



6 June 2013 – summary for media

BACKGROUND: Route of Shame – Trade union rights violations

Algeria

The legitimate activities of independent unions in Algeria are hampered in numerous ways: vandalism and theft from union premises, arrests, detentions, dismissals and death threats.

Union organising is frustrated by excessive restrictions and government intervention. The government frequently refuses to honour collective agreements, and refuses to register trade unions.

PSI's affiliate the Syndicat National Autonome des Personnels de l'Administration Publique (SNAPAP) has informed us of widespread police repression and restrictions on freedom of expression in the country. Trade unionists are harassed with threats and spurious arrests.

Malik Fallil, Chair of the National Committee of Pre-Employment and Social Network Workers, affiliated to SNAPAP, was abruptly fired from her job after being threatened by police officers who warned her to end her trade union activities.

The President of SNAPAP, Rachid Malaoui, has been persecuted for years, and threatened with death. His car was sabotaged in an apparent assassination attempt.

On 25 March 2013, Algerian authorities prevented a delegation of SNAPAP members and human rights activists from crossing the border to attend the World Social Forum in Tunisia – a continuation of the government's determination to prevent its citizens from speaking out.

Botswana

Botswana trade unions operate in a harsh legal environment. Unions can be dissolved and banned on technical grounds with no procedures for appeal. Employers have the right to petition the government to withdraw union recognition. The government asserts the right to inspect the private financial affairs of unions at any time. A maze of restrictions makes it virtually impossible to call a legal strike.

Many workers lose their jobs for union activities or simply union membership. Over 2,800 workers were dismissed after a long and bitter public sector strike. The government violated its own Trade Dispute Act by bringing in replacement workers. Following the strike, it expanded its definition of essential services far beyond the ILO's international standards, denying thousands of workers the right to strike.

Police used tear gas, batons and rubber bullets to disperse a peaceful demonstration by striking public sector workers, and threatened to use firearms during a strike at a secondary school.

Colombia

Between 1 January 1986 and 31 December 2011, a total of 2,914 trade unionists were killed in Colombia. Over this period there were at least 11,942 violations of trade unionists' right to life, freedom and physical integrity in Colombia. In addition, 290 attempts on the lives of unionised workers and 222 forced disappearances were registered. At least 5,397 trade unionists received death threats and 1,776 were forcibly displaced.

These figures vouch for the existence of a human rights crisis not consistent with random and indiscriminate violence. They reflect a policy of extermination, implemented over a sustained period and manifested by the thousands of lives claimed.

Anti-union discrimination, the criminalisation of strike action and brutal police repression are widespread. In Colombia, workers are fired for having trade union bulletins.

And the violence continues. In 2011, there were 29 murders, three forced disappearances, 10 attempted murders, 342 threats, 43 acts of harassment, 34 forced displacements, 16 arbitrary detentions, two cases of torture and one abduction, all part of a systematic attack on workers who dare to exercise their trade union rights and freedoms.

Egypt

Despite the fall of the Mubarak dictatorship, there is little respect for worker and trade union rights in Egypt.

Independent unions, such as the PSI affiliated Real Estate Tax Authority Union, face severe restrictions that prevent them from collecting union dues and freely engaging in trade union work.

In addition, members of independent unions face harassment, defamation and arrest.

Striking workers have been attacked by hired thugs and military police, and a new law makes it illegal for unions to strike or protest publicly.

Guatemala

In Guatemala, the PSI affiliate Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Salud de Guatemala (SNTSG) is the target of a murderous campaign. The union has exposed mismanagement of the country's public health facilities and filed an official complaint accusing the previous Minister of Health of corruption. On 24 March 2012, union leader Luis Ovidio Ortiz Cajas and four members were massacred. On 7 August Ricardo Morataya Lemus, labour advisor to SNTSG, was assassinated and Melvy Lizeth Camey Rojas, Secretary General of Department de Santa Rosa, was shot twice.

This year, Carlos Hernandez Mendoza, SNTSG union leader, was assassinated on March 8, by two men on a motorcycle. Two women trade unionists, Santa Alvarado, a member of SNTSG and Mena Kira Enriquez Zulueta, were brutally murdered in two subsequent incidents.

Freedom of association has long been denied in Guatemala, both in law and in practice. In the past 20 years, the ILO has reported extremely serious and systematic violations of the right to organize in that country, including death threats and murders.

Over 56 trade unionists, most in public services, were killed in the last three years. Coupled with numerous acts of torture, kidnappings, raids and death threats, these have created a culture of fear. Violations of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining have been constant. Guatemala now holds the shameful title of most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists.

South Korea

The government has banned all Korean Government Employees Union activities and branded the union illegal. The PSI affiliate is currently fighting for the reinstatement of 137 members who were dismissed because of their membership in the KGEU.

On 21 May, 49 members of the union, including President Kim Jungnam, were arrested for staging a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Security and Public Administration.

Korean national laws do not respect international core labour standards. The authorities have repeatedly interfered with trade union activities and routinely arrest and convict union members for organising or participating in collective action.

Police violence and criminal sanctions against strikers continue, along with increasing use of law suits claiming huge amounts of damages against strikers and unions. Since the 2008 election of the conservative government, the Korean trade union movement has noted increasing repression and worsening treatment of its members. Employers systematically engage workers on precarious employment contracts specifically to prevent them from forming and joining trade unions.

Collective action is often deemed “illegal” as a result of restrictive and complicated legal requirements for a strike. Hundreds of trade unionists have been imprisoned, most for one year terms, for “obstruction of business.” Prosecutors are quick to issue arrest warrants as soon as workers go on strike, or sometimes the moment a strike is announced. Police or security agencies mount surveillance operations against union leaders and their families. Union offices and telecommunications are routinely monitored.

Turkey

In Turkey, where the trade union rights of public sector workers remain severely restricted by law, trade unionists find themselves frequently arrested on vague and spurious charges related to “terrorism.” KESK, the Confederation of Public Sector Workers, is a particular target as typified by the arrest of 15 KESK members in early 2012. Throughout 2012, union representatives from KESK, SES, Tüm Bel Sen, BES and Egitim Sen were jailed.

There were many cases of employers dismissing workers simply because of their union membership. There were also incidents of violence against trade unionists, which in some cases led to injury. Twenty five teachers and one leather worker were sentenced to more than six years in prison for their trade union activities. Another 111 people face prosecution for participating in a trade union demonstration.

On 3 March this year, ten journalists were arrested for what the authorities claimed was involvement in an anti-government conspiracy. There are now 68 journalists behind bars for daring to be critical of the government in their articles.

PSI affiliate unions are leading the general strikes in the first week of June against police repression in Turkey: www.world-psi.org/en/epsupsi-demands-respect-right-expression-right-demonstrate-and-right-strike-action-turkey

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