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ITUC Global Rights Index: Workers' Rights Weakened in Most Regions, Worst Year on Record for Attacks on Free Speech and Democracy

Brussels, 9 June 2016 (ITUC OnLine): Weakening of workers' rights in most regions is being aggravated by severe crackdowns on freedom of speech and assembly, according to the 2016 ITUC Global Rights Index. Restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, including severe crackdowns in some countries, increased by 22%, with 50 out of 141 countries surveyed recording restrictions.

The ITUC Global Rights Index ranks 141 countries against 97 internationally recognised indicators to assess where workers' rights are best protected, in law and in practice.

"We are witnessing the closing of democratic space and an increase in insecurity, fear and intimidation of working people. The speed at which attacks on rights are being forced through, even in democracies with the Finnish government's proposals and the new trade union law in the United Kingdom, shows an alarming trend for working people and their families," said Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary.

"Repression of workers' rights goes hand in hand with increased government control over freedom of expression, assembly and other fundamental civil liberties, with too many governments seeking to consolidate their own power and frequently doing the bidding of big business, which often sees fundamental rights as incompatible with its quest for profit at any expense."

The Middle East and North Africa were again the worst region for working people, with the kafala system in the Gulf still enslaving millions of workers. At the other end of the scale, rights in Europe, traditionally the best-performing region in the Index, continue to deteriorate. Despite the obvious failure of austerity policies, many European governments are continuing to undermine workers' rights. The failure of most European countries to fulfil their obligations to refugees, including the right to work, is making the problem worse.

The International Trade Union Confederation has been collecting data on violations of workers' rights to trade union membership and collective bargaining around the world for more than 30 years. This is the third year the ITUC has presented its findings through the Global Rights Index, putting a unique and comprehensive spotlight on how government laws and business practices have deteriorated or improved in the last 12 months.

The ten worst countries for working people are Belarus, China, Colombia, Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Qatar, Turkey and United Arab Emirates.

Cambodia, India, Iran and Turkey joined the ranking of the ten worst countries for working people for the first time in 2016. The Cambodian government approved a new Trade Union Law further limiting workers' ability to negotiate over their working conditions and pay, while police in India regularly use disproportionate violence against workers holding protests with many detained for simply exercising their rights guaranteed in national laws. Iran uses heavy prison sentences against workers for peaceful activities, and Turkey is targeting public servants engaging in legitimate and peaceful union activities, with at least 1,390 public sector

workers under investigation. The Turkish government has also become synonymous with attacks on freedom of speech, with ten foreign journalists banned since last October and Turkish journalists facing severe repression including trial and imprisonment on bogus grounds including “national security”.

“All four new additions to the rogues’ gallery of the ten worst countries are clear examples of the combined assault on workers’ rights and other fundamental freedoms,” said Burrow.

In other countries outside the ten worst, conditions worsened in the past year, including in Indonesia, Montenegro and Paraguay. Protests in Indonesia against changes to the minimum wage fixing system were brutally crushed with police using water cannons, tear gas and mass arrests. The Paraguayan government is consistently denying the registration of trade unions, exposing workers to discrimination by employers while bankruptcy laws in Montenegro suspend basic rights laws during bankruptcy proceedings with workers in some 2,363 enterprises affected in the past five years.

The reports key findings include:

- 82 countries exclude workers from labour law.
- Over two-thirds of countries have workers who have no right to strike.
- More than half of all countries deny some or all workers collective bargaining.
- Out of 141 countries, the number which deny or constrain free speech and freedom of assembly increased from 41 to 50 with Algeria, Cameroon, the United States and Pakistan joining the list.
- Out of 141 countries, the number in which workers are exposed to physical violence and threats increased by 44 per cent (from 36 to 52) and include Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia and the Ukraine.
- Unionists were murdered in 10 countries, including Chile, Colombia, Egypt, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Iran, Mexico, Peru, South Africa and Turkey.

“Working collectively for better wages, rights and conditions makes workers targets of both state security forces and thugs hired by companies,” said Burrow. “This is happening in both the public and private sectors, including in global supply chains, which are a notorious source of exploitation and poverty. Governments need to uphold their obligations under international law through the legal standards they themselves adopt at the International Labour Organization, and ensure that multinational companies based in their country are answerable for all the workers in their international operations at home and abroad. The alternative is yet more impoverishment of working families and further flatlining of the global economy as people struggle just to pay their daily bills, unable to invest in their children’s future or to make even the most modest purchases.”

The 2016 ITUC Global Rights Index rates countries from one to five according to 97 indicators, with an overall score placing countries in one to five rankings.

1. Irregular violations of rights: 13 countries including Germany & Uruguay
2. Repeated violations of rights: 22 countries including Ireland & Japan
3. Regular violations of rights: 41 countries including Australia & Israel
4. Systematic violations of rights: 30 countries including Poland & USA
5. No guarantee of rights: 25 countries including Belarus, China & Nigeria
- 5+ No guarantee of rights due to breakdown of the rule of law: 10 countries including Burundi, Palestine & Syria,

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Read the report: ITUC Global Rights Index 2016
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/survey_ra_2016_eng.pdf

Download the ITUC Global Rights Index map
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-violationmap-2016-en_final.pdf

Download the ITUC Global Rights Index Infographic – Violation of workers' rights
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/emc_ituc_a4_english__workersrights_1.pdf

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