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Twenty two unionists remain in detention

Prime Minister,

On 29 May 2009, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), together with Education International (EI), wrote to you to strongly protest against the interventions by the Turkish police that had occurred just the day before against their respective affiliates, the Confederation of Public Employees' Unions (KESK), as well as teachers' union Egitim Sen, which is in its turn affiliated to KESK.

The ITUC is therefore seriously disappointed upon having to note that 14 of the people who were arrested after the above-mentioned police invasion of the KESK headquarters in Ankara and of KESK's local branch offices in Istanbul, Izmir, Van and Manisa remain in custody to date. They are furthermore not the only Turkish unionists behind bars at the moment, as the total number of detained KESK and Egitim-Sen members and leaders, including those arrested on previous occasions, currently amounts to no less than 22.

We are furthermore gravely worried because of concerns over the health of one of the detainees, former Egitim-Sen's Women's Secretary **Elif Akgül Ates**. According to our latest information, living conditions in the prison where the unionists are being held are bad, and just like at the time we issued our previous protest, the defence lawyers still don't have access to their files.

Another worrying element is the fact that these developments take place against the background of the upcoming negotiations, which will start on 15 August, on working conditions for public sector workers, which the Turkish authorities refer to as "collective consultative talks", which in itself is in breach of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 98 on collective bargaining. Turkey ratified this Convention in 1952.

It therefore looks as if your government is only pressuring the unions in order to weaken their negotiating position. As this runs counter to Conventions 87 on freedom of association and 98 on collective bargaining, and furthermore leaves no doubt concerning your government's attitude towards Turkey's public sector workers and their interests, the ITUC can only qualify it as totally unacceptable.

We therefore firmly reiterate, Prime Minister, that the rights of workers' organizations can only be exercised in a climate that is free of violence, reprisals or threats of any kind against their leaders and membership, and that it is up to governments to ensure that this principle is respected. We once again urge you to instruct the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all the arrested KESK and Egitim Sen leaders and members, to ensure Ms. Elif Akgül Ates receives medical attention, and to assume a more constructive approach towards the unions and their work in general. If not, the ITUC will have no other option than to make sure this is taken into account in the framework of your country's EU accession talks.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Ryder
General Secretary