



*INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION*

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan
Republic of Turkey
Cumhurbaşkanlığı Külliyesi
06560 Beştepe
Ankara, Turkey
By e-mail

PERC/HTUR

Brussels, 31 May 2021

Arrest of leaders of the Trade Union of Employees in Public Health and Social Services (SES)

Dear Mr President,

On behalf of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – which represents 200 million workers in 332 national affiliates in 163 countries, including the Turkish trade union Kamu Emekçileri Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (KESK) – and on behalf of the European Trade Union Confederation, we urge you to release without charge the leaders of KESK's affiliated Trade Union of Employees in Public Health and Social Services (SES) who were arrested on unspecified charges on 25 May 2021 after police forces raided their houses in the early hours of the day.

They are currently being held in the Ankara Police Department. Due to a confidentiality order, they were arrested without being informed about the charges, and their lawyers have reportedly no access to their files either. This constitutes unlawful arrest and detention, in violation of the right to liberty and security of person as protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The arrested trade union leaders are:

- 1) Ms Selma Atabey, co-president
- 2) Ms Gonul Erden, former co-president
- 3) Mr Fikret Calagan, former executive committee member
- 4) Ms Bedriye Yorgun, former president
- 5) Ms Belkis Yurtsever, former executive committee member
- 6) Ms Rona Temelli, former executive of the SES Branch in Ankara
- 7) Mr Ramazan Tas, former executive of the SES Branch in Ankara
- 8) Mr Erdal Turan, former executive of the SES Branch in Ankara

These latest arrests are yet another attack on independent trade unions in Turkey and are an example of the abuse of the context of the COVID-19 contamination measures to justify infringements on freedom of association and assembly. We note that the arrests do not adhere to the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality, as outlined specifically for the current context in ten detailed guidelines for governments and law enforcement by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association on 14 April 2020, and therefore constitute blatant acts of trade union harassment and serious violations of freedom of association, protected by ILO Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise. We note that these arrests have taken place on the eve of the annual International Labour Conference, and we will not hesitate to raise your government's flagrant breach of fundamental ILO conventions in that forum.

As underlined by the EU Commission's Report on Turkey 2020: "The deterioration of human and fundamental rights continued in 2020. Many of the measures introduced during the state of emergency remained in force or continued to have a profound and devastating impact (...) Serious backsliding continued on freedom of expression. The disproportionate implementation of the restrictive measures continued to negatively affect the freedom of expression and dissemination of opposition voices (...) There was further backsliding in the area of freedom of assembly and association in light of recurrent bans, disproportionate interventions in peaceful demonstrations, investigations, administrative fines and prosecutions against demonstrators on charges of 'terrorism-related activities'."

We deplore that your government arrests trade unionists who have worked relentlessly to save the lives of citizens and defend the rights of workers in the sector while it has refused to take action to protect workers in the health sector, or the public at large. It is clear that these arrests are an attempt to silence trade unionists who have raised concerns about your government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. SES has, since the outbreak, highlighted that hundreds of health workers and tens of thousands of citizens lost their lives as your government kept factories, other manufacturing facilities, and workplaces open without paying attention to the public health.

We firmly denounce these latest arrests and the ongoing trade union repression in Turkey and demand the immediate and unconditional release of the arrested trade unionists. As several of the leaders have medical conditions, we urge you to ensure their safety and will hold you accountable for their well-being under unlawful detention.

We repeat our call on you to arrange the release without charge of our fellow trade unionists and wish to be kept informed of your interventions in this urgent matter.

Sincerely yours,



Sharan Burrow
General Secretary
ITUC



Luca Visentini
General Secretary
ETUC and PERC

cc:

Mr Vedat Bilgin, Minister of Labour

Mr Sadik Arslan, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Turkey to the UN Office at Geneva

Mr Kemal Bozay, Ambassador, Permanent Representation of Turkey to the European Union