

December 10: Trade Union Rights are Human Rights

Geneva, December 9, 2003 (ACTRAV Info): Trade union organisations worldwide are using this year's Human Rights Day to remind the international community that workers' rights are human rights, but that these rights are still denied to millions of workers. Abuses range from restrictive legislation to the brutal repression and even murder of union activists.

In Geneva, Global Unions will hold a special event on Colombia, the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. This public forum will take place at the ILO headquarters on 10 December from 11h30 to 13h00 (ILO Cinema - R2 North). In 2002 alone, 184 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia. Many more are still receiving death threats. One of them is Gloria Ramirez, a leading member of the Colombian trade union centre (CUT), who will be in Geneva to testify. A former president of the Colombian teachers union, FECODE, she has recently been forced to leave her country because her life is under threat. Representatives from international trade union organizations and Amnesty International will also attend the public forum, to take part in a panel discussion entitled "Stop the killings and impunity in Colombia".



An international trade union delegation will be received on December 10 at the Colombian embassy in Geneva.

Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, amongst other things, that "Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests." The same rights are protected in Conventions Nos. 87 and 98 of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Yet trade union reports repeatedly show that scores of trade unionists are killed every year for carrying out legitimate trade union activities. This year's Survey by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) cited violations of workers' fundamental rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining in 133 countries. The report lists cases in 2002 in which a total of 209 union activists were killed, one thousand were attacked and beaten, 2,562 detained, 89 sentenced to prison, 30,000 sacked and some 20,000 harassed.

Colombia holds the grim record for the highest level of violence against labour leaders. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has repeatedly denounced the impunity which perpetrators of those crimes seem to enjoy.

The ILO has proposed that, as part of this year's theme for World Human Rights Day on December 10, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights should make a clear reference to the human rights of workers, with particular emphasis on freedom of association. In a letter to the Acting High Commissioner, Bertrand Ramcharan, ILO Director General Juan

Somavia points out that "the ILO, with its tripartite constituents representing governments and employers' and workers' organizations from 177 member States, accords key priority to workers' human rights. Its supervisory bodies seek constantly to redress abuses of these rights throughout the world. It has long been acknowledged that the strengthening of democracy and of good governance must go hand in hand with the promotion of workers' human rights, of all human rights, and the eradication of poverty."

International Labour Standards are enshrined in ILO Conventions which are binding on member States that have ratified them as well as in Recommendations which serve as guidance for national legislation. Furthermore ILO Member States are subject to a special procedure to handle complaints in case of alleged violations of freedom of association Conventions (Nos. 87 and 98) and - also by virtue of their membership in the Organisation - have an obligation to respect, promote and realize these fundamental principles and rights at work which also include the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, the effective abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

More information about anti-union repression in Colombia:

✓ Special Paragraph, ACTRAV Publication June 2002

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