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El Salvador: Appalling Situation in the Export Processing Zones

Brussels, 10 February 2010(ITUC OnLine): A new ITUC study on core labour standards in El Salvador reports that many of the 67,000 mostly women workers employed in the country's 15 export processing zones suffer from appalling treatment ranging from verbal abuse and threats to physical abuse and sexual harassment. There is a clear anti-trade union policy and dismissal of workers planning to join or form a union. Many consider that working conditions in export processing zones can be assimilated to forced labour.

On 15 January 2010, Victoriano Abel Vega, the general secretary of SITRAMSA (Sindicato de trabajadores y Empleados Municipales de la Alcaldía de Santa Ana), was murdered on his way to San Salvador where he was due to attend a meeting with several other trade unionists in preparation for a complaints procedure regarding the unfair dismissal of several employees of the municipality of Santa Ana, in breach of Conventions 87 and 98. He had been sent death threats in connection with his role as a trade union leader and his condemnation of the dismissals. In a letter http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Asesinato_de_Abel_Victoriano_Vega_enero.pdf to the Salvadorian authorities, the ITUC urged President Mauricio Funes to immediately launch an enquiry to identify and punish with the full force of the law all those responsible for this brutal crime.

The ITUC report, published to coincide with the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) review of El Salvador's trade policies, finds that many public workers are barred from exercising their right to organise, and that the right to strike is so restricted as to be virtually impossible to implement. Although El Salvador recently ratified the ILO core Conventions on trade union rights in order to benefit from access to the EU's GSP trade benefits scheme, these are still not applied in practice. Workers in the private sector face many restrictions such as excessive formalities and requirements before they can establish or join unions. Anti-union practices are widespread, and public authorities do not intervene to stop them. Furthermore, the law does not provide for the reinstatement of workers illegally dismissed because of their trade union membership or activities.

Women in El Salvador earn 88% of men's average wage and are underrepresented in high-skilled and high-wage jobs. The report finds that to date, the government has not adopted any policy regarding equality of opportunity and that its response to discrimination in employment and remuneration has been largely insufficient. National legislation still does not refer to the principle of equal pay for work of equal value as stipulated in the ILO's Conventions.

Child labour remains a widespread problem that the government has failed to address adequately. In particular the persistence of the worst forms of child labour such as fireworks manufacture, work in garbage dumps and prostitution is a source of serious concern. According to state data more than 67 per cent of children are engaged in some form of work. In rural areas child labourers are found working in agriculture and commerce, while in urban areas they are more frequently employed in street vending and in manufacturing.

Another of the report's findings is that, although outlawed, forced labour occurs through the trafficking of human beings, especially women and girls for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. Forced labour also exists in prisons where convicted prisoners are under an obligation to work.

For the full ITUC report in Spanish: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Examen_OMC_Feb2010-El_Salvador-ES.pdf

In English: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/-_El_Salvador_final.pdf

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