

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)  
ITUC OnLine

Saudi Arabia bans trade unions and violates all international labour standards

Domestic workers fear for lives in modern day slavery

Brussels, 25 January 2012 (ITUC OnLine): A new report from the International Trade Union Confederation on workers' rights in Saudi Arabia has uncovered alarming levels of child labour, discrimination and forced labour.

The report, due to be delivered to the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) review of the Gulf Kingdom's trade policies on 25th January, found that Saudi Arabia is in violation of all core labour standards.

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the ITUC, said there is not a single trade union in Saudi Arabia, as the law does not allow them to exist.

"Employees are only allowed to organise so-called "workers' committees" which must include the participation of the government and the employer. Unions, collective bargaining, strikes, even public demonstrations are banned.

"Despite the strike ban, some unauthorized strikes do take place, In October last year, 16 Chinese workers were arrested for participating in a strike involving at least 100 Chinese workers in a rail construction project. The strikers demanded a salary increase and improved working and living conditions," said Sharan Burrow.

The report also found the law also openly discriminates against women, and in many cases women needed permission from their "guardian" in order to be employed. Women who do work earn 84% less than men in similar roles.

However, it is the country's 8.3 million migrant workers, especially the 1.5 million female domestic servants, who bear the brunt of abuses, with many working in slavery like conditions. The maids predominantly come from Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Earlier this month a Nepalese maid was finally released, after being held hostage for 21 months by her Saudi employer. The woman was imprisoned, fed only one slice of bread a day and tortured after she tried to run away.

"Thousands of migrant workers are the victims of torture, work long hours, live in confined conditions and, in general, are deprived of their basic freedoms. The Saudi authorities have repeatedly failed to address the issue and redress extreme abuses which remain unpunished." said Sharan Burrow.

"Saudi Arabia's wealth and status is built on the backs of workers who face ritual beatings, torture and are denied their basic freedoms. It's time to clean up the Saudi economy and give all workers the right to organise, collectively bargain and strike," said Sharan Burrow.

The WTO General Council Review of Trade Policies in Saudi Arabia will take place in Geneva 25 and 27 January. The WTO has made commitments to observe internationally core labour standards.

Read the full ITUC report to the WTO Trade Policy review: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/internationally-recognised-core,10469.html>

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 308 national affiliates.

Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on: +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 62 10 18.

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