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Iran: Amnesty International and international trade union bodies condemn repressive measures meted out against trade union leader Mahmoud Salehi

Brussels, 18 March 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Amnesty International, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) are calling on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Mahmoud Salehi, the former leader of the Saez Bakers' Union, who was imprisoned in 2007 for the pursuit of legitimate trade union activities.

Mahmoud Salehi, who has serious long term medical concerns, is now on a total hunger strike and there are serious fears for his safety. He went on hunger strike after he was summoned to appear for questioning by Branch 4 of the Sanandaj Courts on 17 March 2008 when, after a prolonged wait, new charges were issued against him.

He has reportedly been accused of 'communicating with those outside prison for the purposes of issuing messages of solidarity' for other individual prisoners on hunger strike and students facing arrest. The new charges appear intended to justify Mahmoud Salehi's continued detention beyond his scheduled 23 March 2008 release date, when he will have completed a one year prison sentence.

Amnesty International, the ITUC and the ITF are concerned that the new charge may have been brought against Mahmoud Salehi in response to the international mobilisation on 6 March 2008 by trade unions and Amnesty International members around the world to demand his release and that of his fellow trade unionist, Mansour Osanloo.

Mahmoud Salehi, former President of the Bakery Workers' Association of the city of Saez, was arrested after a peaceful demonstration to celebrate May Day 2004. He was imprisoned on charges of 'acting against national security' after his final appeal hearing on 11 March 2007, and he began a one year sentence, with another three years' suspended, on 9 April 2007.

Mahmoud Salehi is a prisoner of conscience and has long-term medical needs. A May 2007 request by his doctor that he be accorded specialist treatment outside the prison has been ignored. He suffers from chronic kidney disease, as a result of which he requires dialysis. He is also said to suffer from a heart disorder. In December 2007 it was reported that he had grave intestinal edema or swelling that may be connected with his renal disease. His health continues to be at serious risk, and he is reported to regularly experience fainting episodes in prison as a result of blood pressure problems.

Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ITUC said "It is deplorable that Mahmoud Salehi should have been imprisoned for participating in a May Day rally - a

show of worker solidarity that should be a cause of celebration rather than repression.”

Amnesty International, the ITUC and the ITF are calling on the Iranian authorities to release both Mahmoud Salehi and Mansour Osanlu immediately and unconditionally and to ensure that Mahmoud Salehi has immediate access to specialist medical treatment that he needs.

David Cockroft, ITF concluded “It seems that the Iranian authorities want to silence Salehi ahead of this year’s May Day rallies. Though they may be able to keep him in jail, they will not silence the voices of hundreds of thousands of human rights activists and trade unionists who are demanding respect for fundamental labour rights in Iran. The three organisations will continue to work tirelessly alongside the independent Iranian trade union movement to seek respect for human rights for working people in Iran,” David Cockroft, ITF added.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In November 2005 Mahmoud Salehi was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment and three years’ internal exile in the city of Ghorveh, Kordestan. At his trial, the prosecutor reportedly cited his trade union activities as evidence against him, and referred to a meeting he had held with officials from the then-International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) - a predecessor organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) - in April 2004, shortly before the May Day demonstrations. His conviction was overturned on appeal, but after a retrial he was sentenced on 11 November 2006 to four years’ imprisonment for “conspiring to commit crimes against national security”. He was free until the appeal hearing on 11 March 2007, when his sentence was reduced to a three-year suspended prison sentence and one year’s imprisonment, which commenced with his imprisonment on 9 April 2007.

Amnesty International is working together with the ITUC and the ITF to seek the release of Mahmoud Salehi and fellow jailed trade unionist Mansour Osanlu, leader of the Tehran bus workers’ union, and to promote labour rights in Iran.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates.

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