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INTERNATIONALE des TRAVAILLEURS du TEXTILE, de l'HABILLEMENT et du CUIR FITTVC FEDERACIÓN
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HTUR/JB

17 March 2008

Violent repression of Vietnamese workers' strike in Jordan

Dear Minister,

We write on behalf of the International Trade Union Confederation representing 168 million workers in 311 independent national trade unions worldwide and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation with a membership of ten million workers in the industry to denounce the assault of 176 Vietnamese migrant workers at W&D Apparel in the Al Tajamouat Industrial Estate in Amman after they went on strike on February 10.

According to our information, when the strike broke out, the company cut off food to the workers to force them to return to their jobs and to entice some workers to abandon the strike, management offered compensation to those who had worked overtime hours and were the most productive. This constitutes undue interference with legitimate trade union activities. When the majority of workers were still on strike ten days later, the employer called in the police who broke down the doors, dragged the workers out of their dormitories and beat them. Some workers who were ill in bed were subjected to the same treatment.

With the assistance of support groups, the workers sought the intervention of your Ministry, which promised to assist the workers. We understand that a doctor was sent in and five critically ill workers were taken for emergency medical treatment at a nearby clinic.

The workers, mainly women, protested the exploitative working and living conditions they faced at the Taiwanese-owned factory for which they had paid a Vietnamese labour broker 1,600 USD in recruitment fees, the equivalent of nearly three years' minimum wage, to be employed in Amman. Many were forced to borrow the money from loan sharks who charge exorbitant interest. The workers were employed under a contract between W&D and two Vietnamese state-owned corporations, National Coal Corporation and National Leather and Footwear Corp. The workers were promised wages of 220 USD a month in Jordan, but once they arrived their employer confiscated their personal documents, forced them to work for up to 16 hours a day, and paid them between 80 and 150 USD per month.



Given the recent launch of the Better Work Programme in Jordan this situation does not augur well for the reputation of the industry. We urge your Government to ensure that W&D respects the right of the migrant workers to join or form a union of their choice and to bargain collectively with their employer and we would urge your government to conduct an urgent investigation into the role played by police in breaking up the strike and to ensure that any police officers found to have abused workers are punished. Furthermore, we take this opportunity to urge your government to take urgent steps to review Jordan's legislation to ensure that migrant workers are given the right to organise and strike in conformity with the principles of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as enshrined in ILO Conventions 87 and 98 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The latter convention was ratified by your country in 1968. The government of Jordan has an obligation to respect the principle of freedom of association by virtue of its membership of the ILO and to comply with ratified ILO conventions.

Additionally, several issues such as forced overtime, deceptive recruitment and the retention of passports of migrant workers indicates that these workers might be victims of human trafficking in the sense of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime to which your country became a signatory in 2002. It also raises serious concerns with regard to ILO Conventions 29 and 105 on Forced Labour and the Abolition of Forced Labour, ratified by your country in 1966 and 1958 respectively. Therefore we urge your government to order that an investigation be carried out to determine whether the abuses against these workers were akin to forced labour and thus of a criminal nature. We further urge you to ensure that all those responsible for criminal behaviour are held responsible, and that the workers are adequately compensated for the abuse.

Finally, we urge your government to review and tighten regulations for recruitment agencies to avoid systematic exploitation of migrant workers into situations of forced labour. Labour brokers should cover all costs associated with the employment of migrant workers, including recruitment fees and airfares in line with ILO Convention 181 on Private Employment Agencies, and should provide all migrant workers with an employment contract in their local language specifying the gross pay rates; overtime rates and maximum allowable overtime hours; all legal deductions; benefits such as medical coverage, sick leave, annual leave and holidays; the disciplinary processes; the complaints mechanism; as well as a detailed summary of the living conditions. All wages and benefits should be paid in legal tender directly to the workers concerned and the company should not withhold any deposits or fee sums from the workers' pay.

We trust that you will give this important matter proper attention.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Kearney



General Secretary
International Textile, Garment and
Leather Workers' Federation

Guy Ryder



General Secretary
International Trade Union Confederation