

ITUC OnLine

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Spotlight on Salman Jaffar Al Mahfoodh (GFBTU- Bahrain)

"We want real democracy that will benefit the whole population"

Brussels, 8 March 2011 (ITUC OnLine): The Kingdom of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia's neighbour, is in the throes of an unprecedented popular revolt, begun by the country's youth on 14 February.

Following violent repression by the authorities which left seven people dead (*) the opposition has called for the resignation of the government and the establishment of a genuinely democratic parliamentary monarchy. Salman Jaffar Al Mahfoodh, General Secretary of the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU), looks back at the long-criticised political and socio-economic causes of the revolt. He talks about the political and practical involvement of the Bahraini trade union in this struggle for democracy, and trade union rights, and expresses his hopes for free trade unionism throughout the Arab world.

What are the key factors behind the outbreak of this sudden revolution?

The explanation is both political and socio-economic. The two factors are closely linked and have been the focus of long-standing demands. On the one hand, there is the lack of political freedom, with a regime where the government is not elected and the constitution does not grant full rights of political association to parties. On the other, we have a socio-economic situation where we have unacceptable levels of poverty and unemployment. That is why we are not surprised at this widespread uprising. There had already been small protest movements, demanding political reforms and the release of political prisoners. Our trade union federation, the leaders of the opposition political parties and civil society had already urged the government to enter into dialogue many times, long before 14 February, to discuss political and socio-economic reform. But the authorities did not understand the urgency of the situation and did not listen to these demands.

But why was 14 February chosen specifically as the date for mobilisation, the start of the revolution, organised notably by the young using Facebook ?

There are two reasons for this date, external and internal. Externally, of course, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the uprisings in other countries in the region were a powerful inspiration. Internally, the date is doubly symbolic. On 14 February 2001, the National Charter was ratified. Everyone hoped it would bring more political freedom and usher in real democracy. But ten years later, these promises have not been kept, there has been no improvement. And 14 February 2002 was the date that the current Constitution, rejected by the entire opposition, came into effect, without consulting the people.

Why are the young playing such an important role in this uprising?

The young are the heart of the movement. They have used Facebook and Twitter to mobilise as many people as possible to join the movement. Despite extraordinarily bloody brutality, they were determined to keep going, to risk confrontation to reach the Lulu roundabout in the centre of Manama, now renamed Martyr's Square. The youth have even taken the initiative of approaching the leaders of the opposition parties to develop joint demands. A lot of young workers are actively participating in the movement.

Were you surprised by the brutality of the authorities' repression?

We weren't expecting such violence. The dawn attack on the demonstrators on 17 February by the army and security forces that left seven dead and many wounded was unimaginable. They even stopped ambulances and medical staff from getting to the roundabout to evacuate the wounded.

Now we expect absolutely anything.

How did the GFBTU react when the uprising began?

We were in constant contact with the people on the ground from the outset. We held an emergency meeting of our governing body and we published many statements calling on the government to listen to the peaceful demonstrators and release the political prisoners. After the

bloody attack on the demonstrators on 17 February, we announced a call on the morning of 19 February for a general strike on 20 February if the army and security forces did not withdraw immediately. A few hours later the Crown Prince ordered the retreat of the army and the police.

But we had no guarantee that the military would not attack again and we maintained our strike call for the following day. As the situation remained calm, we suspended the strike on 21 February. So far it remains suspended – but not called off.

Has the GFBTU taken any other concrete action, in addition to the mass participation of workers on an individual level in the demonstrations and the strike call?

As part of the civil society coalition, we have visited the wounded in hospital and we have also been to see the families of the martyrs to express our support.

We have a constant presence on Martyrs' Square to talk to the young people there, to explain to them what role the Federation plays, and the ITUC and ILO, to support their movement. We explain to them how a strike works, what the procedures are and the consequences, and also what civil disobedience consists of. We are educating on the ground.

We have urged employers not to take any retaliatory measures against workers who have been absent from work because of the demonstrations.

We have also had meetings with important players such as the Chamber of Commerce which is being badly affected by the economic losses. We talk to them about how to work together to reach our shared goal of economic prosperity.

How do you work with the opposition forces, politically?

We are part of the civil society coalition. We also work in coordination with the opposition group, which is composed solely of the opposition parties. Individually, we are also present within the national alliance. We are involved on a daily basis in the discussions in all three bodies.

What are the opposition's foremost demands today?

The government must resign. Forty years with the same Prime Minister – we've had enough. We want real democracy, through constitutional reform and a system of elected government. These demands are on the government's table, the ball is in their court.

Is the religious divide between Sunnites and Shiites an important factor in this revolution?

We don't agree with the way the international media present the situation. This is a national, not a sectarian struggle. Constitutional reform and a regime based on independent elections will benefit the whole population, Shiites and Sunnites alike, and will make it possible to combat all forms of discrimination.

How can the international trade union movement support this national struggle?

It can help put pressure on the government to listen to its people at last and open real dialogue to respond to their demands. It can also press the government to involve the GFBTU in the dialogue process in order to be able to defend workers' demands, freedom of association and the introduction of a new labour code. These are all demands we have been making for years now.

We would like to thank the ITUC for the support it has given us since the beginning of the revolution, through its statements and its appeals to its affiliated organisations. We have also received support from the national trade union centres of Norway (LO) and the United States (AFL-CIO). The Building workers' international (BWI) supports us too.

The ILO, which has been in contact with us from the beginning, is also very important. Its Director, Juan Somavia, called me personally at the height of the repression to express his support for the Bahraini people and our organisation.

What effect do you think the popular movements for change sweeping across the Arab world will have on the Arabic trade union movement?

The people of all the Arab countries are suffering from the same problems of poverty, unemployment, corruption and tyrannical regimes. I think that these revolutions are going to have a positive effect on the Arab trade union movement. Many Arab trade unions are in the grip of their government's power. I hope that these changes will contribute to the creation of a truly independent trade union movement and to progress for workers, for better wages, more jobs,

better living conditions and real trade union rights, notably the right to strike - all the things that we want real democracy to bring for us here in Bahrain.

Migrant workers represent 77% of the workforce in Bahrain. Many of them are currently suffering the economic consequences of the situation. Are they also involved in the opposition's fight?

The GFBTU has been deeply involved in the defence of migrant workers rights for a long time now, in the same way that it defends all workers' rights. If we achieve our goals, it will be to the benefit of all workers, whatever their religious denomination or country of origin. We make no difference.

Interview by Natacha David

(*) out of a total population of 1.2 million, including 650.000 Bahrainis.

See pictures from Bahrain demonstrations: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/demonstrations-in-bahrain.html>

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