

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC OnLine

076/040411

Bahrain: Wave of Sackings, Threats and Violence Against Workers and Union Representatives

Brussels, 4 April 2011 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC denounces the wave of massive sackings, threats and violence against workers and their trade union representatives in Bahrain, in reprisal for their participation in legitimate strike and protest action for greater democracy in the country.

“The international trade union movement is extremely concerned at the large number of workers, including trade union representatives, who are being heavily penalised by the authorities simply because they exercised their legitimate rights to strike and to freedom of expression and assembly, following the widely-supported call for strike action by the national trade union centre GFBTU,” said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow. “These dismissals are nothing less than a “political purification” in workplaces. This is totally unacceptable and illegal.”

“Such punitive actions, especially dismissals, for having taken part in legitimate demonstrations, is a flagrant violation of ILO Convention 111 concerning discrimination at work, which Bahrain has ratified, and of Convention 87 on Freedom of Association which Bahrain is obliged to respect. The ITUC will be pursuing this matter, and the situation in Bahrain in general, at the ILO including at the annual ILO Conference this June,” added Burrow.

About 300 workers have been dismissed for taking part in the strike and in demonstrations, mainly from the aluminium company Alba (Aluminium Bahrain BSC) and the Khalifa Sea Port (driven by APM terminal). Around 40 workers have apparently also been dismissed by Gulf Air. Furthermore, the aluminium company Alba has announced that it will make its rules and procedures even tougher, notably through action in the courts against striking workers.

Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Hussain, President of the trade union at the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) has been sacked for having “called on workers to take part in the general strike” and faces legal action in the coming days. The company management has threatened to take legal action against other members of the union as well.

Bahrain University is also the scene of heavy anti-union repression. The Vice President of the Bahraini Teachers’ Association and four other members of the union’s leadership were arrested on 29 March, and the union’s General Secretary the following day. Nineteen students were also arrested, and the payment of salaries of certain lecturers and union members was stopped. Students supported by scholarships who participated in demonstrations have been punished by non-renewal of their scholarships.

With the GFBTU expecting the wave of sackings to flow to other key enterprises, the ITUC denounces the dismissals as “an economic massacre following the deplorable human massacre of the past few weeks”.

The punitive policy being imposed on workers and their union representatives is all the more unacceptable given that the GFBTU called on workers to return to work, and received assurances from the authorities that there would be no punishment for those who participated in the industrial action. The GFBTU call for a return to work was done in order to promote a spirit of national dialogue and in the interests of the country's economy.

"These degrading and unjust actions must stop. The GFBTU, which has the absolute support of the international trade union movement, must be allowed to continue to protect its members and their legitimate rights, in line with the fundamental principle of freedom of association," said Burrow. "All forms of anti-union repression must stop immediately – only negotiation can resolve the political and socio-economic problems facing Bahrain".

Since mid-February, when the unprecedented popular protests started, the Bahraini authorities' bloody repression, supported by troops from neighbouring Saudi Arabia, has caused the deaths of at least 20 people, while some 300 have been detained without any information available on where they are being held. Several dozen others have disappeared and 300 have been injured. Some of the most seriously-injured were further brutalised, and even chained to their beds, while medical staff were trying to treat them. Teachers, doctors, artists, human rights defenders, cyber-activists, members of political parties and others face arrest, and the regime is also trying to stop the publication of the independent Al-Wasat newspaper. Armed thugs had already attacked the newspaper's printing shop some weeks ago.

The ITUC also condemns the replacement of workers who took part in strike action by non-strikers. It is especially concerned for migrant workers, who are simply seeking to make an honest living but whose lives are in danger due to the political machinations of the regime.*

(*) For more information, see ITUC OnLine of 1 April 2011 'Bahrain: Political Exploitation of Migrants Puts Their Lives at Risk' : <http://www.ituc-csi.org/bahrain-migrants-exploited-their.html>

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