

27 September 2017

An open letter to Delegates at the 10th ILO European Regional Meeting

We are disappointed that the ILO, an institution dedicated to rights founded on freedom of association, would hold a conference in a state where workers are subjected to the most serious human and labour rights violations, and where business owners and managers are at risk of having their property and their commercial operations seized with no recourse to the rule of law.

We have been astonished at the lack of support from governments and business concerning the violence and oppression leveled against workers, including the dismissal by emergency decree of more than 125,000 public servants, academics, teachers and journalists, with thousands of them incarcerated. In addition, the livelihoods of both owners and personnel of more than 950 companies have been affected.

At the UN General Assembly in September, the President of Turkey said, “Most of [the imprisoned journalists] are terrorists, involved with bombing attacks, many are involved with theft, many are spies.”

With some USD 11 billion worth of corporate assets having been taken over by the government along with the dismissal and often imprisonment of workers in both the public and the private sectors, this constitutes a systematic denial of rights with few precedents in modern economic history.

Freedom of association both for workers and for business has been stripped away. We have documented the arrests and imprisonment of union members taking part in protests, speaking out on social media or campaigning against the anti-democratic measures inherent in the referendum, and have presented such to the ILO. Indeed thousands of dismissals, house raids and even armed attacks on union leaders represent everyday risks for trade unionists.

The 2017 Committee on the Application of Standards discussed a complaint regarding the application of Convention 135 on Worker Representation. It expressed concern over the allegations in relation to the dismissal and arrest of workers’ representatives following the proclamation of the state of emergency, and clearly found that there is no freedom of speech for worker representatives let alone freedom to exercise their trade union representative functions (ref. pages 190 – 198 of this year’s report of the CAS).

Earlier this year the Chair of Amnesty International Turkey was arrested and for some days held in isolation along with other NGO leaders. And UN judge Aydin Sefa Akay has been convicted with a seven-year sentence, in breach of diplomatic immunity and a binding legal order.

In a context where some worker representatives from the host country are denied freedom of association and freedom of expression, and face ongoing and large-scale victimisation, an ILO Regional Meeting cannot deal effectively with the shocking acts perpetrated by the very government that will be afforded a civility that defies reality.

Some of our local trade unions will not be able to speak freely before, during or after the Regional Meeting and indeed we believe the same stands for business leaders. Indeed, Turkish trade union leaders have been forced to seek asylum in EU countries.

We had hoped that the situation in the country might change with a return to the rule of law with democratic rights and freedoms, justice for workers arbitrarily dismissed or arrested, and an end to the continuous and coordinated attacks on trade union and workers' rights. However, given that these egregious violations of the rights of workers and of business people are continuing, the representatives of ITUC and ETUC member organisations will not participate in the European Regional Meeting. We thank those governments and employers who have also chosen not to attend, and we ask the ILO to refrain from the practice of forming a Workers' Group in these conditions, which would lack the necessary political legitimacy. Further, we could not associate with any conclusions of such a Conference under these circumstances.

We deeply regret the lost opportunity for a serious tripartite discussion on the critical issues facing Europe.

Yours sincerely,



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ITUC General Secretary



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