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Middle East: Governments Step Up Repression As Economic Crisis Hits Jobs and Incomes

Brussels, 9 September 2009 (ITUC OnLine): As the economic situation in several Middle Eastern countries has deteriorated over the past three months, an alarming increase in repression of independent trade union activity has taken place, as governments react with force to demands for better protection of incomes and for job security.

In Morocco, massive fraud took place during national employee-representative elections, aimed at excluding trade unions from future negotiations on wages and working conditions. Other forms of anti-union action have included dismissal of workplace trade union representatives.

In Tunisia, workers and unemployed people who took part in July 2008 demonstrations in Gafsa remain in prison, despite the international support for the efforts of the national trade union centre UGTT to obtain their release. Media coverage of the demonstrations was banned, and a journalist who published images of them was sentenced to six years in jail. In addition, the Tunisian authorities supported the holding on 15 August of an "extraordinary congress" of pro-government journalists which tried to depose the leadership, elected in January 2008, of the national journalists union SNJT. The government's campaign to destabilize the union was launched in reaction to an SNJT report which criticized the lack of press freedom in the country.

In Egypt, a series of demonstrations for workers' rights and against large-scale dismissal of workers and factory closures met with extremely brutal reactions by the police. Despite the recognition at the beginning of this year of the first independent sectoral union RETA, which has some 50,000 members in the taxation service, the authorities have tried to force the workers into the official trade union centre and handed control of the social security fund of RETA members to the official centre. The workers affected responded by launching a strike and demanding respect for trade union independence.

In Jordan, the violent police repression of the workforce at Aqaba port demanding better salaries on 3 August was a flagrant example of denial of trade union rights. At the same time, the government's newly-established Social and Economic Committee has failed to convince the country's unions that the authorities take negotiation and social dialogue seriously.

In Iraq, the government continues to enforce anti-union laws from the Saddam Hussein era, notably the notorious Law 150 which bans trade unions in public and semi-public employment, and cases of interference

in legitimate union activities are increasing. Repeated circulars from government ministries to enterprises affiliated to the various ministries have specifically advised employees to "avoid dealing with" various trade unions.

The Iranian authorities continue to repress all independent trade union activity, with detention and maltreatment of many workers, including a number who took part in demonstrations around the disputed presidential election results. Following blanket bans on media coverage of the demonstrations, the offices of the Iranian Journalists Association were sealed off by the authorities last month.

"Instead of trying to silence legitimate claims by workers facing enormous hardship, governments in the region should fully respect their international obligations on labour rights, to which they have freely given binding commitments. They cannot ignore the serious impacts of the global economic crisis, especially given that millions of jobs have already been lost. These anti-union actions are counter-productive, and are only increasing tensions in middle-east countries," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 157 countries and has 312 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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