

ITUC OnLine

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Bahrain: Deeply Worried at the Escalating Repression, the ITUC Urgently Calls for a Dialogue for Reform

Brussels, 15 March 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Further to the excessive use of force by anti-riot police in the centre of the capital Manama and the violent attacks on university students on Sunday 13 March, the leaders of the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU *) have called a general strike. The ITUC supports the strike call.

"The violent escalation of the repression of demonstrators legitimately calling for dialogue and reform is totally unacceptable. The ITUC supports the general strike as an act of peaceful civil disobedience by its Bahraini affiliate. It is extremely urgent that the authorities give a genuine response to the wishes expressed by the opposition forces courageously demonstrating for more democracy and equality in Bahrain for over a month now," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

A trade union source reported that "the security forces have used both rubber bullets and live ammunition against the demonstrators. Men armed with knives, batons and revolvers, claiming to be government supporters, have stopped cars at crossroads and several trade union members have been beaten. The premises of political parties have been burnt down and we fear there will be an attack on our own premises".

Dozens of the injured, some of them very seriously, have had to be hospitalised (**), the university's academic year has been suspended and concern is growing as foreign troops from Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including one thousand Saudi Arabian soldiers, entered Bahrain yesterday.

"The authorities' violent repression of the demonstrators is in violation of the fundamental rights and international conventions signed by Bahrain. We hold the government responsible for the dangerous impasse it has plunged the country into and we call on the Crown Prince to be more open to the demonstrators demands, and urgently begin real dialogue with the opposition," said the General Secretary of the GFBTU Salman Mahfoodh.

"Our strike is an act of peaceful civil disobedience that will continue for as long as the workers feel they are not safe and are not being listened to. Anonymous armed groups, suspected of being in the pay of the security forces, have attacked Bahraini workers and migrant workers on their way to work, or simply as they sat in their shops. As an organisation for the defence of workers, we are also responsible for workers' safety and we demand that the government put an end to the presence of these violent groups and allow calm to be restored, while respecting the legitimate right of the demonstrators to make their demands heard," he added.

Faced with anonymous armed individuals stirring up divisions, the GFBTU has also called for "all members of the opposition and civil society organisations to form a common front and join forces to prevent the country descending further into the bloody violence that has already left too many victims in its wake".

"The excessive use of force will not put an end to the protest. Only real dialogue and genuine responses to the problems expressed by the people will restore calm," continued Salman Mahfoodh.

The GFBTU had initially called a general strike on 20 February following the extremely brutal attack by the army and police against the demonstrators peacefully gathered at

the Pearl Roundabout on 17 February. Further to the army's retreat, the GFBTGU lifted the strike call, but the escalation of violence in the last few days by the security forces and armed groups in the pay of the authorities has forced it to review its position.

The GFBTU is associated with the seven political parties involved in the national dialogue that was instituted by the authorities but has so far produced no results.

Yesterday the opposition platform declared all intervention by the armed forces of the neighbouring countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council as unacceptable and has sent a message to the United Nations Secretary General calling on the UN to protect the right of the Bahraini people to demonstrate peacefully for reform.

The Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon yesterday expressed his concern at the escalating violence of the last few days. He called for the use of peaceful means to ensure national unity and stability and for the holding of real national dialogue without delay. He also called on Bahrain's neighbouring countries and the whole of the international community to support the process of dialogue aimed at achieving credible reform.

(*) The General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU), <http://www.gfbtu.org>

(**)-Watch new pictures of the demonstration and people in hospital severely wounded on March 13: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/demonstrations-in-bahrain.html>

-Read the ITUC spotlight interview with GFBTU General secretary Salman Mahfood "We want real democracy that will benefit the whole population" -March 8: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-on-salman-jaffar-al.html>

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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