



## **Declaration of Trade Unions from Arab countries for Democracy and Social Justice**

**May Day 2011**

An unprecedented popular uprising is taking place in most Arab countries to end political despotism, social injustice, and repression. People are mobilising for respect of fundamental liberties and of the will of the people. This uprising is for values that the independent trade union movement has long held dear and considers to be essential: democracy, human rights, including trade union rights, fairness and equality, guaranteed not only by the adoption of good legislation and regulations, but also through the rule of law. That means moving from arbitrary rule to inclusive governance.

Tunisia sparked off this peaceful and democratic uprising, which extended eastwards to include Egypt and other Arab countries. Millions of citizens with diverse views, but united by a common will for democratic change, have taken to the streets and squares, staging large scale protests and sit-ins, chanting slogans of freedom, democracy and social justice, and calling for jobs, justice, and a future for them and their children. And they have sought to hold to account the perpetrators of corruption and oppression. A critical feature of the uprisings was the massive mobilisation of young people and, in some countries, of women, often for the first time.

The Arab people have sacrificed thousands of martyrs, and countless others were wounded. Many protesters have been arrested and imprisoned. But, dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt were brought down.

The Arab revolutions represent a shift from despair to hope and from fear to courage. The trade union movement has an essential role to ensure that such fundamental changes continue and are irreversible. Forces of reaction remain powerful.

New independent trade unions in Egypt and the established ones in Bahrain and Tunisia, have played a key role in staging popular demonstrations and strikes. They are building structures to support the ideals of the revolution and helping to ensure that the infrastructure of democracy is put in place.

Free and independent trade unions are the indispensable motor of change to achieve the transition from dictatorship and corruption to democracy and the rule of law. They are central to popular participation and the establishment of pluralistic societies in which respect for human and trade union rights, as embodied in international standards, are guaranteed. Human rights are the foundation for the existence of authentic civil society.

Political despotism and market fundamentalism formed a toxic combination that produced poverty, precarious work, undermined social protection and savaged public services, including in such sectors as education, health care, and culture. This went hand in hand with the repression of political opposition and the suppression of free speech.

Corruption, already a problem, was fueled by privatisation in the public sector, including in basic services, diverting shrinking public resources. Such services must be for the public good, not for private gain. Efficient services infused with public service values make an irreplaceable contribution to democratic transition.

Economic policies in many countries privileged exports over domestic demand. This was linked with growth of precarious work, instability, degradation of working conditions, including occupational health and safety, exploitation and violation of workers' rights, all facilitated by "flexibility" amendments to labour codes.

The deterioration of living standards, rising unemployment and underemployment, poverty, the weakening of social security systems and the growth of informal, unprotected work helped produce huge and widening inequalities and injustices. This further concentrated power and control over the



political decision-making process and national wealth in the hands of a few. Corrupt, despotic rule confiscated the rights, liberties, and property of the people.

There are changes in some Arab countries, but not all changes are real or profound. The respect of trade union rights has not come automatically with "reform". Neither real reform nor democracy can be achieved without full trade union rights. "Democracy" will be an illusion and a cruel deception if workers are not able to organise freely and be represented through trade unions of their own choosing.

The trade union movement supports the popular struggles for democracy and social justice in the Arab countries. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Global Union Federations (GUFs) call on their Arab member organisations and all Arab workers to demonstrate support for democracy and social justice by holding a joint celebration of May Day 2011 in the region.

All Arab trade union organisations affiliated with the ITUC and GUFs signing this Declaration:

- 1) Pay tribute to the martyrs of freedom, fallen in demonstrations in squares and streets, in police stations and government detention centers, as a price for freedom and dignity. And demand the immediate release of all detainees held captive following these events, and the bringing to justice of all those responsible for attacking protestors, as well as the provision of compensation for the victims' survivors. And salute the triumphant revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in full recognition of the crucial role played by free, independent and democratic trade unions in mobilising workers in support of revolutionary ideals and principles.
- 2) Call upon governments to fully respect human and trade union rights including the rights to strike and to demonstrate peacefully and condemn all forms of violence and repression against those who participate in them.
- 3) Pledge to extend solidarity between Arab trade union organisations to achieve legitimate demands for freedom, equality, decent work and better living standards for Arab peoples.
- 4) Reject trade unions that serve dictators rather than their members and recognise that the legitimacy of trade unions can never be granted by repressive regimes, but can only be obtained by the will of members and through the representation of workers.
- 5) Fully support the principles of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, including trade union pluralism. And agree that there is an urgent need throughout the region for strong and independent trade unions controlled by their members. Only such trade unions have the mandate and moral authority to engage in collective bargaining and social dialogue.
- 6) Seek to construct powerful, independent and democratic trade unions in order to preserve the autonomy and defend the rights of all Arab workers, with a special emphasis on young people.
- 7) Strive to ensure full equality for women, in all aspects of politics, society and the economy, including within the trade union movement, recognizing the particular impacts of the years of repression and dictatorship on women.
- 8) Support quality public services and consider them essential for good governance, democracy, and development. It is necessary and important for trade union organisations to fully assume their responsibilities to combat dictatorship and achieve full transparency accountability in decision-making in order to eliminate corruption and nepotism in all their forms.



- 9) Work for a transition in our societies that enhances human dignity through democracy, equality and social justice.

**The signatories:**

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*An initiative of the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) and the Global Union Federations (GUFs)*