

ITUC STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

December 10th is an important date for the trade union movement, not only because labour rights are human rights but because the guarantee of human rights for all underpins social and economic justice. Unfortunately, 2012 has been another difficult year for workers in most parts of the globe, with many facing imprisonment or death at the hands of their governments or injury and death on the job as a result of negligent corporations.

On 24 November, a fire at the Tazreen Fashions Ltd factory in **Bangladesh** claimed the lives of over 100 garment workers. The fire followed similar garment factory fires in **Pakistan** in September, which claimed the lives of over 300 workers. These fires are nothing new, and hundreds have perished in Bangladesh alone in recent years. To keep costs as low as possible, garment factories often cut major corners on health and safety. Each time there is such a fire, the garment industry resolves to take the matter seriously and sets up new fire safety initiatives. However, these fires are evidence that any such industry efforts are woefully insufficient. It was recently reported that Wal-Mart, which sourced from the Tazreen Fashions factory, had refused to contribute any resources towards fire safety in a 2011 meeting between industry and labour stakeholders.

In 2012, more than 80 leaders and members of **Turkey's** public sector union, KESK, were again arrested – including 15 women preparing for the International Women's Day (8 March) activities. They face trials on false charges of terrorism merely for carrying out trade union activity. The next hearing is on 13 December 2012. The government harassment of unions this year, and in particular public sector unions, is part of a strategy to break the back of the labour movement. In 2011, 25 KESK members were condemned to more than 6 years imprisonment. Sixty-six trade unionists are currently serving prison sentences in Turkey and many more are yet to appear in court. Trade unions around the world are concerned that these unionists will be imprisoned as terrorists simply for standing up for the rights of Turkish workers.

In recent weeks, Mohamed Morsi has issued decrees and amendments to the trade union law, which combined with the proposed constitution, threaten to betray the aspirations of the 2011 revolution in **Egypt**. The roots of the revolution are actually found in the actions taken by independent trade unions in the years leading up to 2011. These brave unionists posed a direct challenge to the Mubarak regime. The legal framework now being put into place violates Egypt's international obligations, and signals a return to a system of government domination of civil society institutions such as trade unions. As we see in the streets of Cairo, the result will be continued conflict.

In **Panama**, protests in October 2012 against a law to sell land within the Colón free zone resulted in the deaths of at least three people, including a young boy. The community was deeply worried that the sale would result in the loss of an important source of income for the area. Residents formed a united front, including various community groups and trade unions. The government responded by unleashing a brutal wave of repression resulting in the deaths. In solidarity, trade unions demonstrated across the country. Again, the government responded by hiring thugs to break up the protest and vandalize buildings. Several trade unionists were arrested. The law was eventually repealed.

In the **United States**, 1,300 workers at American Crystal Sugar have been locked out since August 1, 2011 in an attempt to break the union. Workers have been without a pay check for 16 months. At the same time, the CEO of the company rewarded himself with a 50% pay increase. The company was also recently cited by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for widespread, "high gravity" and "serious" safety violations. Unions are calling on the company to return to the

bargaining table and conclude a contract, though the company recently tabled a proposal that has already been rejected. A nationwide boycott has been called to try to bring the company to the table and bargain in good faith.

ASEAN, the bloc of South-East Asian countries, issued a Human Rights Declaration in November. While this should be cause for celebration on International Human Rights Day, the Declaration unfortunately signals a retreat from well-established human rights law. On workers' rights, the Declaration purports to uphold the universal right to form a union but then provides that this right is protected only to the extent permitted under national law and practice. Unfortunately, labour law and practice among ASEAN member states fall far below international standards.

Today, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) recommits itself to fight alongside working women and men around the globe who struggle to establish respect of international human rights on the job, in their communities and in their countries.