

ILO Acts Against Violations of Workers' Rights in Belarus

Geneva, November 19, 2003 (ACTRAV Info): The worker members of the Governing Body of the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) have welcomed the decision (today 19 November 2003) to set up a Commission of Inquiry into allegations of serious abuses of workers' rights in Belarus.

The establishment of a Commission of Inquiry is one of the ILO's strongest procedures available to its supervisory bodies to seek redress to abuses of workers' rights and is only used in the most serious cases.

The tripartite Governing Body decision (governments, employers and trade unions) followed a complaint made by workers' delegates at the June 2003 International Labour Conference in which trade unions denounced arrests, imprisonment, harassments, dismissal and threats against independent trade unionists in Belarus as well as the takeover by allies of President Lukashenka of the country's national trade union federation.

Details of violations of Freedom of Association have been documented in a series of complaints lodged by Belarus independent trade unions and international trade union organisations since 1996. Only recently Aliaksandr Bukhvostau and Aliaksandr Yaroshuk, two independent trade union leaders were arrested and imprisoned for ten days for criticising publicly the authorities repressive anti-trade union measures.

"Looking at the economics of the country and the situation of workers, no wonder why the regime is trying to silence the voice of trade unions" says a document released today by the Secretariat of the ILO workers' group (see attached). "Wage arrears totalled millions of dollars (billions of roubles) and hundreds of thousands of workers have no other choice than receiving their salaries in kind. Per capita income nationwide was approximately 56 US dollars per month in 2002 but two thirds of the 4,5 million working population were said to survive below this level. A third of the population lives under the poverty line", the document says.

Earlier this month the Belarus government decided to close down all ILO projects in Belarus and have threatened trade unionists that participation in these ILO activities is now illegal.

"By virtue of its membership in the ILO the government of Belarus has subscribed to the tripartite character of the ILO and has an obligation to ensure that direct cooperation with the social partners, employers and trade unions, can be carried out by the ILO without any government interference. The decision of the Belarus government is totally unacceptable and a quite unique violation of the ILO constitution by a Member State, which is also a member of the Governing Body of the Organization" says Leroy Trotman spokesperson for the ILO Workers' group.

"The ILO decision to have a Commission on Inquiry on Belarus sends a clear

message to the authorities that the international community is taking workers' rights very seriously and that things will need to improve rapidly. This will give us strong backing to seek action being taken also at other levels" said Mr Trotman. Members of the ILO Governing Body workers' group say they will mobilise support for the European Union to launch an inquiry into Belarus, possibly leading to a withdrawal of trade privileges under the EU Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), in case workers' rights abuses continue in the country. Belarus exports to EU countries amounts to more than 8 billion US dollars which benefits from tariff exemption under the GSP procedure.

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