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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC Calls for Palestinian Relief Agency to Negotiate End to Strike

Brussels, 29 January 2014 (ITUC): The UN's relief agency for Palestinians, UNRWA, should enter talks to end a 58-day strike of its employees, and donor governments need to boost contributions to fill the agency's funding gap, according to the ITUC. Two of 28 UNRWA workers on a 30-day hunger strike were admitted to hospital on Monday, while thousands of people demonstrated in support in Ramallah.

The strikers are asking for West Bank employees' salaries to be lifted to the level of UNRWA staff in its other five areas of operation and the end of a ban on employing any person who has been imprisoned in Israel. The prohibition affects a large number of Palestinians, including people imprisoned without charge.

Some 4,400 Palestinians are employed in the West Bank's 19 refugee camps, providing health, education and other services during a severe economic crisis with unemployment at some 20%.

"Just as talks are underway to seek agreement on a two-state solution in the Middle East, it is deeply regrettable that some donor governments seem to be pulling back from the vital humanitarian mission of UNRWA for political reasons or due to aid budget cuts. We call on them to help meet the UNRWA's financial deficit, and we call on UNRWA to negotiate to settle the strike instead of insisting that strike action ends before talks can begin," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

Burrow began talks with senior UN representatives on the issue last week in Davos. Handing over a letter from Palestinian union centre PGFTU, she proposed that existing donors could bring forward funding commitments as an interim measure, while efforts continue to restore previous funding and find new donors.

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 161 countries and territories and has 325 national affiliates.

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