

ITUC OnLine

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Burma : “Burma’s Children, a Generation Sacrificed”, the new ITUC report

Brussels, 11 December 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The Burmese military junta is to organise “elections” in 2010, but the Constitution, whose adoption it organised in 2008, leaves no doubt as to the army’s desire to stay in power after the ballot. The ITUC’s new report shows that the generals currently in power have no intention of showing any more interest in the population than their predecessors have over the last 47 years of military dictatorship. Without a return to real democracy and the respect of all human rights, including trade union rights, the next generation of Burmese children will never get to sit in a classroom and will be forced to perform all kinds of work, including the very worst.

The new ITUC report highlights the link between the abuse of human rights, including trade union rights, and the catastrophic situation of Burmese children. Crushing all forms of opposition the Burmese military junta spends at least 40% of the State budget on the army, even though the country is not facing any external military threat, and leaves only crumbs for such important sectors as education and health care. As a result, less than 55% of Burmese children complete primary school education, and every day hundreds of thousands work for long hours, sometimes in forced labour imposed by the authorities. The forced recruitment of child soldiers by different army groups is still frequent in Burma, despite repeated promises by the junta to put an end to it.

The report sheds light on the very difficult situation faced by Burmese teachers, who have no trade union rights and no possibility therefore of negotiating their salaries. What they earn today is only a small percentage of what is needed to support a family. Many Burmese teachers encourage children to take private lessons with them, but not all parents can afford to pay for them, given all the other costs they already have to face for their child’s education (materials, forced donations to schools...). This system exists at every level of education, forcing tens of thousands of children out of school every year and into exploitation at work.

Interviews carried out in the country for this report illustrate the distress of these children growing up under military dictatorship. “I work 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, for a salary of 8.60 dollars a month,” says a child of 11 working in a tea room in Rangoon. “Other children only earn 6 dollars a month. My boss gives me two meals a day and I can sleep in a small room, but there are a lot of us all squeezed into one very hot room. I am always tired during the day because I don’t sleep enough. We are constantly busy serving customers, cleaning the cups, the floor...”

As the military dictatorship will not tolerate any criticism, it is extremely dangerous to discuss anything to do with social rights, human rights or children’s rights inside Burma. The junta’s censorship prevents the Burmese media from publishing any reports about the real situation in the country. According to the Association to help political prisoners in Burma (l’Association d’aide aux prisonniers politiques birmans), over 2,100 political prisoners are being held in the country. They include about 30 trade unionists, sentenced to between five years and life. Despite this repression, the Federation of Trade Unions – Burma, FTUB, affiliated to the ITUC but banned in Burma, continues to help workers in Burma and support schools in different regions of the country.

To see the full report: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Burma_EN_Final.pdf

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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