

Widespread Abuse of Workers' Rights

More than a quarter of countries represented at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth this week have failed to allow basic industrial rights for workers, the ACTU said today.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said a survey by the Commonwealth Trade Union Group showed workers' rights were being ignored across the Commonwealth, with the worst abuses currently occurring in Fiji and Swaziland.

The CTUG, representing over 30 million workers in 50 countries, is calling on the CHOGM to suspend Swaziland for wholesale violations of democratic rights and to ask the United Nations to stop using Fijian soldiers as peace keepers around the world, as well as condemn the already suspended Fijian military dictatorship's Essential Industries Decree.

"Workers' rights are human rights. Without them, people cannot defend their economic and political freedoms. They are as central to democratic societies as they are to free trade unionism," Ms Kearney said.

"The Commonwealth prides itself as an organisation that supports democracy and human rights, but this survey shows many countries are falling short, with 14 countries having failed to ratify all eight core ILO conventions."

"In the Pacific region, Fiji's unelected dictatorship is imposing draconian restrictions on workers' rights and trying to remove unions from workplaces. It is becoming increasingly unsafe for workers in Fiji to stand up for their rights, and we need more international pressure to stop further erosion of constitutional rights in Fiji."

Ms Kearney said that other Commonwealth countries had also failed to protect workers' rights.

"India has not ratified the child labour conventions or the conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining," Ms Kearney said.

"Shockingly, Australia, New Zealand and Canada have not ratified one of the two conventions on child labour.

"In Malaysia the Government is seeking to take away workers' rights to unionise by classing more workers as self-employed or contractors. In other countries, such as Malawi and Zimbabwe, union officials are subject to persecution and violence by government."

Simone McGurk, Secretary of the West Australian peak trade union organisation, UnionsWA, says CHOGM leaders need to listen to the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group if the Commonwealth is to survive.

"It's timely that CHOGM's own advisors are saying that they need to address human rights if the Commonwealth is going to retain its relevancy," said Ms McGurk.

"Trade union rights are central to a vibrant and active society. We call on the Commonwealth to ensure that workers are properly represented in all member countries," she said.

Ms Kearney and Ms McGurk will be at a press conference in the Commonwealth Media Centre at the Perth Exhibition and Convention Centre, at 10 a.m. this morning (Wednesday) by trade union leaders battling the worst repression in the Commonwealth.

Trade unionists from Australia, India, New Zealand, Fiji, Swaziland, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and the UK are also attending the Commonwealth People's Forum and available for interview.

Background Information:

- Fiji Trades Union Congress Daniel Urai, arrested in August for holding a so-called illegal meeting with union members in the only current member state of the Commonwealth suspended because of the military dictatorship, part of an increasing pattern of repression including a new Essential Industries Decree which bans strikes and collective bargaining in the energy, media, finance and airline industries;
- Mduduzi Gina, General Secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions, where trade unionists and political opponents of the last feudal monarchy in Africa are regularly arrested, beaten and prevented from demonstrating – including union member Sipho Jele, who died in suspicious circumstances in police custody;
- Abdul Halim bin Mansor, Secretary General, Malaysian Trade Union Congress, where trade unions are facing a new law to take away workers' rights by disguising employment relationships as self-employment and sub-contracting;
- Ms Vimbai Zinyama, Parliamentary Officer, Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Zimbabwe, which left the Commonwealth after it was suspended, where trade unionists continue to be harassed by pro-Mugabe forces; and
- Chinguwo Paliani, Malawi Trades Union Congress Research officer where demonstrators including trade unionists were violently attacked recently by the security services.

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The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 308 affiliated national organisations from 153 countries and territories.

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