



Migration from Northern Africa: Europe must live up to the values it claims

The ITUC is extremely concerned at the lack protection of civilians in the conflict in Libya, and urges the international community to respond effectively and comprehensively to the humanitarian crisis. An end must be put to the killings, large scale violence and generalized repression against women and men whose only aspiration is to live in a peaceful and democratic society. The Gaddafi regime must come to an end, and a transition to a democratic government that protects the human rights of its citizens must take place. Of particular concern to the ITUC is the situation of men, women and children fleeing the violence and crossing borders for their own safety. An estimated 700.000 people are already outside Libya and the number keeps growing. Many foreign workers are in dire circumstances and their fate is uncertain.

As many as 2 million foreign workers were used in the 1980s and 90s to serve the Libyan regime's economic and political interests. They were subsequently subjected to severe repression and persistent violations of their human rights, including their rights as workers. Many are now left with no job, no home and no relatives to rely on. They are stranded in highly dangerous areas, or in overcrowded camps without proper shelter or other essentials such as food, water and basic medical care. Many Eritreans, Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians among others cannot return to their countries of origin because of violence or risk of persecution.

Urgent action is needed to organise the evacuation of foreign workers and the resettlement of refugees. The ITUC urges the international community to offer generous resettlement places to the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR. Further international action is needed to ensure that all workers will receive outstanding wages, compensation and other entitlements when the situation improves.

People fleeing Libya are increasingly risking their lives to enter Europe by crossing the Mediterranean, often in boats which are not seaworthy. Many of them have drowned. The European Union and its member states must deploy all necessary means to ensure that those at risk are rescued. They must also conduct careful assessment of the arriving refugees and grant asylum to those in need of international protection in full respect of the 1951 UNHCR Convention and relevant EU regulations. The problems that emerged recently with the arrival in Europe of Tunisian migrants should not exonerate European countries from scrupulously applying refugee laws and regulations. The ITUC and the European Trade Union

Confederation urge the EU to put in place an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure that asylum law is properly enforced in all member states.

The ITUC and the ETUC are further concerned that the arrival of 22.000 Tunisians to the Italian island of Lampedusa last month shook one of the core and founding principles of the EU - the free movement of people within its member states. While the number of arrivals was large compared to the 6.000 inhabitants of Lampedusa, it is negligible in proportion of the 400 millions of people living in the Schengen area.

In the words of ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow. "Looking objectively at the facts, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that those seeking to cause panic on this issue are motivated simply by electoral purposes." The lack of solidarity among EU countries in this matter stands in stark contrast to the generosity of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments which have together received almost 400.000 foreign people since the beginning of the war in Libya, despite being in the midst of deep political changes themselves.

Migration must be managed in a coherent, transparent, and rights-based manner. The Italian government's decision to grant temporary visas to 20,000 Tunisians, while threatening all other newcomers with collective deportation, does not pass this test. European countries must also make major improvements in the way in which migrants are received, and provide adequate facilities that respect their dignity.

ETUC General Secretary John Monks notes that "It is urgent for Europe to adopt a real migration policy which takes account of all the aspects of the matter, including the economic, social and development dimensions."

On a positive note, the ITUC and the ETUC welcome the recent ruling of the European Court of Justice to the effect that member states cannot imprison undocumented migrants who refuse to leave the country. This ruling conforms to the ITUC view that the lack of migration documents should never be considered a penal offense, and should not prevent undocumented workers from enjoying the same wages and working conditions as their national colleagues.

The ITUC and the ETUC call on the EU to be genuine and serious in supporting the democratic changes taking place in North Africa and to start building equitable and fair relations with them. When visiting Tunisia last month, European Commission President Barroso put this new and fragile democracy under tremendous pressure to accept the re-admission of undocumented migrants, holding out the prospect of an additional 140 million euros. This is inappropriate. Likewise, spending money on building a fortress around the Schengen area is the wrong approach. Europe must prioritise the economic and social development of its neighbouring countries. Creating decent job opportunities in North Africa remains the only sustainable way to encourage young people in particular from risking their lives on a daily basis to reach European shores.

“The real challenge for Europe today is not to stop migration flows, but to become a real source of peace and prosperity for the whole African continent” concludes Sharan Burrow.