



May Day 2009 and Freedom for Imprisoned Trade Unionists in Iran

Around the world, for over one hundred years, workers and their trade unions have celebrated May Day - International Labour Day. It is the day on which workers internationally show their shared commitment to justice and freedom. Since the first International May Day in 1890, it has been celebrated in public gatherings but also in jails and prisons - for there are still governments which forbid unofficial gatherings on the first of May.

Iran is one such country. For years, workers attempting public May Day demonstrations have been harassed, beaten, and jailed. For the past two years, workers and labour rights supporters seeking to organize May Day gatherings have been sentenced to public whippings. Mahmoud Salehi, leader of an independent bakers union in Iran's Kurdistan province, served one year in prison for attempting to organize a public rally on May Day 2004.

The government-sponsored Workers' House or Islamic Labour Councils organize annual official ceremonies on the first of May, designed for workers to speak about the things officials like to hear rather than the real issues they face. But free trade unions are illegal in Iran and independent trade unionists have always been prevented from joining this ceremony.

Repression of trade unions in Iran

But it isn't just for celebrating May Day that trade unionists are attacked in Iran. All expressions of free trade unionism face the prospect of repression.

In June 2008, five thousand workers at the Haft Tapeh Sugar Company in the southern city of Shush formed an independent trade union following a 46-day strike for the payment of 6 months' back wages. On December 20, 5 elected leaders of their union were charged with "endangering national security" and "anti-government propaganda" in connection with the strike and the formation of the union. Following a low turnout to the February 24, 2009 election to the Islamic Labour Council at Haft Tapeh, union officers were arrested again, including Haft Tapeh union President Ali Nejati. As a result of pressure from his work mates and trade unionists globally, Nejati was freed on bail following 45 days' detention - 33 of them in solitary confinement. On March 14, Ali Nejati and 4 other Haft Tapeh union leaders were sentenced to one year imprisonment.

Mansour Osanloo and Ebrahim Madadi, leaders of the Union of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, are currently serving five-and three and a half-year sentences, respectively, solely for their union activity. In his current prison term,

Osanloo has been harshly treated and denied essential medical treatment. Just weeks before the establishment of the union in 2005, activists including Osanloo were attacked severely by company thugs and members of the government-sponsored organizations. Some workers remain unfairly dismissed after supporting union actions.

Teacher and trade unionist Farzad Kamangar, in detention since July 2006, was sentenced to death in February 2008 and transferred to Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

All trade union activists currently imprisoned in Iran solely for their peaceful, legitimate trade union activities must be released immediately, and charges unconditionally dropped against all those facing jail.

This year's May Day

Inside and outside Iran, individuals and organizations have campaigned for the release of these imprisoned workers' leaders, who are struggling for the advancement of basic trade union rights in Iran and for worker and human rights everywhere.

The government of Iran is intensifying its repression against independent trade unionists ahead of May Day 2009 and the June presidential elections.

As we near May Day 2009, EI, ITF ITUC and IUF again wish to draw international attention to our common struggle in support of fundamental labour and trade union rights in Iran. The right of workers to organize, to bargain collectively with employers and the right to strike are essential human rights as enshrined in the ILO Conventions. Workers in Iran must be free to exercise these rights that workers everywhere are entitled to. We call on the authorities to let workers in Iran freely join their sisters and brothers around the globe in celebrating this May Day, and we demand the immediate and unconditional release of, Mansour Osanloo, Ebrahim Madadi, Farzad Kamangar and all other Iranians currently imprisoned or facing imprisonment for attempting to exercise their fundamental rights as workers and trade unionists.

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International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)
Education International (EI)
International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

