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ITUC OnLine

Bahraini King's Law-Reform Promise a Positive Sign

Brussels, 24 November 2011 (ITUC OnLine): The pledge by Bahrain's King Hamad to "reform our laws so they are compatible with international law" is a positive sign that the anti-union repression there may be coming to an end. The promise follows the release of a highly-critical report by an Independent Commission of Inquiry, released on 23 November, which detailed beatings, torture, arbitrary arrests, dismissals and a range of other serious rights violations aimed at the country's trade unions in particular.

"Bahrain needs to act quickly to implement the King's promise, especially by fully respecting freedom of association and freedom of speech. The months of repression and violence against trade unionists and others, orchestrated by the state and supported by many employers, must come to an immediate end. All those who were sacked must be reinstated immediately, and the false charges laid in tribunals withdrawn. Only then can Bahrain begin the path back to international acceptance and reconstruction of its economy and society," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), headed by international legal scholar Cherif Bassiouni, issued a 501-page report evaluating the events of February and March 2011 on the basis of international human rights norms. As to the sacking of thousands of workers this year, the report fully confirmed the ITUC's assertions that the firings of public and private sector workers were undertaken in retaliation for participation in demonstrations and legal strikes, that the government created an environment which encouraged the sackings and in some cases directly urged companies to do so, that the authorities "applied" the law in a racially discriminatory manner, and that the vast majority of the firings were illegal under domestic and international law.

The ITUC affiliate in Bahrain, the GFBTU, has issued a statement in which it "welcomed the contents of the report with regards to recommendations related to workers, particularly those dismissed, as it confirmed without room for doubt that their dismissal came outside the framework of the law". The GFBTU called for the immediate implementation of the recommendations of the report, particularly concerning the immediate reinstatement of, and compensation to, all trade union leaders and workers in both the public and private sectors. It also "stressed the importance of holding accountable those who undertook the dismissal measures in violation of the law, as well as those who targeted trade union leaders because of their trade union activity, in order to ensure that these practices will not occur again".

Last week, the International Labour Organization's Governing Body agreed to the establishment of a tri-partite commission to review the mass sackings. The commission should expedite its review of these cases in light of the findings and conclusions of the BICI report.

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

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