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Turkey: anti-union action follows high profile press freedom campaign

President,

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which represents 175 million workers through its 305 affiliated organisations in 151 countries and territories, including Turkey, is writing to you to protest against the serious violations of press freedom in Turkey and the increased number of journalists currently in prison.

The ITUC has been informed by the the EFJ (European Federation of Journalists) and the IFJ (International Federation of Journalists), representing over 260.000 journalists in over 30 European countries about the recent developments that appear to demonstrate a concerted effort by the Turkish authorities to attack the largest IFJ and EFJ affiliate in the country, the Türkiye Gazeteciler Sendikası (TGS). This union is playing a leading role in the Press Freedom Forum, the campaign to release over 100 journalists currently in jail in Turkey.

According to the EFJ and the IFJ, the General Manager of the Anatolian Press Agency (the state news agency), who is directly appointed by the government, has recently been driving attempts to force the agency's journalists to resign from the TGS. The Anatolian Press Agency (Anadolu Ajansı) is the largest employer of TGS members and their membership is of crucial importance to the success of the union's work of defending journalists' rights.

It also appears that a new union has also been founded, with the clear backing of the employer and the government, to challenge the TGS. This is a widely recognised tactic used by those who seek to undermine independent trade unions.

The government has also sought specifically to target the president of the TGS, Ercan Ipekci, who has been a leading activist in campaigns for press freedom in Turkey and who is also a member of the EFJ's governing Steering Committee. Mr Ipekci has been singled out for criticism in a speech by the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and has subsequently seen management at the Anatolian Press Agency play an organising role in attempts to undermine his position within the union.

Such concerted anti-union action against the TGS, fits the picture of a general growing practice of anti-union harassment by the government and employers in Turkey.

In a report published recently, the ITUC denounced the heavy restrictions on the right to organise unions, government manipulation of union membership figures and the common practice of threats and intimidation to stop workers joining and forming unions mean that only 5.4% of workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements. The long-standing practice of judicial harassment of union advocates continues. Many other trade unionists remain in prison, and peaceful union demonstrations are often subjected to violence by the authorities.

Turkey has ratified all eight core ILO labour conventions including No 87 on Freedom of Association and No 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.

Clearly individual journalists have the right to decide whether or not they wish to be members of the TGS. Those who are members also have the right to choose the leadership of the union through TGS's democratic structures. However, they also have a right to make those decisions free from pressure by the government or their employer.

An extraordinary meeting of the TGS is scheduled to be held on 14-15 April. Along with the IFJ and EFJ, the ITUC considers that it is of the utmost importance to that members of the union are able to conduct their business independently, without pressure from outside forces who do not share the union's interest in giving journalists a strong and independent voice.

The ITUC write this letter to you to highlight its concerns around this case and to urge you to take appropriate action to put pressure on the Turkish authorities to allow the members of TGS to go about their lawful union activities free from fear of reprisals by their employer or the authorities.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. B. ...', written in a cursive style.

General Secretary