

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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IRAN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR RELEASE OF BUS WORKERS

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to release immediately hundreds of Tehran bus workers who were detained last week apparently to pre-empt threatened strike action. Although some of the workers have been released, hundreds are reported still to be detained without charge or trial at Tehran's Evin Prison.

The arrests began after the executive committee of the Union of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, which represents workers employed by the United Bus Company of Tehran (Sharekat-e Vahed), called for a strike on 28 January in support of various union demands. These included the release of the union's leader, Mansour Ossanlu, who has been detained without charge or trial since 22 December 2005, the introduction of collective bargaining and for the bus company, which is run by the Tehran local authority, to grant a pay increase.

According to reports, leaflets announcing the strike were widely distributed in Tehran on 24 January 2006 and one member of the union's executive, Hosseini Tabar, was detained for about four hours while helping with this. Next day, six other members of the union's executive committee - Ebrahim Madadi, Mansour Hayat Ghaybi, Seyed Davoud Razavi, Sa'id Torabian, Ali Zad Hossein and Gholamreza Mirza'i - were summoned to appear at the Public Prosecutor's Office in Tehran. When they did so on 26 January, they were arrested when they refused to call off the strike and taken to Evin Prison. Interviewed by the official IRNA news agency, the Mayor of Tehran reportedly described the union as illegal and said that the authorities would not permit the strike to go ahead. The United Bus Company's management threatened workers who supported the strike call with the loss of their jobs.

The authorities then carried out mass arrests of union members on 27 January, the eve of the threatened strike, detaining some workers as they completed their shifts and others at their homes. Those detained included the wives of Mansour Hayat Ghaybi and Seyed Davoud Razavi, and a third union leader, Yaghub Salimi.

Security forces raided Yaghub Salimi's home after he was interviewed by a Berlin-based radio station but he was absent at the time. However, his wife and their children were beaten and detained. Mahdiye Salimi, aged 12, described her ordeal later in a radio interview. She said that three women and five children had been arrested, that they had been beaten and that her two-year-old sister had been injured when she was pushed roughly into a security forces vehicle, and that her mother had been kicked in the chest. Mahdiye Salimi was released, together with her mother and young sister, when Yaghub Salimi gave himself up to the security forces. The other children and women who were detained are also now reported to have been released.

Hundreds more union members are reported to have been arrested on the day of the strike, 28 January, with most of these also being taken to Evin Prison. Workers were reportedly beaten with batons, punched, kicked and threatened to force them to work, including by members of the volunteer Basij force who had apparently been brought in replace striking workers, and security forces reportedly used tear gas and fired shots into the air. Further arrests were reported on 29 and 30 January.

Currently, only some 30 to 50 of those detained are reported to have been released, apparently after they agreed under duress to sign guarantees that they would not participate in strikes or other protest actions. As many as 500 others are believed still to be held at Evin Prison without access to lawyers or family. Some are reported to have started a hunger strike on 29 January to protest their detention. Another strike has been called for 2 February 2006.

Amnesty International is concerned that those detained are being held solely on account of their peaceful activities as trade unionists and as such are prisoners of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally. The right to form and join trade unions is well-established in international law, notably under Article 22 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Iran is a state party to both of these treaties.

Iran is also a member of the International Labour Organization and bound by its requirements, including the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association's ruling that it is not legitimate for states to restrict the right to strike during disputes concerning workers' occupational and economic interests. States can restrict the right to strike only in cases of acute national emergency (and then for a limited period only), which is clearly not the situation which prevails in Tehran. Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining are core principles of the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which requires all state parties "to respect, to promote and to realize, in good faith and in accordance with the Constitution, the principles [of the Declaration]."

Background Information

The union representing Tehran's bus workers was banned after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, then reactivated in 2004 although it is not legally-recognized. On 22 December 2005, police arrested 12 of the union's leaders at their homes but quickly released four of them. Further union members were arrested on 25 December while staging a bus strike in Tehran to call for the release of their colleagues but they and all those arrested earlier were released in the following days with the exception of Mansour Ossanlu. He continues to be detained and to be denied access to a lawyer, and is said possibly to be facing serious charges of having contact with exiled opposition groups and instigating armed revolt.

Seven union members, including Mansour Hayat Ghaybi; Ebrahim Madadi; Reza Tarazi; Gholamreza Mirza'i; Abbas Najand Kouhi and Ali Zad Hossein, were reportedly summoned to appear before a Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 1 January 2006 to face public order charges but their trial was postponed when other union members protested outside the court.

On 7 January, five drivers were reportedly detained when bus company workers staged another strike but later freed.

For further information please see Urgent Action AI Index MDE 13/002/2006 which can be found at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130022006?open&of=ENG-IRN>

