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### 1. Middle East and North Africa: Defence of Trade Unionists

Education International – the global union for teachers and education workers – and the TUC – are focusing heavily on the defence of trade unionists in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA). We encourage UCU members to support some of their latest 'Urgent Action Appeals', particularly on Iran, Bahrain and Egypt.

#### Iran: Stop the execution of academic Abdolreza Ghanbari

The most urgent is the case of Abdolreza Ghanbari, a university lecturer in Persian literature, who is at risk of execution by the Iranian authorities. Detained since April 2010, his death sentence was confirmed on 28 February. This means Ghanbari could be executed any time now.

Click on the link here: [Iran: Stop the execution of Abdolreza Ghanbari](#) to send a message in support of the EI and Labourstart campaign calling on the Iranian authorities to:

- drop the charges against Abdolreza Ghanbari and revoke the death-sentence
- drop all charges against all detained trade unionists and release them immediately
- comply with the international labour standards and respect the rights of Iranian workers to freedom of association, assembly and expression.

#### Bahrain: Free jailed trade union leader Mahdi 'Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb

Attacks on teacher trade unionists and student activists are also a serious problem in Bahrain. Since the end of 2011 UCU has been calling for the Bahraini authorities to review charges and convictions and commute sentences of all teachers, teacher unionists and students charged with offences related to exercise of freedom of speech and right to assemble.

The latest demand is for the Bahraini authorities to immediately release on bail Mahdi 'Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb, President of the Bahraini Teachers Association (BTA), whose health condition is deteriorating.

Click on a link here to send a message to the Bahraini government calling for them to release Mahdi:

[http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show\\_campaign.cgi?c=1247&src=ei](http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show_campaign.cgi?c=1247&src=ei)

Activists may also be interested in a new MENA Solidarity Network briefing on Bahrain: <http://menasolidaritynetwork.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/bahrain-bulletin-march20124.pdf>

## **Egypt: Drop the charges against Kamal Abbas**

UCU has also been at the forefront of the campaign to support the new independent trade unions in Egypt, including within the education sector. The Egyptian authorities, however, are continuing to use Mubarak-era laws to clamp down on independent trade unions and other civil society organisations.

For example, at the end of February, Kamal Abbas, the General Coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) in Egypt was sentenced, in absentia, to six months for "insulting a public official", at an international conference in 2011. Kamal is an inspiring labour rights activist and a leading figure in building an independent and democratic union movement in Egypt.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is calling on the Egyptian government to immediately withdraw all charges against Kamal, annul the sentence, and to refrain for further harassment of trade union activists. Click on [http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show\\_campaign.cgi?c=1287](http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show_campaign.cgi?c=1287) to send your own message to the Egyptian authorities.

Separately, UCU has written to the Egyptian Ambassador in London with our concerns about Kamal's sentence. Click here to read the letter:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/j/g/2-Mar-12\\_HE\\_Mr\\_Hatem\\_Seif\\_El\\_Nasr\\_\\_Egyptian\\_Embassy\\_London\\_re\\_Sentencing\\_of\\_Kamal\\_Abbas\\_TH.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/j/g/2-Mar-12_HE_Mr_Hatem_Seif_El_Nasr__Egyptian_Embassy_London_re_Sentencing_of_Kamal_Abbas_TH.pdf)

## **2. Latin America: a focus on Colombia**

International solidarity can play a key role in the release of imprisoned trade unionists and academics. For example, international pressure from UCU and Justice for Colombia was vital in helping to secure the release of Dr Miguel Beltran in June 2011. We also have some good news to report about another Colombian political prisoner, Lilianny Obando.

### **Colombian academic released after international pressure**

On 1 March Lilianny Obando, a Colombian trade unionist, academic and human rights defender was freed after being detained for more than 3 years and 6 months in jail. Once again, international pressure played a key role in her release.

Read more here: <http://www.justiceforcolombia.org/news/article/1195/lilianny-obando-is-free>

Listen to Lilianny here: <http://strongerunions.org/2012/03/09/colombian-trade-unionist-freed-from-jail-says-see-you-got-me-out/>

## UK/Colombia higher education partnerships

Earlier this year UCU wrote to the UK Minister for Universities and Science regarding new memorandums of understanding between UK HEIs and the Colombian Ministry of Science. While UCU is in favour of free and open collaboration between academics and universities internationally, we called on the Minister and UK HEIs to seize the opportunity offered by such links to push for the ending of repressive action against academic and other trade unionists in Colombia. To read our letter and the Minister's response, click on the links below:

Letter from General Secretary Sally Hunt to the Rt Hon David Willetts MP:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/8/6/Letter\\_from\\_Sally\\_Hunt\\_to\\_the\\_Rt\\_Hon\\_David\\_Willetts\\_re\\_new\\_memos\\_of\\_understanding\\_between\\_UK\\_HEIs\\_an.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/8/6/Letter_from_Sally_Hunt_to_the_Rt_Hon_David_Willetts_re_new_memos_of_understanding_between_UK_HEIs_an.pdf)

Letter from the Rt Hon David Willetts MP to Sally Hunt:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/k/g/Letter\\_from\\_the\\_Rt\\_Hon\\_David\\_Willetts\\_MP\\_to\\_Sally\\_Hunt\\_re\\_new\\_memos\\_of\\_understanding\\_between\\_UK\\_HEIs.PDF](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/k/g/Letter_from_the_Rt_Hon_David_Willetts_MP_to_Sally_Hunt_re_new_memos_of_understanding_between_UK_HEIs.PDF)

## JfC calls for peace in Colombia

Human rights violations in Colombia take place in the context of an armed conflict, and large sectors of Colombian civil society, including our trade union colleagues, are calling for a peace process to help end the abuses. That is why Justice for Colombia (JfC) is promoting a new Peace Campaign.

An Early Day Motion, **EDM 2276 HUMAN RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA** has been tabled in the UK Parliament calling on the UK Government to encourage the parties to the conflict to enter into dialogue. Please **CLICK HERE TO WRITE TO YOUR MP** asking them to add their name.

## 3. UCU President Terry Hoad in Venezuela

When I signed up to join a trade union delegation for a ten day visit to Venezuela, organized by the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (to which UCU is affiliated), I knew I would be having my first experience of a country undergoing rapid and transforming political and social change. I could not have known however, just what an eye-opening experience it would be for me.

I certainly could not have anticipated, nor could the dozen other members of the delegation (including representatives of Unite, CWU, NUT and RMT), that on the day after our arrival in Caracas there would be an opportunity to be part of a large rally to welcome President Chávez back from his second bout of surgery in Cuba. His extended appearance on the balcony of the Presidential Palace, addressing the crowd (and singing to them !) confidently, happily and with an evident easy rapport, and showing no obvious signs of physical weakness, was itself a moving experience. But so too was the unmistakably genuine enthusiasm and delight of the people who had turned out in large numbers to welcome him.

A busy programme in the following days gave the delegation a good chance to see at first hand some of the tangible advances made in Venezuela in such areas as housing, health care, and education. We saw, for example, a large new housing development for those currently lacking adequate homes; the Latin American School of Medicine, training

Venezuelan and foreign students to become doctors in their communities; an impressive (though apparently not fully utilized) children's heart hospital; and the El Sistema musical centre, training teachers to promote music study among children and young people in Venezuelan communities for the broader educational and socializing benefits of ensemble playing, as much as or more than with the aim of producing top class instrumentalists. All these facilities and services were without charge.

The delegation participated in a series of meetings with government representatives (including the vice minister for foreign affairs), with academics, with community leaders, with trade unionists and others, and attended a couple of lively trade union rallies (one of which, with around 400 participants, had been arranged specially to mark our visit). It would be fair to say that we were overwhelmed with the warmth and openness of the welcome we received, and the evident value that our Venezuelan colleagues attached to the solidarity that our visit represented. In return, we came away both better informed about the situation in Venezuela, and with a strong impression of the very different – and in many ways much more appealing – approach to political and social issues in that country compared to what we are experiencing in the UK. No doubt what is being done in Venezuela could not be simply replicated here, for a number of reasons, but the underlying principles of seeking to provide decently for the whole population and of allowing an effective voice to every citizen present a real challenge to the more unequal and divisive treatment offered by our government.

## **4. Resources**

### **Challenging neo-liberal austerity in Europe**

UCU is affiliated to the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), which is the name for the European region of Education International (EI). The ETUCE has launched a new action and campaign framework on the economic crisis. The website includes recent statements and actions by the ETUCE and our sister trade unions in Europe.

For more details click on: [http://etuce.homestead.com/ETUCE\\_Crisis.html](http://etuce.homestead.com/ETUCE_Crisis.html)

### **Make Burma meet benchmarks before dropping sanctions, says ITUC**

Despite some positive signs of change in Burma, forced labour and violations of human rights, particularly of ethnic minorities, remain rampant. A new briefing by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) argues that sanctions should only be lifted if the government of Burma frees all political prisoners, eliminates forced labour and allows independent and democratic trade unions. Click on:

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-20644-f0.cfm> for the ITUC report.

In light of the ITUC report UCU wrote to the Foreign Secretary William Hague calling for the British government to retain its current position on economic sanctions. Read the letter here:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/f/I/Letter\\_to\\_Rt\\_Hon\\_William\\_Hague\\_Foreign\\_Secretary\\_re\\_trade\\_union\\_benchmarks\\_for\\_lifting\\_sanctions\\_aga.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/f/I/Letter_to_Rt_Hon_William_Hague_Foreign_Secretary_re_trade_union_benchmarks_for_lifting_sanctions_aga.pdf)

## **5. Dates for your diary**

### **Amnesty International UK conference and AGM – 13-15 April 2012, Manchester**

The keynote speaker at this year's Amnesty International conference will be the Bahraini activist Maryam Al-Khawaja. For details of the programme click on:

<http://www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=10159>

### **Trade union conference on Palestine – 21 April, London**

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign is organising a major trade union conference in London on 21 April. The conference is open to trade unions affiliated to the PSC (which includes UCU) and will discuss how to take forward union campaigning on Palestine. UCU branches and regions are also able to send a delegate.

For more details of the conference, including how to register, click on:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/1/f/PSC\\_Trade\\_Union\\_Conference\\_on\\_Palestine\\_21\\_April\\_2012\\_Registration\\_Form.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/1/f/PSC_Trade_Union_Conference_on_Palestine_21_April_2012_Registration_Form.pdf)

### **UCU Congress – 8-10 June, Manchester**

UCU's Annual Congress 2012 will be held in Manchester Central Convention Centre from Friday 8 June – Sunday 10 June 2012. International solidarity will be one of the many themes to be discussed at the Congress. For more details, click on:

<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5860>.

If you have any comments or feedback on International News, please send to Diana Hendry at [dhendry@ucu.org.uk](mailto:dhendry@ucu.org.uk).