INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

Asian Supply Chain Countries Under ILO Spotlight

Brussels, 14 June 2016 (ITUC OnLine): This month's ILO Conference in Geneva heard testimony from workers from a range of Asian countries, underlining the challenges workers have to overcome in the face of increased repression from governments and employers in the region.

Indonesian representatives testified about violent attacks on workers by police and armed thugs. When workers were shut out of wage-setting mechanisms and took to the streets in 2015 to protest, the authorities reacted by arresting more than 20 demonstrators and banning assemblies in key parts of the capital Jakarta.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "The ITUC has called on the Indonesian Government to end the violence against workers and return to the bargaining table, but as yet to no avail. A government that ignores the country's constitutional commitment to consultation, and imposes a wage system that locks in wages that do not allow workers to live with dignity, is doing the bidding of corporate leaders who want to continue to exploit workers."

Workers from the Philippines reported an alarming rise in violence against union leaders, including extrajudicial executions, as well as legal manoeuvers such as the intentional misclassification of workers to remove them from the protection of the labour law. The election of President Duterte has heightened concerns, given his authoritarian style, violent rhetoric and links to death squads responsible for hundreds of murders.

Cambodian workers explained how recent labour legislation was actually a major step backwards and that they too had been the victims of anti-union violence and harassment via lawsuits.

"The decision to send ILO Direct Contacts missions to these three countries is a positive initiative, and should provide a first step towards ensuring that the governments concerned uphold their obligations under international law to protect workers' rights," said Burrow. "Governments should use this chance to guarantee freedom of association and the right to strike along with secure contracts of employment, a minimum living wage and collective bargaining rights."

Bangladeshi, workers at the ILO Conference explained that while some steps had been taken to make factories safer, the government had done little to support freedom of association. Unions are still banned in the country's export processing zones and nothing is being done to sanction employers who have busted unions. Having failed to implement ILO recommendations for several years, this year the ILO Conference Standards Committee put the country on its "black-list" – known in ILO parlance as a "special paragraph".

Malaysia also faced scrutiny over its laws on collective bargaining. A member of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Agreement, Malaysia also expected to implement wide-ranging changes to its labour laws to comply with the Agreement's labour chapter.

"Asian countries sit at the heart of global supply chains, but a model of trade that pays poverty wages, relies on insecure and often unsafe work and is based on violation of

fundamental rights is not sustainable. We expect national leaders to stand up for their people and protect workers," said Burrow.

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

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