

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

Mauritania: Government Frees Anti-Slavery Activists and Convicts Slave Owners

Brussels, 19 May 2016 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC has welcomed the release of anti-slavery activists and the recent sentencing of slave owners as steps in the right direction, but recognises that a long way to go remains for Mauritania – one of the worlds’ most egregious labour rights violators, known to be a lasting stronghold of traditional slavery.

After over a year in prison, on Tuesday the Mauritanian High Court overruled a regional court decision to imprison anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid. Together with his colleague Brahim Bilal, the well-known anti-slavery activist was violently arrested in 11 November 2014 during a peaceful rally to raise awareness about land rights for people of slave descent.

NGOs around the world, Mauritanian trade unions, and the international labour movement have long called for their release (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-calls-for-the-immediate>). In a reaction to his release, Birham thanked the international trade union movement.

In addition, on May 16, the Special Courts for Slavery announced their first ever convictions for the crime of slavery. Two members of a powerful slave-owning tribe were sentenced to five years’ imprisonment, and ordered to pay compensation. While the five-year sentences were light given the crimes committed, the court decision should mean an end to the culture of impunity which has enabled exploitation on a huge scale.

In March this year, Mauritania ratified the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/mauritania-ratification-of-forced>). Following the ratification, the government must develop – in consultation with social partners – a national action plan.

“These steps form a first concrete sign of real commitment by the government following decades of campaigning”, said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow. “We welcome this change in attitude and urge the Mauritanian government to follow through, because much more needs to be done to root out the endemic scourge of slavery from Mauritanian society. The true test will be the inclusion and involvement of the social partners in the government action plan, along with the broader anti-slavery movement.”

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