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International Trade Union Confederation

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Huge May Day Turnouts Highlight Gravity of Economic Crisis



Brussels, 5 May 2009: Millions of people took part in May Day rallies and demonstrations around the world, as workers protested at the deepening impact of the global economic crisis on jobs and incomes. More than 1 million participated in rallies jointly organized by the ITUC's member organisations and non-affiliated national centres in France, while large crowds assembled in union-organised events across the globe, with some of the largest numbers reported in Germany and Russia. In Turkey, where the government finally agreed to make May Day a national holiday, thousands of workers took part in a rally in Istanbul's Taksim Square despite the government initially refusing to allow them to assemble in the Square, where dozens of people died during an attack by unidentified killers on May Day in 1977. Other major events in Turkey were marred by police violence.

Rallies organized by the trade union movement across the globe were peaceful, although there were a number of instances of violent attacks by police on demonstrators at other events. In Iran, independent trade unionists and labour rights supporters faced heavy intimidation by security forces. Some 150 arrests and detentions were reported following violent attacks by police against those taking part in May Day events, and several independent trade union advocates remain in prison, in some cases due to their involvement in activities on May 1st in previous years.

In Palestine, the ITUC affiliate PGFTU reported heavy interference by Israeli soldiers in one of its May Day activities. Following a speech by PGFTU General Secretary Shaher Sae'd at a rally in Bethlehem, soldiers from the Israeli Defence Force placed barbed wire barriers at the front of the crowd, and launched noise grenades and teargas at the participants. The soldiers then proceeded to block surrounding roads, and further teargas canisters were launched at the fleeing crowd. Three trade unionists and a journalist were reportedly apprehended by the military.

"Violent repression of legitimate protest is absolutely unacceptable, and cannot be justified in any country," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

In Mauritania, where there were fears of violent repression of May Day activities by the military, no major incidents were reported, despite a heavy presence of security forces along the route of the main trade union march. Mauritania's trade union movement has maintained a united front in its campaign for the restoration of democracy, following the August 2008 military coup.

"Working people have turned out in exceptionally large numbers to protest at the appalling state of the global economy and the deepening jobs crisis. Governments need to understand that a "business as usual" response to the crisis is not acceptable, and that the possibility of major social upheaval is real. The world's trade unions will press forward the demand for fundamental change, and will continue to mobilise for that change to happen," said Ryder.

Pulling the world out of recession and building a new global economy will be the focus of this year's World Day for Decent Work on October 7, following the hugely successful global mobilisation which took place on the same day last year.

Photo: Claudia Vieira

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 312 affiliated national organisations from 157 countries and territories. <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For more information please contact the ITUC Press Department on: +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018

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Contact details

Human and Trade Union Rights

Human and Trade Union Rights Department

Boulevard du Roi Albert II, 5, Bte 1

1210 Brussels

Telephone: 32-2-224.03.08

Fax: 32-2-224.02.97

E-mail:

tur@ituc-csi.org

turights@ituc-csi.org