

# *Global Labour Notes / There's a battle outside ragin': Unions take centre stage in the fight for democracy*

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For those of us who support the growth of democracy in the world, it almost goes without saying that we support workers' rights and trade unions. But sometimes that support is only perfunctory.

After all, when we think about dictatorships in the world today and the struggle for democracy, we usually think of political and spiritual leaders, writers, intellectuals and others before we think of the workers. Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama have become household names. For some of the larger and better known human rights organisations, workers' rights have long been seen as a bit of a footnote – though there is some evidence that this is now changing.

While most of us will be vaguely familiar with key international human rights documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), most human rights campaigners will have difficulty naming the eight core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) which lay out what are universally recognised workers' rights – such as the right to form and join a trade union and to bargain collectively.

Everyone remembers the central role played by independent trade unions in bringing down Communist rule in Poland and triggering the collapse of the entire Soviet empire in the process. But my guess is that few are aware of the key role being played by trade unions today – unions which find themselves on the front lines of what amounts to a fight to the death with dictatorships. Those dictatorships are often far more severe in their repression than the Polish Stalinists ever were.

Take for example, Zimbabwe. As I write these words, most democrats and human rights supporters will be aware that Robert Mugabe's brutal dictatorial rule has faced its most serious challenge at the hands of a man who formerly led the country's trade union movement – Morgan Tsvangirai. But how many know that unions today came under severe pressure in the aftermath of the 2008 elections? In

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early May the top leadership of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions as well as leading teacher unionists were jailed by the regime and denied bail. Unions in Zimbabwe cannot fail to remind us of the role played by Solidarnosc in Poland – right down to the union leader (Walesa then, Tsvangirai now) personifying the need for change.

The role of unions in the battle for freedom in Zimbabwe was made even more dramatic by the remarkable action of South African dockers. Following the recent elections in Zimbabwe, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union refused to off-load weapons from a Chinese ship, weapons which were bound for Zimbabwe. The union members did this in the face of their own timid government, which to its shame has failed to act decisively in support of the people of Zimbabwe.

In Iran, most people see a battle between ‘reformers’ and hardline fundamentalists, or perhaps are aware that Iranian women and dissident intellectuals are in a constant battle for rights. Few, however, will know of the central role played by Iranian unions – unofficial, independent unions not controlled by the regime. There have been strikes and demonstrations around the country, often mobilising thousands, but the most extraordinary story has been the fight of the Tehran bus workers for union recognition and improved pay and conditions. When those workers brought Iran’s capital to a halt with what amounted to a general strike a couple of years ago, the regime reacted with savage repression. The union leader, Mansour Osanloo, has been repeatedly jailed and has become a symbol, perhaps the symbol, of the struggle for a new society in Iran.

Iraqi unions play a central role in the efforts to create a democratic and secular society in their country and have paid a heavy price for their efforts. There are many decent people in Iraq risking their lives every day, but unions may be unique in their ability to reach across ethnic sectarian divisions and unite Iraqis in the fight for a better future. They are certainly doing what no political party in that country has been able to do.

The same story is repeated everywhere dictators rule: unions, and sometimes unions alone, stand on the front lines against vicious repression. In China and Vietnam, extraordinary large-scale strikes have rocked the foundations of the Stalinist regimes. Unions in Burma, Eritrea and Belarus have been targeted repeatedly by

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the dictators in an effort to crush independent thought and action.

As George Orwell might have noted, the hope – if there is any hope – still lies with the proles.

This is not how the far Left sees it, however. When I've launched an online campaign that focussed attention on violations of workers' rights in places like Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Burma, Iran and Belarus, I am often sent emails by comrades eager to point out that in supporting workers in those countries, I'm somehow supporting George Bush and the neo-conservatives.

The knee-jerk anti-Americanism here is so powerful that sometimes people find themselves defending regimes they know almost nothing about (Eritrea? Belarus?) simply because they heard that America might not be fond of this or that particular dictator. My enemy's enemy must be my friend – and the workers be damned.

On the other hand, if you can find a regime which is backed by Washington and in which trade unionists are denied their rights or even killed, you can get the entire left on your side. What this means in practice is that when right-wing death squads kill trade unionists in Colombia, it gets considerably more attention and support from the left (and unions) than when Ba'athist or al-Qaeda death squads kill trade unionists in Iraq.

Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of trade unionists do not share the view of the totalitarian left.

Global campaigns in support of embattled trade unionists are bigger than ever before. Earlier this year, the International Transport Workers Federation staged a huge global day of action in support of Osanloo and jailed Iranian union leaders. Their affiliates on every continent, in dozens of countries, and in Muslim countries as well, took to the streets to demand freedom for their Iranian brothers and sisters. A delegation of trade unionists from Indonesia travelled to Iran and attempted to meet with their jailed comrades.

Amnesty International is taking an increasing interest in workers' rights, adopting a number of jailed trade unionists as prisoners of conscience. Recently when Amnesty launched an urgent action in support of one of the jailed Iranian unionists, it turned

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out to be their biggest, quickest mobilisation ever. Clearly there is a lot of public support, certainly within the unions, for international solidarity.

All this is going to prove to be particularly difficult for what remains of the totalitarian Left. Defending Mugabe or the Iranian mullahs is getting less and less popular. The heroism of trade unionists who risk their lives (and in many cases, give their lives) in the battle against these dictatorships inspires thousands.

There's an opportunity here to build a great global coalition, anchored in the trade union movement, allied with traditional human rights groups and pro-democracy campaigners, that struggles to create a better world. In that world, the promises made in Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – including 'everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions' – could become a reality.

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