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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

ITUC OnLine

ITUC Annual World Survey: Onslaught Against Trade Unions Claimed 91 Lives

Brussels, 20 November 2008 (ITUC OnLine): The publication of this year's ITUC Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations reveals an appalling record of union-busting, anti-union laws, intimidation and violence against workers' representatives in 2007. A worldwide total of 91 trade unionists were murdered for defending workers' rights, with Colombia, where 39 lost their lives, by far the worst offender yet again. Second-worst was Guinea, where the regime of President Lansana Conte was directly responsible for the killing of 30 unionists during brutal repression of union-organised public demonstrations against corruption and violations of fundamental rights. The Survey also notes a disturbing upsurge in violence in Guatemala as trade unions were increasingly targeted, with four unionists murdered and a worsening climate of threats and harassment.

The Survey, which covers worker rights violations in 138 countries, reveals a number of disturbing trends, including collusion between some governments and employers to deprive working women and men of their legitimate rights to union membership and representation. Serious and systematic harassment and intimidation was reported in 63 countries. Seventy-three unionists were sent to prison in 2007, including 40 in Iran alone, where systematic suppression of workers organising in transport, education and other sectors continued. Fourteen unionists were jailed in Morocco and seven in Burma, where the junta targeted union activists as part of its brutal crackdown on any moves for democracy and human rights.

"Repression of legitimate trade union activities, which are guaranteed under ILO Conventions, continued unabated in every continent. Murder, violence and torture, along with harassment, dismissal and imprisonment, were all used to stop working people organising unions and bargaining collectively for decent pay and working conditions. Several governments were only too ready to openly or covertly support unscrupulous employers who deny fundamental rights to their employees," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder. "Governments have failed to do enough to protect workers' rights, either at home or in their international diplomatic, economic and trade relations," he added.

New legal and administrative measures to restrict union activities, in breach of International Labour Organisation Conventions, were introduced in 15 countries, mostly in Asia but also including Chad, Ghana, Madagascar, Mauritius, Tanzania and Georgia, where an estimated 20,000 workers were sacked by anti-union employers profiting from the country's new labour code that stripped employees of even the most basic protections. Belarus, "Europe's last dictatorship", maintained its record for serious and persistent violations of union rights.

In Africa, employers in several countries used defective labour legislation to instigate and encourage splits in trade unions and create employer-controlled groups to displace legitimate worker representation. Outright hostility to union organization again featured in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, which also featured on a list of countries where Chinese-owned and funded projects were cited for poor working conditions and exploitation of the workforce. Along with Guinea, the Survey records killings of trade unionists in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Restrictions on legitimate union activities continued in several industrialized countries as well, with workers in the public sector in particular deprived of their union rights. Court judgments in the "Viking" and "Laval" cases in the European Union also constituted a major threat to previously-accepted rights, while the Bush and Howard governments in the USA and Australia stepped up their hostility to union organising. In a positive development, voters in Australia threw out the Howard government in November 2007, rejecting its notorious "work choices" laws that featured heavily in the election campaign.

Migrant workers in every region were subjected to exploitation and abuse, and were frequently denied any right to union membership and representation. Many of the worst cases occurred in the Middle East, and several construction workers were reported to have died due to terrible living and working conditions, notably in Qatar.

Worker rights violations in Middle Eastern Export Processing Zones (EPZs) were also prominent in common with EPZs elsewhere, and the region's atrocious record for exploitation of migrant domestic labour was once again in the spotlight. In Saudi Arabia, where any form of worker organisation is tightly controlled by the authorities, employers beat four female Indonesian domestic workers so badly that two died, and police forcibly removed the other two from hospital. Two trade unionists, one of whom was abducted and tortured, were killed due to their union activities in Iraq.

Migrant workers also suffered in Asia, with government suppression of the migrant workers' union in South Korea and denial of organising rights to migrant workers in Brunei, Thailand and Singapore. Union activity was severely curtailed under the military regime in Pakistan, and effectively banned altogether in Bangladesh. China once again featured strongly due to widespread violations, and the North Korean dictatorship also maintained the total ban on legitimate union organization. Murders of trade unionists were once again reported in Cambodia and the Philippines.

Latin America remained the most dangerous continent for union activity in 2007, with assassinations, abductions, death threats and assaults in a number of countries. While there was a slight reduction in killings in Colombia compared to the previous year, many attempts to kill unionists failed, and there was a notable increase in forced removals, arbitrary arrests, illegal raids and threats, especially in agriculture, health and education. Along with Guatemala, killings were also documented in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama and Peru.

The Annual Survey also documents a number of disturbing trends that became increasingly apparent in 2007 and have continued into the current year. Many governments have used sweeping definitions of "essential services" in order to deny organising and collective bargaining rights, in particular to public sector workers. A notable increase in repression of workers' rights in the media sector emerged, as journalists faced increasing levels of hostility from governments intent on avoiding public scrutiny. One of the more alarming developments repeated in cases throughout the report concerns wholesale moves by national and multinational employers, often facilitated by legislative provisions, to replace full-time and permanent jobs with precarious employment, by forcing workers into temporary, casual and part-time arrangements, reducing their incomes, removing job security and leaving them open to unfair and unjustified treatment, including the risk of losing their livelihoods with little or no advance notice or compensation. Many companies have moved in this direction by replacing regular workers with "contract labour", thus avoiding duties and responsibilities which they would otherwise have to meet.

"Global patterns such as casualisation and contracting-out are emerging, which pose a major threat to working men and women right across the globe. As the global economic situation worsens, this threat can be expected to spread wider and deeper, and governments need to act responsibly to ensure secure, decent jobs at a time when working people, and the revitalization of the world economy, most need it," said Ryder.

To see the annual survey:

<http://survey08.ituc-csi.org/>

To see the Media Release on Europe:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2526&lang=en>

To see the Media Release on Africa:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2520&lang=en>

To see the Media Release on Middle East:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2527&lang=en>

To see the Media Release on Americas:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2524&lang=en>

To see the Media Release on Asia:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2525&lang=en>

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