

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Salman Jaffar Al Mahfoodh (Bahrain - GFBTU)

"We feel that people are supporting our fight"

Unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the Arab spring in Bahrain did not lead to democratic reforms nor to the end of an autocratic regime. The authorities responded to the demand for freedom with harsh repression and unprecedented violence on protesters, civilians and workers. An independent commission of inquiry recently confirmed the human rights abuses committed by the Security Forces during the unrest. Almost thirty-five deaths occurred between February and April 2011, including five cases of torture that have been attributed to the Minister of Interior. The trade unions supported the demand for reforms and, as a consequence, thousands of union members were dismissed, and many were arrested. Any previous progress in social dialogue stopped, and a new union law might undermine core labour rights in the Kingdom. Salman Jaffar Al Mahfoodh, General Secretary of the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU), speaks about the assault on labour organisations and the urgent need to have the workers reinstated.

Why did you decide to support the demonstrations of last spring?

We believe that any true, democratic labour movement should be involved in the political, social and economic issues of a country. We don't think that there is a separation between the political movement and the labour movement. The slogan of our organisation, after all, is "democratic, free, independent and united". When the crisis erupted in February, we supported the national demands, but we were not in favour of overthrowing the regime, like the radical groups. These demands were about a new constitution based on a true agreement, a social pact between the government and the people. First of all, we wanted a change in the elections, in order to allow a fair representative system. In general, we were in favour of an economic reform, starting from the introduction of a minimum wage and from the ratification of the core conventions of the ILO. Then we decided to call for a general strike in March. It was not a political strike; our aim was just to protect people. There was a problem of safety for citizens and workers, there was the risk of being attacked and beaten by National Forces but also by thugs along the streets of Manama and at the checkpoints. The response to the strike was huge: over 60 percent of workers participated. However, even the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (Bici) confirmed that our protest was legitimate, since the strike was a matter of freedom of expression.

How did the regime react to this protest?

About three thousand people were dismissed and over a thousand workers have been suspended, both in the private and public sectors. Of course, these dismissals are unjustified, since they are all openly based on political opinion. For example, in the dismissal letters from the Representative Council (the Bahraini Parliament), it was written that the workers were fired because they had attended the funerals of the martyrs killed during the protests. Other letters reported that the workers had participated in the rallies, in the protests at the Pearl roundabout. People were demonstrating freely because they thought that it was safe. Instead, the Security Forces were documenting everything, every day with every single group. They

have thousands and thousands of photos. There are many trade union members who have also been arrested at the workplace or on their way to work. The authorities used the pretext of the National Safety Law, but clearly these procedures are completely out of law. Moreover, they tried to manipulate information and criminalise the union leaders among the public opinion, through the national media, which are all under the government's control. Unionists are portrayed as traitors of the country, as conspirators against the regime and as the actual responsible for all the dismissals. Despite this campaign, we feel that people are supporting our fight.

The government employed migrants to reinforce the police. Would you say that this has contributed to raise hostility against expatriates in Bahrain?

Migrants have always been employed by the Bahraini riot police. But during the crisis there have been some clashes between the police and the demonstrators. The government exploited this fact to divide the workers, to show that the native protesters were attacking foreign workers and that they were xenophobic. But actually it was just a reaction to the repression of riot police, regardless of their nationality. On the other hand, many foreigners were hired to substitute Bahraini dismissed workers, and we think that most of these were contractors. It happened in companies like Gulf Air and Elba Aluminium for example, where there have been over 200 and 400 dismissals respectively.

What other measures were adopted against the unions?

All the public financial support to the federation stopped, although the Chamber of Commerce, the employers' association, still receives that money, which is about half a million Bahraini dinars every year (over 1,3 million USD), much more than what we used to have. Apart from that, every kind of social dialogue is now over, since almost all of our trade union leaders - about 55 - used to work within the companies. And all these people, with a dismissal for disciplinary reasons, are not entitled to any kind of unemployment subsidy, so there are thousands of families without incomes. Even worse, the government has drafted a new union law which will prevent a unionist from participating in union elections, if charged by a court. Also, the law will allow the creation of new federations in Bahrain and the government will decide which federation will be legitimate to represent workers, both at the national and at the international level. Of course, this rule might leave room for yellow unions.

So what are your demands at the moment?

The government is now talking about some kind of compensation for dismissed workers. At this point, however, we cannot accept anything but the reinstatement. If we accepted any other kind of compromise, we would endorse the principle of dismissals for political reasons and the use of discrimination. We have reported in detail the social impact of these dismissals and sent a letter to the king Hamad bin Hissa Al-Khalifa, to the Members of Parliament and to the Employers' organisation. Also the BICI reported that those dismissals were unfair and that the government violated freedom of expression, so we believe that it has no way out now. There is a strong pressure on Bahraini authorities from the international community. After the Workers group issued a complaint to the ILO about the violation of Convention 111 on discrimination, which Bahrain had ratified, in November 2011 the Governing body decided to create a tripartite committee in our country to reinstate those workers. In addition to that, we have received the solidarity and the support from the ITUC and from the AFL-CIO in the United States. So the message is quite clear. Given this international monitoring on human

rights in Bahrain and given the indications by the Commission of inquiry, the government has now an opportunity to put an end to this attack.

Interview by Vittorio Longhi and Khalil Bohazza

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