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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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ITUC Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations

Global Trade Union Rights Situation Worsening - New ITUC Report

76 Trade Unionists Murdered in 2008

Thousands of Dismissals and Arrests

Repression of Striking Workers in 40 Countries

Brussels, 10 June 2009 (ITUC OnLine): 2008 was another difficult and often dangerous year for trade unionists around the world, according to this year's ITUC Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations, which details abuses of fundamental workers' rights in 143 countries. 76 trade unionists were killed due to their actions to defend workers' rights, and many more were attacked physically or subjected to harassment, intimidation or arrest by the authorities. While the worldwide total of killings fell from 91 the previous year, the number of killings in Colombia, which is notorious as the most dangerous place on earth for trade unionists, reached 49 - an increase of 10 over the previous year. The upsurge in killings took place despite assurances by the Administration of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe that the situation was improving.

Aside from the appalling toll in Colombia, nine unionists were murdered in Guatemala, which in recent years has seen an increase in violent attacks against trade union representatives and members. Four were killed in the Philippines as well as in Venezuela, three in Honduras, two in Nepal and one each in Iraq, Nigeria, Panama, Tunisia and Zimbabwe, where the Mugabe regime continued its reign of terror against the country's union movement. In a number of instances, governments were either directly or indirectly involved in the killings. A total of 50 serious death threats were recorded across seven countries as well, along with some 100 cases of physical assaults across 25 countries.

Governments in at least 9 countries (Burma, Burundi, China, Cuba, Iran, South Korea, Tunisia, Turkey and Zimbabwe) were responsible for imprisoning trade unionists on account of their legitimate activities in support of working people.

"Governments in every region are clearly failing to protect fundamental workers' rights, and in several cases were themselves responsible for heavy repression of these rights. The fact that certain countries, such as Colombia, Guatemala and the Philippines appear year after year on the death list shows that the authorities are, at best, incapable of ensuring protection and in some cases are complicit with unscrupulous employers in the murders," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

Some 7,500 cases of dismissal of workers involved in trade union activity were recorded in a total of 68 countries, including 20 countries in Africa alone. These cases are, however, only the tip of the iceberg, with a great many more dismissals not being recorded. The country with the worst record of dismissals was Turkey, where more than 2,000 were documented and where the government remained intolerant of union activity in general. Indonesia (600) was the next highest, with hundreds also dismissed in Malawi, Pakistan, Tanzania and Argentina.

In Burma, China, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam and a number of other countries, only official state-controlled unions were allowed to operate while in Saudi Arabia, genuine trade union activity is still effectively impossible. Heavy government interference in union affairs also continued in Belarus through much of the year.

The impact of the global economic situation on workers' rights was a prominent feature in many countries. Much of the repression across Africa in particular involved governments reacting harshly against workers seeking to improve wages as the global food crisis hit, with increasing numbers of families unable to feed themselves properly. Incredibly, many of the worst affected were workers in the agriculture sector itself. Later in 2008, the effects of the global financial crisis began to hit, putting additional pressure on job security, wages and working conditions.

The trend towards increasingly harsh exploitation and attacks on workers' rights in the world's Export Processing Zones (EPZs), already a feature in previous years, worsened in 2008. Thirty-four countries are cited in the report for inadequate or non-existent protection of EPZ workers, including Albania, the Bahamas, Belize, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Jordan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Poland and Oman. A further 22 countries are singled out for the exploitation of migrant workers, who are often denied even the most basic of rights, and whose situation frequently means that they are the most vulnerable of all workers to exploitation and abuse.

"Hundreds of millions of working people, in developing and in industrialised countries, are denied the fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. For many, especially those in precarious employment, this denial wreaks havoc on their lives, as they work extremely long hours in hazardous or unhealthy situations with incomes so low that they are unable to support themselves and their households properly. Lack of respect for workers' rights has increased inequality around the world, and that inequality helped trigger the global recession," said Ryder.

Disturbing trends in labour rights in the industrialized countries are also evident in the Survey, with increasing recourse to contract labour and "third-party" labour agency employment eroding incomes, conditions and rights at work. On a more positive note, changes in government in both Australia and in the USA brought the promise of new protections for working people in two countries with extremely poor records in recent years.

Workers in Burkina Faso, Kenya and Mozambique also had some cause for optimism, with the adoption of new legislation recognizing and enabling trade union organizing, while in the Maldives, the country's new Constitution guarantees freedom of association and the right to strike.

To read the full report: <http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/>

To read the Onlines concerning the regions:

Africa: Insecurity, political unrest and armed conflict at the root of trade union rights violations:
<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?mode=pr&IDCont=1&Lang=EN>

Americas: increased attacks against trade unions:
<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?mode=pr&IDCont=2&Lang=EN>

Anti-unionism undermines Asia :
<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?mode=pr&IDCont=3&Lang=EN>

Europe: anti-union practices on the increase:
<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?mode=pr&IDCont=4&Lang=EN>

Trade union rights still systematically flouted, migrants being the

hardest hit:

<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?mode=pr&IDCont=5&Lang=EN>

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