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Egyptian authorities must allow peaceful protest and the right to strike

The Egyptian authorities must abolish a recent law criminalizing peaceful protests and strikes, Amnesty International said ahead of tomorrow's planned protests for International Workers' Day in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

The organization called for workers' rights to be protected, as protesters gather to demand the lifting of restrictions on forming trade unions, the introduction of an adequate minimum wage and the reinstatement of co-workers dismissed for their trade union activities.

"The authorities must seize this historic moment of reform in Egypt and commit to protecting workers' rights in the country," said Amnesty International.

"The protesters' legitimate demands are not new, but this is a fresh opportunity for the Egyptian authorities to abide by their obligations and act positively on them".

"A first step would be to scrap the law banning strikes and to allow independent trade unions to operate freely."

Sunday's gathering is being planned by trade unions, political parties and women's groups, human rights organizations as well as the "popular committees for the defence of the revolution".

Among the triggers of the 25 January uprising in Egypt that led to the fall of former President Mubarak were calls for an end to poverty, and demands for social justice and dignity.

During 2010, thousands of protests, strikes and sit-ins were staged by Egyptian workers in both the public and private sectors, protesting the rising cost of living and demanding better wages and working conditions.

But a new law which entered into force on 12 April this year criminalizes demonstrations and strikes and places protesters at risk of imprisonment and heavy fines.

Law No. 34 of 2011 stipulates a prison sentence and a fine of up to 50,000 Egyptian Pounds (about US\$8,400) for anyone who takes part in or encourages others to join a sit-in or any other activity that prevents, delays or disrupts the work of public institutions or public authorities.

If there is any violence or if protests damage public and private property, lead to the "destruction of means of production" or cause harm to "national unity and public security and order", the fine rises to 500,000 Egyptian Pounds (about US\$84,000) with at least a year's imprisonment.

Amnesty International said that such vaguely worded provisions were in breach of international law. The right to strike is guaranteed under Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to which Egypt is a state party.

The organization said that the Egyptian authorities also have a duty to uphold the right to peaceful assembly under Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

"The adoption of this law at a moment where people are seeking to realize their demands for more human rights and dignity and preserve the achievement of the uprising is a major setback," said Amnesty International.

"The law stands at odds with the demands of many Egyptians and Egypt's international human rights obligation and must be repealed immediately."

In its *Egypt: Human Rights Agenda for Change*, Amnesty International calls for workers' rights to be upheld.