

Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights

Trade union rights under threat worldwide, domestic workers the most vulnerable, disturbing report reveals

76 trade unionists murdered in 2011, the Americas still the most deadly region Thousands dismissed and arrested Arab Spring workers paid dearly as they marched towards democracy

Brussels, 6 June 2012 (ITUC OnLine): 2011 was a difficult and often dangerous year for workers throughout world, with those who dared stand up for their trade union rights facing dismissal, arrest, imprisonment and even death. That in essence is the picture that emerges from the annual survey of trade union rights violations published today by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). This year's survey examines 143 countries.

Colombia is once again the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. Of the 76 people murdered for their trade union activities, not counting the workers killed during the Arab Spring, 29 lost their lives in Colombia. And in Guatemala yet again trade unionists paid a heavy price, with 10 assassinations committed with impunity. A further eight trade unionists were murdered in Asia.

The worldwide trends highlighted in the survey include the non respect of labour legislation by governments, the lack of funding for labour inspection and workers' protection, the lack of rights and the abuse faced by migrant workers throughout the world, particularly in the Gulf States, and the exploitation of the largely female workforce in the export processing zones around the globe. Among the most vulnerable are the 100 million domestic workers. The year 2011 was of course the year of the Arab Spring and the revolutions surrounding this in North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf States. The repression of trade union rights has been particularly harsh in these regions. Trade union organisations played a leading role in the revolutions, notably in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain. They paid a heavy price. Hundreds of activists were killed in the clashes and thousands were arrested. Today however the road to democracy is getting smoother, as could be seen from the massive turnout for the Egyptian elections in November and the continued protests in Syria and Bahrain. The creation of an independent trade union movement is well underway, although there is still no freedom of association in some nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Eritrea or Sudan.

The world economic crisis continued to impact unfairly on workers, as governments persisted in favouring austerity measures over stimulating growth and employment, says the ITUC survey. The consequences have been devastating, particularly for the young. Unemployment reached 205 million in 2011. In Spain, 40% of young people are out of work while Greece has an unemployment rate of 21%.

The measures taken to optimise profits and flexibility at the expense of the workforce have failed. One consequence of this failure is the increase in precarious forms of working, making it extremely difficult for trade union organisations to defend workers rights, for example in South Africa, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Pakistan.

"The situation of hundreds of thousands of workers is very disturbing," said Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the ITUC. "Most of them do not enjoy the fundamental rights of collective bargaining and freedom of association, and are in precarious employment. Their lives are thrown into disarray because they have to work long hours in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, in return for salaries so low they cannot meet their own needs or those of their families. That partly explains the worldwide recession."

The ITUC survey reveals how strikes are fiercely repressed in many countries, by means of mass dismissals, arrests and detention, including in Georgia, Kenya, South Africa and Botswana, where 2800 workers were dismissed after a public sector strike. Trade union rights do not only come under attack in the developing world however. They are also under threat in many industrialised countries, including Canada, whose conservative government has repeatedly sought to undermine union organising and collective bargaining rights.

Organising workers in the export processing zones remains very difficult, according to the ITUC survey. Legal restrictions persist and trade unions are still banned in most of them.

Migrant workers remain another very vulnerable group, particularly in the Gulf States where they represent the majority of the workforce in Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates but have few or no rights. Among these migrant workers are some 100 million domestic workers, the great majority of whom are women with little knowledge of their rights and no means of enforcing them. The ITUC has therefore welcomed the adoption of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention no.189 on Domestic Workers, which gives these workers the right to form unions and enjoy decent working conditions. The international trade union confederation is campaigning vigorously with its "12 by 12" campaign, aimed at getting 12 countries to ratify the convention by the end of 2012. (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/travailleurs-euses-domestiques,513.html?lang=en>)

Read the whole Survey here:
<http://survey.ituc-csi.org>

For further information or to request an interview, please contact Mathieu Debroux on +32 476 62 10 18 mathieu.debroux@ituc-csi.org

Information by region:

Americas:

Impunity, defined in the dictionary as "free from punishment", is the principal factor behind the continued proliferation of crimes against trade unionists in many countries of the Americas and the extremely high levels of social injustice.

See the survey website for more information

Africa:

As the citizens of North Africa have proved, the people of Africa know that no government can last forever, however totalitarian. Not even in Sudan, Eritrea or Equatorial Guinea, three countries where the despots will not tolerate any trade union or opposition force

See the website for more information

Europe:

The pressures on labour relation systems continue to lead to a dramatic loss of trade union and workers' rights.

See the survey website for more information

Asia-Pacific:

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, workers are facing alarming levels of "precarious work" - a term used to describe work that is not-permanent, indirect, informal and/or otherwise insecure.

See the survey website for more information

Middle East:

The Arab Spring of 2011 changed the face of the world, well beyond the confines of the Arab countries. The end of authoritarian rule in Tunisia and Egypt and the recognition, at least partial, by the two transitional governments of freedom of association and expression, opened up a much wider space for trade union rights for the first time in 2011.

See the survey website for more information

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 308 affiliated national organisations from 153 countries and territories. 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 +32 476 621 018

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