

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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China: Workers arrested while participating in collective protest action

Brussels 6 March 2008 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC has today protested to the Municipal Government of Guangzhou, in China's Guangdong Province, against the arrests and sentencing on February 13 of five workers from a shoe making factory in Panyu district on charges of illegal assembly and demonstration. It also criticized the detention and sentencing to various terms of administrative detention on charges of disturbing public order of three workers from a handbag factory and a further five workers from an undisclosed factory.

Returning from their New Year holiday on 13 February (the seventh day of the Chinese New year) 700 shoe producing workers found that they were locked outside the factory premises. The factory owner had closed down the factory and sold the equipment during the New Year holiday. Missing wages, amounting to some 2,000 yuan (approx. 180) per worker, as well as social insurance and others insurance payments, had not been paid by the employer, for periods extending from nine months to sometimes up to 10 years.

To protest against the closing, around 400 workers began to walk from the factory to the Guangzhou Municipal government offices in an attempt to publicize their plight. The police stopped the march and detained around 50 workers. Five of those were then formally arrested and detained on criminal charges. The workers have been ordered to vacate their living place within 24h and remain to day without any place to live.

In a letter sent to the authorities

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Detention_of_Workers_following_Legitimate_Collective_Protest_Action.pdf, the ITUC urges the Guangzhou government to provide full information as to the whereabouts of the thirteen detained workers along with clear details of their alleged crimes and demands their immediate and unconditional release. Noting that they have been arrested and detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association, the ITUC says it may consider lodging a formal complaint against China at the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association if they are not released.

"If your government observed the right to freedom of association and allowed workers easier access to redress in labour disputes then the intractability and scale of industrial unrest currently observed in China would be greatly lessened" writes ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder in his letter to the Guangzhou authorities. The administrative methods of deprivation of liberty should "be abolished or at the very least subject to greater judicial oversight", also writes Guy Ryder. The system of re-education through labour ("lao jiao") has repeatedly been criticised by several United Nations bodies and agencies, including the International Labour Organisation, for bypassing the few safeguards of

China's criminal justice system.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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