

European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
Confédération européenne des syndicats (CES)



Education International
Internationale de l'Education
Internacional de la Educación



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69 trade union leaders to be tried for 'terrorism'

Prime Minister,

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Education International (EI), the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), the European Federation of Public Sector Unions (EPSU) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) are writing to you to protest a flagrant violation of trade union rights in your country. On Thursday 4 October, no less than 69 members of the Confederation of Public Sector Workers' Unions (KESK) will stand trial in Ankara, while they have only been engaging in fully legitimate trade union work.

The international trade union movement has been observing the alarming situation in your country with increasing incredulity. In general, anyone involved in opposition to your ruling Justice and Development (AK) party is facing harsh repression. At least 80 journalists are currently in jail, many of them Kurds accused of PKK membership. The intolerance extends to students, 2,824 of who are in prison, almost a quarter of them charged with "membership of a terrorist group" for calling for free education and other "sins".

Turkey's trade union movement has not fared better. In June this year, a strike called for by aviation employees' union HAVA-Is was banned. Unions affiliated to national union centre TURK-Is, which just like KESK is affiliated to the ETUC and the ITUC, have been harassed with financial audits. Members of national union centre DISK, also an ETUC and ITUC affiliate, have been arrested and remain in prison. The court case against KESK, which has been dragging on for years without ever yielding any real evidence

against the accused, is even more emblematic, as 69 of its members – most of them belonging to Egitim Sen, KESK's biggest affiliate, which is also affiliated to the ETUCE and EI – are facing terrorism charges because they stood up for workers' rights.

The 4 October court hearings are the culmination of a highly worrying sequence of events:

- On 28 November 2011, 25 trade union colleagues, including KESK President Lami Özgen and other leaders who are based in the union's headquarters in Ankara, were sentenced to six years and three months in conclusion of a case which had been filed against them in 2009. The appeal which was filed against this court ruling is still pending.
- On 13 February 2012, 15 KESK leaders including Women's Secretary Canan Calagan were detained after raids on their houses and workplaces. All of them were women. Six of them were released after four days, nine of them are still awaiting trial. They are among those who will stand trial on 4 October.
- On 25 June 2012, a total of 50 trade union leaders, including KESK President Lami Özgen and a number of leaders of KESK affiliates, were taken into custody. After three days, 22 of them (including M. Özgen) were released, the other 28 were arrested.
- On 2 September 2012, three KESK members were sentenced to 1.5 year in jail because they had attended a press conference on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2005. The appeal against this outrageous decision was rejected.

Unfortunately, the list of similar cases of judicial harassment is infinitely longer. In all of these cases, the evidence held against those who stand trial is at best flimsy: participation in trade union events and activities (of which photos and videos are being kept on file as "proof"), attending demonstrations or press conferences, participating in strikes, printouts of anonymous reports, illegally tapped phone calls that merely concern trade union-related issues etc..

In the meantime, and in spite of promises on behalf of your government, Turkey continues to fail to bring its labour legislation in line with international standards as set out by the European Union (EU) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The "Law on Meetings and Demonstrations" is being used to curtail your citizen's freedom of expression. The Turkish Counter-terrorism Act provides penalties for offenses such as "disrupting the unity and territorial integrity of the state" or "offense against the government", and hundreds of people have been arrested on the basis of statements from anonymous witnesses. The much-contested Law Nr. 4688 (on Public Servants' Trade Unions) has finally, after years of insistence from the ILO, been amended on a couple of points; however, these amendments do not address the core of the issues and do, on the contrary, actually narrow down public sector workers' rights further. As a matter of fact, 200,000 of them remain excluded from collective bargaining due to outdated legislation, and 300,000 of them still have no access to union membership.

Furthermore, the courts who are responsible for law enforcement continue to issue rulings that run counter of international agreements to which Turkey is a signatory, including the European Convention on Human Rights as well as ILO Conventions 87 and 98.

Prime Minister, the international labour movement is extremely worried by these developments, and very concerned about its colleagues in Turkey. Of all the 69 KESK leaders who stand trial next Thursday 4 October, none has ever been involved in any action related to or resulting in any violence whatsoever. They are all committed trade unionists who were merely engaging in legitimate trade union work, standing up for the rights of Turkish public sector workers, including those belonging to minority groups. Under no circumstance can involvement in trade union activities be labelled as an act of terrorism or support to terrorism, which seems to be a deliberate strategy from your government to bring the union movement in Turkey to its knees, as part of an overall attempt to muzzle the entire opposition.

We strongly urge your government to revise this strategy, to allow for a democratic opposition to function in a climate free of fear from harassment and persecution, and to refrain from attempting to destroy trade unions in Turkey. All of our 69 colleagues who stand trial on 4 October are there on trumped-up charges and they should all go free. Trade union rights are human rights!



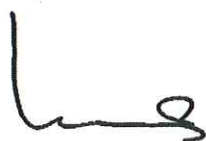
Bernadette Ségol
ETUC General Secretary



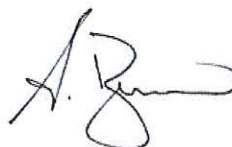
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