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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

United States Calls on Bahrain to Make Progress on Labour Rights

Brussels, 8 January 2013 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC is urging the US government to follow through on a US Department of Labor report which has found that Bahrain violated labour commitments made under the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries. The long delayed report, issued on December 20, made a series of recommendations to be taken up in formal consultations between the two governments, including enacting substantial labour law reforms, ensuring that workers be unconditionally reinstated with back pay, reviewing all criminal cases against trade unionists and dropping charges where appropriate and refraining from any further activities that would undermine trade unions, including the national trade union centre GFBTU.

"The U.S. government now must demonstrate that the consultations comprise a serious effort to address Bahrain's blatant disregard for the trade agreement's labor chapter, including punishing people at work for their peaceful participation in democracy marches," according to the AFL-CIO, which filed the original complaint under the FTA in April 2011.

In February 2011, Bahrainis took to the streets to demand economic and social justice and democratic reforms. Trade unions, including the GFBTU (General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions), played an important role in the protests and at one point called a general strike. The government's reaction to the protests was swift and harsh, resulting in serious and widespread human rights violations. In light of this crisis, the AFL-CIO filed a complaint under the US-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in April 2011 calling on the United States to withdraw from the pact and, at the very least, to initiate consultations under the labour chapter regarding the sacking of thousands of trade union members and the arrest and prosecution of union leaders.

"In 2012, an ILO-led process produced important but incomplete progress in achieving justice for those who were victims of the labour repression committed by the government in response to the protests. That process has now stalled due to a lack of political will by the government and, indeed, it is again backsliding on its international commitments. This includes the recent sentencing of trade union leaders to lengthy prison sentences for their union activity," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

"The US Department of Labor has issued an important report that could provide the leverage necessary to resolve the on-going labour rights crisis in Bahrain. The formal consultation process also provides the United States, which has maintained a muted public response to the human rights crisis in Bahrain, an opportunity to show that it can and will put human rights first in the Middle East. We urge the United States not to conclude the consultation process until each of the recommendations is fully met," urged Burrow.

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 308 national affiliates.

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