

Open letter from Reza Shahabi ; member of the Board of Directors of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (VAHED).

Message to trade unionists independent of governments and employers attending the International Labour Organization's 2023 Conference

June 1, 2023

Warm greetings,

I am Reza Shahabi, a bus driver in Iran, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (VAHED). I send you my greetings from behind the walls and bars of Evin prison.

Since 2004, that is since the reopening of our Syndicate, my colleagues and I have been arrested, fired, imprisoned, and tortured many times.

From 2010 to 2017 because of:

- Our union activities
- Fighting in defence of workers' rights
- Our protests against the miserable level of wages, and for a better life such as for workers' access to means of subsistence, housing, healthcare, education...

... We were subjected to the most severe repressions with false accusations and sham legal cases. I personally was in prison during this time and there I underwent neck and back surgery due to beatings and torture.

After the 2022 International Workers' Day, because of our union meetings with our colleagues and meetings with other trade union activists including pensioners, writers, women, and students, as well as a meeting with two French teacher trade unionists in Tehran, we were arrested and, as in the past, we had to deal with false, fictitious and misleading accusations.

The following activists are either still in prison, or awaiting cruel sentences:

- Reza Shahabi, Davood Razavi, Hassan Saeidi of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Workers' Syndicate,
- Keyvan Mohtadi and Anisha Asadollahi, English teachers and translators for the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Workers' Syndicate,
- Reyhane Ansarinejad, union activist,
- Zhaleh Roohzad, retired teacher-activist,
- Rasoul Bodaghi, Jafar Ebrahimi, Mohammad Habibi, Masoud Nikkhah, Eskander Lotfi, Sha'ban Mohammadi, members of Teachers' Trade Associations.

- As well as a number of sympathizers and children of workers. What's more, while being in jail for over a year now, new charges have been laid against Hassan Saeidi, Keyvan Mohtadi and myself on May 29, 2023.

Dear comrades and colleagues:

Since its inception, the ruling establishment in our country has resorted to open and brutal repression against the entire working class. Its first measure was to remove the protection of trade unions and other independent labour organizations from the law. They replaced them with state-sponsored organizations such as the Workers' House, the Islamic Labour Councils and the Assembly of Workers' Representatives. All of these organizations operate under the command and direction of the government. They act as secret police in factories and workplaces, ensuring that workers' protests go unheard. They identify protesting workers and report them to the security forces or to the management.

For example, in the Tehran Bus Company, the Islamic labour councils identified and reported the protesting drivers to the company's security and the security council of the province, and on the orders of the security forces, they fired the right-seeking and protesting workers in fake meetings of the "Labour Discipline Committee". We were among the dismissed workers.

We were dismissed, arrested and imprisoned by the security forces for having organized an independent trade union, in accordance with ILO conventions 87 and 98, and because of our demands for a just life, the implementation of new classifications and pay scales, fair recognition of the arduous nature of our jobs, and so on. We were dismissed on the basis of false reports from members of the Islamic Labour Council and the Workers' House. And now we are imprisoned again for the same reasons.

Dear friends,

These so-called Iranian trade unionists are attending the International Labour Conference once again. They are not the legitimate representatives of the workers of Iran. They were not chosen through a democratic process free from interference by the security forces and employers.

These so-called trade unionists do whatever the employer and the government ask of them. And they do so solely in their own interests, to take advantage of the privileges and facilities made available to them by those in power.

They have never been on the side of the workers; on the contrary, they have constantly acted against their interests. It's no secret that they are an instrument in the hands of employers and the government's security apparatus. They are a "signature machine" to sanction dismissals of workers and justify repressive legal proceedings against working-class activists. Nonetheless, the pain of the workers in

Iran is great and beyond many people's patience. Our concluding message to you, our esteemed colleagues, is:

The Iranian government has signed up to the ILO international conventions and covenants, and by virtue of their ILO membership this includes the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Right at Work. Not only does the Iranian government fail to apply these conventions, it is also setting up harsher and more inhumane conditions for all employees, men and women alike, in all workshops, schools, hospitals, temporary employment agencies and public and private sector companies.

What's more, the government's speculative and rentier policy has created galloping inflation, resulting in low purchasing power for workers. And even when they have a job, wage labourers are unable to pay for certain monthly expenses, such as housing rent. The fear of dismissal, imprisonment and whipping, in case of protesting, adds to these inhumane conditions.

Not only do workers of Iran have no voice in world summits like ILO conferences, they also find that important positions in these institutions are held by the very people responsible for their misery.

The Iranian authorities do not allow the formation of trade unions and independent organizations. They have made the right to strike a crime against state security. It does not allow the election of workers' representatives within a democratic framework. Every time the voices of workers are raised through protests, the authorities respond with dismissal, imprisonment, whipping and torture. This same security apparatus sends its own representatives, labelled as workers' delegates, to international forums, including ILO meetings.

Is it possible for the same person to remain the General Secretary of the "Workers' House" for almost three decades, and at the same time being a member of parliament for 6 terms? And after all this while the existence of rigid and selective electoral filters is common knowledge. And all this time, the Parliament has taken countless decisions against workers.

What about the members of the Workers' House and Islamic Labour Councils who played a direct role in the repression of the general assembly of Tehran bus company's workers? They consider it their honour and duty to serve those in power. But how is it possible to claim that they can simultaneously represent the workers of Iran? How can we trust these people who could potentially even be considered for election to the ILO Governing Body, its committees or the working groups?

I urge all independent trade union representatives at the ILO Conference to take the demands of the oppressed and deprived workers of Iran, who are trying to survive in unequal conditions with minimal possibilities for actions, into their consideration.

In recent times, the world has clearly witnessed dramatic events concerning the oppression, exploitation and use of endless violence against workers, young people,

women and minorities in this country. Repeated accusations have been levelled against us, such as that of undermining state security and other false accusations. However, it is not possible to wash the bloody hands of these people.

We ask you to stand by the workers of Iran:

- Do not accept these security agents, who have been sent to the International Labour Organization's Conference as representatives of Iranian workers, in the Governing Body of the ILO or in any committees or working groups in the ILO.
- Demand their rejection.
- Openly call for the release of all imprisoned workers and trade unionists in Iran.
- Demand full implementation of International Labour Organization conventions in Iran, notably those concerning the right to strike, to organize, to bargain collectively and to freedom of association.

In solidarity,

Reza Shahabi,

Evin Prison, Tehran

June 2, 2023