

Monday, 7 February 2011

Australian unions join global day of action for democracy and human rights in Egypt

Australian unions will tomorrow take part in an international day of action for democracy in Egypt by calling on the Egyptian Government to respect human rights, including free trade unions.

Unions will deliver a letter to the Egyptian Government's representatives in Australia conveying their unwavering support for democratic change in Egypt, and condemning the use of violence against democracy protesters.

The ACTU also demands that the Egyptian Government recognises the emergence within the democratic movement of recent days of a new, independent trade union body in Egypt.

This is a welcome development in a country where workers' rights have long been repressed by the existence of a single, government-controlled union federation, which has been responsible for stifling decent jobs, a living minimum wage, social protection and freedom of association.

Around the world, unions are mobilising on 8 February to increase the pressure on the Mubarak regime to agree to a peaceful handover to a new transitional government in Egypt.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said Australian unions wished the workers of Egypt well in their fight for democracy after three decades of autocratic government by Hosni Mubarak. She called on the Australian Government to exert more direct pressure on Egypt to recognise the wishes of the people.

"Independent unions in Egypt have set the stage for these democracy protests over the last decade," Ms Kearney said. "As the independent unions have grown in confidence defying the autocratic regime's dictates they have created the model for protest action and given confidence to the young democracy activists in Tahrir Square.

"Worsening unemployment, particularly among young people, has combined with resentment at the lack of political freedom to provoke a popular uprising against the regime.

"Now people across Egypt have risen in massive numbers to demand change, for democracy, justice, and fundamental rights and to insist on the end of the Mubarak regime.

"The ACTU salutes its Egyptian colleagues in independent trade unions, who have a critical role to play in putting Egypt on the path to genuine democracy and in ensuring social and economic justice for the Egyptian people."

Ms Kearney said Australian unions unreservedly condemned the actions of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which acts as an arm of the regime to prevent freedom of association and repress democratic free trade unionism in Egypt.

"It does not legitimately speak for Egyptian workers," she said. "Its activity in recent days has exposed their hostility to democracy and human rights. This is abhorrent to the principles of trade unionism."

Ms Kearney said Egypt relied on Australia for imports of food and raw materials, and the Australian Government should use its trade influence to exert more pressure on Egypt to change.

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