



Brussels, 13 February 2012
BS/TJ/sw

Baroness Catherine Ashton
High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the
Commission
European Commission
BE-1049 Brussels

*Letter sent by e-mail: catherine.ashton@ec.europa.eu
Copy to Commissioners Andor, de Gucht and Füle*

Egypt: Support for Independent Trade Unions

Dear Ms Ashton,

I was pleased to address the founding Congress of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions in Cairo, 28-30 January. This was an inspiring event, contrasting starkly with the period when official trade unions were little more than a transmission belt for the government. From discussions with the EFITU President, Mr Kamal Abu Eita, and at subsequent meetings with the President of the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress, Mr Kamal Abbass, it was clear that a key preoccupation of independent unions in Egypt is the need for legislation on Trade Union Rights to be enacted as soon as possible, guaranteeing in particular freedoms of association and collective bargaining in line with Conventions of the International Labour Organisation to which Egypt is party.

I would urge you and the EU delegation in Cairo to use all means of persuasion available to press the Egyptian authorities to enact legislation enshrining those concerns, a draft of which drawn up under the auspices of the former Labour Minister Mr Ahmed Boraei has been languishing for nearly a year. I had the occasion to press this point directly with the current Minister, Mr Fahti Fakhri, but did not discern the sense of urgency that the matter requires. However, we have since learnt that the draft law may be presented to the People's Assembly in the coming days and hope that the EU can encourage that process. It would be helpful if your services would liaise with the local ILO representation in respect of the legal and technical issues arising around the legislation.

In that context I would draw attention to our standing policy that all EU aid and trade agreements should include strong and enforceable provisions on the implementation of labour rights in line with ILO Conventions and Decent Work principles, as well as monitoring mechanisms involving the social partners. The opening of negotiations to establish a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Egypt provide an excellent opportunity to press for a strong Sustainable Development Chapter covering those issues, as well as providing for concomitant technical assistance.

My Senior Adviser and our Euromed Coordinator had an opportunity to discuss the issues with officials at the Delegation and we will of course be happy to help further in any way appropriate. At the same time, it is our view that there is a need to reinforce the EU's capacity on the ground to deal with the complex industrial relations issues arising, that will have significant political ramifications. I would remind you of our request, already made to you by my predecessor John Monks, that posts of Labour and Social Affairs Attachés should be instituted in key Delegations. Our Executive Committee, and indeed our last Congress, have identified in particular Cairo and Tunis as priorities and I hope that you will consider acting on this soon.

An area of particular interest to us is the development of social dialogue and good governance in partner countries. The ILO office in Cairo is engaged in an important project on social dialogue and we would urge the Delegation to maintain close contacts, in particular with the ACTRAV and EMP/ACT representatives (who deal with workers' and employers' interests respectively), and help sustain that project.

In addition to bilateral work with Egypt and other countries, we are committed to developing the Euro-Mediterranean relationship, and in particular Social Dialogue in the region. Together with Business Europe we have agreed that our next European social partners' work programme for the period to 2014 should include capacity building and governance issues in the Euro-Mediterranean region. We are working closely with DG EMPL on this and hope that our representation in Cairo will follow initiatives in that context.

More generally, we hope that the EEAS will give labour matters high priority in its political work both on the ground and in strategic development. Free and independent trade unions will be a key component of a democratic Egypt and we look to you to ensure that the EU is at the forefront in pressing in that direction. The interest and solidarity of EU trade unions, demonstrated by our significant presence in Cairo for the EFITU Congress, was very much appreciated by our hosts and we hope to maintain the momentum.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "B. Ségol".

Bernadette Ségol
General Secretary