

Spotlight on Ebrahim H. Abdulla and Abdulla M. Hussain (GFBTU-Bahrain)

“We are calling for the dismissed workers to be reinstated and for an end to the attacks on trade unions”

Bahrain’s national trade union centre GFBTU (2), that was at the heart of the 14 February movement for democratic reform and social justice, has been the target of violent attacks. Ebrahim H. Abdulla, Assistant General Secretary of the GFBTU, and Abdulla Mohammed Hussain, Assistant General Secretary for Arab and International Relations, look back at the anti-union attacks and mass dismissals (3), two issues that the GFBTU wants to put on the agenda of the national dialogue that began on 1 July.

What are the GFBTU’s expectations for the national dialogue that has just begun?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: We trust the King, and we hope, God willing, that everyone will work together for genuine dialogue, even if it is hard to believe after all the attacks on the trade union movement and all the dismissals(2). We cannot have a proper dialogue while people are being dismissed. The big companies responsible for the recent dismissals belong to the government. We are asking for this dialogue to tackle economic and social issues. Amongst other things we want to put salaries, unemployment, the freedom to create trade unions in the public sector and the rights of migrant workers on the table.

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: The reinstatement of nearly 2,000 sacked workers must be on the national dialogue agenda. The Bahraini trade unions are having a very difficult time. The GFBTU is attacked daily in the media. There have been pictures of me on the television for example accompanied by very negative comments about my participation in the demonstrations. Other trade union leaders have been treated in the same way.

Have democratic rights, notably trade union rights, been restored since the state of emergency was lifted on 1 June?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: No, there have been no improvements on that front. When the state of emergency was lifted the King announced that national dialogue would begin on 1 July, but workers continued to be dismissed. As recently as 12 June, nine major Bahraini companies, including Alba, Gulf Air, Bapco and Banagas, entirely or partly government owned, have sent letters to some of their employees, all GFBTU officials, to tell them they must resign, failing which they will be prosecuted.

Nearly 2,000 workers have been dismissed altogether, and most of them were involved in the pro-democracy demonstrations. Usually they were not told that they were being dismissed because of their participation in the strike or the democracy demonstrations. That only happened in the case of one employee of the national Parliament: his letter of dismissal said that one of the reasons he was being fired was his participation in the demonstrations.

There are 51 trade union leaders among the sacked workers, including 15 members of the GFBTU Executive.

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: Most of the workers were dismissed because of their opinions, because they oppose the government for example, because they have called for democracy or because they have been identified on a photograph taken during the demonstrations. The employers dismiss them claiming they have broken the law. The government promised that those who had not broken any laws would get their jobs back, but so far that has not been the case.

How are the dismissed workers surviving? Is there any unemployment benefit ?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: Bahrain does have an unemployment benefit system, but the workers dismissed after the demonstrations are not considered eligible, on the grounds that their behaviour amounted to serious misdemeanour.

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: There is a lot of solidarity among Bahrainis. The dismissed workers know they can rely on their friends, but it is not a situation that can last in the long term.

The repression of the pro-democracy movement was targeted particularly at the medical services and education. Is that still the case?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: Yes. Every member of the Executive Committee of the Union of Doctors, Nurses and Teachers is in prison. They are waiting for a verdict.

Has the government's repressive policy had a negative impact on the country's economy?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla : In a small community such as Bahrain, when 2,000 people lose their jobs, it has an impact on the population's purchasing power. The government claims the economy is still healthy but until the situation returns to normal this cannot be true, even if commercial activity is slowly returning to normal.

Who has replaced the 2,000 dismissed workers?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla : We have heard that some companies have turned to the Philippines and India to replace skilled staff, such as engineers, nurses and doctors.

The GFBTU stands out in the region as a leading defender of migrant workers' rights (4). What is your reaction to the replacement of Bahraini workers by migrant workers?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla : We fully support Bahraini workers, but we have nothing against the migrants who come from Bangladesh, the Philippines, India or elsewhere with a contract of employment. It's the government's problem: there are local workers without jobs yet they bring in migrants. We hope that they will return home and that the Bahraini government will understand that if local workers don't get their jobs back, the problems will keep getting worse. Bahraini nurses, doctors and engineers who have been dismissed could also emigrate and get a job abroad, especially as they are experienced, but they want to stay in Bahrain and fight for democracy in their country.

Some of the police officers who took part in the harsh repression of the democracy movement were migrants, notably Pakistanis. Has that created tensions between migrant and Bahraini workers, within for example the trade union movement?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: Bahrainis are a very peaceful nation. We know that most of our police officers are Pakistani, Indian and Nepali. In a way, that means the government does not trust its own citizens. But we don't feel any resentment against these foreign police officers. We know that they are simply police officers employed by the government, and that they attack civilians.

Bahraini women were on the front line in the demonstrations and strikes. In neighbouring Saudi Arabia they don't even have the right to drive a car. How can these differences be explained?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: Bahrain is a more open country, that went through a period under British influence. Feminist movements have been strong for a long time.

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: Since the beginning of the 20th century, Bahraini women have travelled to study, they have created their own organisations. They drive cars, they are lawyers....and indeed they were in the front line of the pro-democracy movement. We are proud of our wives and daughters. Some have been arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to up to one or even two years in prison for taking part in the demonstrations. Two members of our Women's Committee were in prison for a week.

Was their physical violence along with the arrests?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: Yes. Some workers were arrested in their own offices, they were beaten up at the work place, in the middle of their colleagues, and continued to be hit as they were taken out to the car park. Most of those who have been released from prison have told us they were severely beaten. Medical documents, photographs and videos bear witness to this violence.

The Bahraini government finally decided to withdraw from hosting the highly controversial Formula 1 Grand Prix. What was your position on the subject?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: When the government announced the Grand Prix was cancelled, it claimed that it was because it was going to be so busy over the next three months because of the national dialogue. All the human rights organisations from all over the world were exerting maximum pressure to prevent the Grand Prix taking place in Bahrain. Our union did not take a position on the matter. Both sides of the argument are worth considering. If the Grand Prix took place and the media and spectators came here, that could enable us to show them the real situation. But the government would perhaps try to prevent them meeting the local population, and in that case they would leave Bahrain saying there was nothing happening.

You have just taken part, in June, in the ILO's first International Labour Conference (ILC) since the repression of the democracy struggle in Bahrain. Can international pressure help you?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: We can feel the effects of the enormous support we have had from the ITUC, particularly for the ILC, and from the whole international trade union movement. We have also had the support of the ILO Director General. We are particularly grateful to the ITUC which has done everything it can to ensure the survival of the Bahraini trade union movement, to prevent any further attacks on it and to press for the reinstatement of the dismissed workers.

What impact has this international pressure had on the government of Bahrain?

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: We haven't seen any sign from the government that it is open to dialogue with us. Social dialogue has stopped, even within enterprises. But it is important that the Bahraini authorities know, at the very least, that there is an international trade union movement that is taking a close interest in the situation of Bahraini workers and their trade unions.

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla : As Bahraini citizens, we believe our country's image is very important. We don't want it to be destroyed. We therefore want the government to enter into serious dialogue, and not tarnish the image of Bahrain.

The ILO adopted a new Convention on domestic workers. What does this important development mean in the Bahraini context?

Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla: We warmly welcome this new convention. We have always maintained that we need it because we see just how much migrant domestic workers suffer (4). However just having a good Convention is not enough, now there has to be a strong campaign for countries to ratify it. (5)

Abdulla Mohammed Hussain: Domestic workers in Bahrain are not currently covered by labour legislation, unlike other migrant workers, and we would like that to change. Labour legislation is being reviewed and we are pressing for all migrant workers to be covered by all the rights guaranteed in ILO standards.

Samuel Grumiau, with Natacha David

(1) 24 people were killed in the repression, and hundreds arrested. Two of those arrested later died in prison.

(2) General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). The Bahraini national trade union centre has 70 member unions, representing over 20,000 workers.

(3) A total of 2,000 dismissals followed the demonstrations, representing 1.8% of the workforce. They include eight members of the GFBTU leadership and 40 trade union leaders. Initially the dismissals were concentrated in large companies, then extended to the public authorities, notably the health and education ministries.

(4) See the 'Trade Union View' From Bahrain to Malaysia: Mobilising to Defend Migrants' Rights <http://www.ituc-csi.org/from-bahrain-to-malaysia.html?lang=en>

(5) Link to ITUC OnLine on the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention : <http://www.ituc-csi.org/new-international-convention-on.html>

- The GFBTU at the heart of the peaceful struggle for democracy: key dates

From the moment the movement for democratic reform emerged onto the public stage on 14 February, the GFBTU became involved in the peaceful struggle for more democracy and social justice. In protest at the extremely violent repression of demonstrators by the police, the GFBTU issued a strike call on 20 February, which it promptly lifted following the withdrawal of the security forces from the Pearl roundabout, the focal point of the uprising. Following the escalation of the bloody repression, meted out with the assistance of foreign troops, the GFBTU issued a fresh call for an unlimited general strike on 13 March. The response was a wave of anti-union reprisals including the dismissal of workers accused of taking part in the pro-democracy demonstrations and strike action. On 15 June, the biggest companies in the country called on 15 trade union leaders to resign or face prosecution. On 22 June, 14 members of the political opposition were sentenced to prison

by a military tribunal, including life terms for seven of them. On 30 June the King set up an independent international commission of inquiry into human rights violations during the uprising of recent months. On 1 July, the King opened the national dialogue, of which the GFBTU agreed to be a part.

- International trade union solidarity: key dates

Since February, the ITUC has constantly denounced the repression and supported its affiliate the GFBTU, particularly its strike calls.

On 7 April, the ITUC sent a protest letter to the King of Bahrain to call for an end to anti-union repression and unfair dismissals.

On 16 April ITUC Deputy General Secretary Jaap Wienen went on an urgent mission to Bahrain to show solidarity with the trade union movement after the vicious attacks against it. He called on the international community to respect the fundamental rights of Bahraini workers, including trade union rights.

The international trade union community also mobilised support for the Labourstart campaign (www.labourstart.org) on 19 April.

On 26 May the ITUC's General Secretary, Sharan Burrow, led an international trade delegation to the Bahraini Embassy in Brussels to deliver a protest letter calling on the authorities to put an end to the violent repression against the trade unions, reinstate the dismissed workers and release political prisoners. At the International Labour Conference in Geneva in June, the international trade union movement again denounced the serious trade union rights violations in Bahrain.

On 17 June, further to a complaint lodged by the American national trade union centre (AFL-CIO) for violations of the US-Bahrain free trade agreement in terms of labour right, the US Labor Department opened an inquiry.

On 20 June the Director General of the International Labour Office (ILO) Juan Somavia, condemned threats by Bahraini business leaders, which he described as an "act of intimidation" and demanded that the government take all possible steps to withdraw the call by business figures for the resignation of trade union leaders and instead promote social dialogue and the reinstatement of the dismissed workers, while ensuring the security and protection of trade union leaders.

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