

Trade unions:

# Rights at work

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Executive Board

■ The simultaneous violation of human, trade union and other workers' rights is a frequent occurrence. The record of international monitoring demonstrates that these rights are tightly connected. In many parts of the world, independent and free trade unions have assumed a major role in the pursuit and establishment of democratic rule, enduring a significant share of repression. In numerous countries, this process continues. For trade unions worldwide, and in particular for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the International Trade Secretariats (ITS) associated with it, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights thus represents a unique opportunity to assess and review international protection mechanisms, in particular as they relate to trade union and other workers' rights.

For historical reasons, such as the foundation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) 30 years before that of the United Nations, the international free trade union movement concentrates its work on human and trade union rights at the ILO. It makes extensive use of ILO standards, supervisory mechanisms and jurisprudence. While some countries steadily refuse to respect fundamen-

tal international human rights obligations deriving from their ILO membership, others have agreed to bring their law and practice into conformity with international standards, as a result of ILO pressure. At the same time the ICFTU, its affiliated organizations and the ITS are determined to make every effort to oppose attempts by conservative forces to weaken the ILO's standards and instruments designed for the protection of human rights, and in particular for the protection of trade union rights.

While the ILO plays a unique role in protecting trade union and other workers' rights, trade unions also recall that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the European and the Inter-American Conventions on Human Rights, among others, all specifically guarantee trade union rights. The relevant treaty bodies regularly question governments about the implementation of trade union rights, the core of which is the right of all workers to set up and join organizations of their own choosing without prior authorization, for the furthering of their interests.

As concerned partners in the pursuit of respect for these rights, free and independent trade union organizations throughout the world share their portion of responsibility in making their governments fully accountable for their record on social and economic rights. The ICFTU and ITS are therefore committed to preserving and further developing adequate forms of involvement of their membership,

**The right of all workers to set up and join trade unions of their own choosing is long-established and protected by international human rights treaties**



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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted 45 years ago, yet its humane principles have not been enforced worldwide. Innocent people still suffer in countries afflicted with war and conflict. Faced with such distress we cannot ignore it: it shames all mankind. The Slovak Republic is a young, independent state whose course depends upon democracy and humanism. We are committed to advocating the protection of everyone in need of our support. Therefore we welcomed the outcome of the World Conference on Human Rights as a step towards attaining the highest ideals of humanity.

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both internationally and at the regional and national level, in the various stages of human and trade union rights' monitoring.

This calls, *inter alia*, for additional attention to be paid to the unions' consultation in periodic reporting by states to the various treaty bodies in which trade union rights are discussed. It also entails that unions need to expand on their own capacity to provide the international human rights system with relevant and specific information. In doing so, unions should use all available material on genuine instances of violations against workers' and trade union rights, be it in the area of civil and political or economic, social and cultural rights.

In addition, unions should fully assume their role, locally and internationally, in the promotion and furthering of general awareness of these rights, and should benefit from the UN human rights machinery's assistance in this process. Furthermore, the ICFTU also confirms its readiness to cooperate with other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with which it shares the same values and principles for the defence of human and trade union rights.

Within the spectrum of human rights, women's rights issues, including the problem of gender-related discrimination, are a matter of constant preoccupation for the international free trade union movement. While already itself deeply involved in this area, the ICFTU calls on the UN to further expand its work on this subject and calls on the Conference to address it specifically; it stands ready to contribute to these tasks.

Among the many attacks on civil and political rights, violations of the rights to freedom of expression and information constitute a permanent source of preoccupation for the international trade union movement. In numerous countries, governments attempt to curtail the free flow of information in the social and economic area: journalists reporting on these and other issues relevant to trade union concerns frequently suffer grave violations of their rights, including, all too often, the right to life and security of the person.

While fully supporting the unique role of the ILO in the protection of trade union and other workers' rights, the ICFTU and ITS would also welcome a further increase in the attention brought to these rights by other bodies within the international supervisory machinery. Recognizing the need for union organizations to provide adequate information to the existing structures, including the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the ICFTU and ITS express the hope that trade union and other workers' rights will be fully taken into account in future monitor-

ing work, in line also with the Resolutions on Trade Union Rights adopted at recent sessions of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The thorough monitoring of these rights appears even more essential at a time when social and economic injustice and inequality in different parts of the world are increasingly seen to be the root of continuous human rights violations, often on a scale sufficient to degenerate into open conflict, and so threaten international peace and security. Where relevant, findings and recommendations of the international community, especially those of Treaty Bodies and other relevant UN structures, including the ILO, should be made instrumental in the decision-making process affecting international relations and cooperation, including with respect to the provision of non-humanitarian assistance to states which systematically refuse to abide by international standards.

Trade union organizations, both nationally and at the international level, should be guaranteed and, where already so, use every opportunity to take part in the ongoing reporting and monitoring process of these rights. At the same time, adequate attention should be paid by the UN's monitoring system to all instances of violations of civil and political rights in which workers, and in particular trade union leaders and members, are specifically targeted for repression.

In this connection, issues of workers' and trade union rights should be carefully scrutinized in the UN's on-site involvement, with the aim of achieving full coordination between supervisory procedures and operational activities. Relevant advisory services and technical assistance, such as are provided for instance by the UN Centre for Human Rights and the ILO, may and should play an essential role in monitoring, promoting and defending human and trade union rights.

Such on-site human rights work should be made a standard component of the UN's growing involvement in conflict-prevention and peace-keeping. Particularly essential in this context is the monitoring of measures concerning the prevention or the elimination of discrimination in employment, a regular but usually neglected warning sign of predictable conflicts, at times resulting in clear challenges to international peace and security.

As trade union organizations, the ICFTU and ITS consider it important that several other concerns, such as child labour and work-related gender issues, should also figure prominently on the international human rights agenda.

*EXTRACT FROM: Statement Concerning the UN World Conference on Human Rights, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Executive Board.*