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Mauritania: Ratification of Forced Labour Protocol a Step Towards Freedom

Brussels, 15 March 2016 (ITUC OnLine): Mauritania's ratification of an ILO Protocol on Forced Labour brings hope for the more than 300,000 people affected by slavery in the country. Mauritania joins Niger, Norway and the UK as countries which have already ratified the 2014 Protocol, which updates ILO Convention 29 on Forced Labour.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "Mauritanians living in slavery are under the total control of their masters, herding animals, working in the fields, and doing domestic work. Women and girls are often subjected to abuse and sexual assault. The government needs to finally break the cycle of servitude, which is passed on from mother to child."

Despite previous government claims that slavery no longer exists, local anti-slavery organisations, with strong backing from the country's trade unions, maintain that the practice is still widespread, and that even those freed from slavery face stigma, discrimination and exploitation. Unions have been prevented by the authorities from organising awareness-raising activities, and a number of anti-slavery activists, including Diram Ould Dah Abeid, remain in prison for standing up to powerful slave-masters (<http://www.equaltimes.org/jailed-for-denouncing-slavery-in#.VufhydC1RjY>).

Last September, the ITUC backed Mauritanian trade unions in their protest (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/mauritanian-women-kept-as-slaves>) against the trafficking of domestic workers as modern slaves to Gulf countries (<http://www.equaltimes.org/stop-the-trafficking-off#.VufiBtC1RjY>).

Mauritania's Labour Minister then pledged to propose a bill for ratification of the Protocol, and ordered a stop on visas for workers planning to work in Saudi Arabia. A revision of the migrant labour programme was also promised, and four agencies involved in the scheme were closed down. Nevertheless, demands for compensation of victims were ignored, and imprisoned anti-slavery activists have yet to be released.

"This ratification is a step in the right direction; however, the Mauritanian authorities need to confront the powerful vested interests which profit from this appalling exploitation and end slavery forever. We also call upon all other governments to ratify this Protocol (<http://www.ratifytheprotocol.org/>) and launch a global fight to rid the world of forced labour. With well over 20 million people trapped in slavery, including in global supply chains of multinational companies, a huge international drive to free them all from modern slavery is urgently needed," said Burrow.

The ITUC represents 180 million workers in 162 countries and territories and has 333 national affiliates.

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