PRESS RELEASE
For immediate release

ILO investigation into labour crimes in Philippines gives hope to trade-union activists

AMSTERDAM, 18 June 2009 - The Workers Assistance Center, a labour-rights NGO in the Philippines, and their European partner coalition of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) welcome the announcement by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that they will send a high-level team to the Philippines to investigate reports of extra-judicial killings, trade-union repression, disappearances and other human rights violations against labour-rights activists.

From 2004 to 2008, a Philippines organization, the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR), recorded 70 killings and two cases of enforced disappearances in the labor sector. The authorities, especially elements from the military and the police force, are widely seen as being behind these killings.

WAC and the CCC hope that increased ILO involvement with the Philippines will also lead to an end to the abuse of the court system to intimidate labour activism in the country. The two coalitions work together on a number of cases where labour-rights activists are being intimidated as a means of discouraging political opposition.

"In the case of Attorney Remigio D. Saladero Jr., who is a prominent opposition figure and labour-rights supporter, the Filipino authorities trumped up murder charges. The ensuing court case that has kept Saladero and 66 co-accused fellow activists busy for months," said Wyger Wentholt of the CCC. "After the judge ruled against the accusations, and less than a week after his release, Saladero and five other labour and human rights activists were again indicted on new murder charges."

The Campaign said that another court case against 33 labour-rights activists and factory workers is also politically motivated and aimed at suppressing labour rights in the country.

The workers, most of whom are women, are officials and members of two labour unions active in the Chong Won and Phils. Jeon garment industries in the province of Cavite. They organized a strike in their factories in September 2006 to protest against the factories' refusal to negotiate for collective bargaining agreements. Two days after their initiation, the peaceful strikes were violently dispersed by police forces and agents of a private security company, who attacked the strikers with clubs and other crude weapons, injuring dozens of the workers.

Despite continued violence, the strikers persisted for another ten months until a group of masked and uniformed men with fire-arms entered the heavily-guarded factory compounds and threatened some of the strikers at gunpoint with death.

Following the violence, both unions sued the local police and the security firm. Around the same time, the police also filed criminal charges against the 33 activists, accusing them of violence on the same

occasion. Although the case against the police is still being investigated by the prosecutor of Cavite province, the same authority issued arrest warrants against the unionized workers in early April.

According to Merly Grafe, a spokeswoman for the accused workers, "the resolution to file criminal charges against us is void of any substance," adding that the prosecutor "failed to distinguish who are the real offenders and who are the real victims."

“It seems that the authorities use the judicial system to stifle dissent,” said Mr. Wentholt of the CCC. "We demand from the Philippines authorities that they respect labour rights, freedom of expression and freedom of association for workers and labour activists, and protect these rights if necessary."

The ILO had requested a green light for the investigation from the Philipines government for over two years.

It is not yet clear when the ILO mission will visit the Philippines.

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Notes to the editor:

see also
www.cleanclothes.org/philippines-more-legal-harassment-of-labour-activists
and
www.cleanclothes.org/philippine-labour-rights-lawyer-faces-new-round-of-false-charges
and
www.wacphilippines.com

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