles Makozho, the chairperson, were picked up during the morning of Tuesday 18 September and were being detained in the Midlands town of Gweru. ZCTU lawyers gained access to the two and were working on having them freed.

In Bulawayo, the regional chairperson Reason Ngwenya was picked up, also on Tuesday, together with Ambrose Sibindi but they were released around midnight. They were told to report to the police station this morning and were still being interrogated as this online was issued.

In Harare, Lovemore Matombo's brother Kenneth Matombo was arrested together with a security guard last night. Plain clothes policemen forced their way into Matombo's home but when they discovered the ZCTU President was absent they took his brother and security guard with them instead. They are being held at the Harare Central police station. All cellphones at Matombo's home were confiscated.

³We fully support this peaceful Stayaway², said Guy Ryder, ITUC General Secretary, ³and we call upon the Government of Zimbabwe to cease this unacceptable harassment of the ZCTU. It should listen to the message of the workers and ensure the full respect for workers' internationally recognised human and trade union rights² he added.

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates.

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