
**ILO Committee on the Application
of Standards**

Intervention by Amanda Brown, NUT

June 2009

Ethiopia: government attacks on teachers' union

The Committee of Experts has set out in detail the series of legal provisions and administrative requirements by which the Ethiopian government restricts the trade union rights of public servants and other groups of employees. Despite the criticisms of the Ethiopian government over many years, those restrictions are still in place, denying many workers the right to form organizations without obstruction, and preventing them from carrying on their legitimate trade union activities.

This Committee has heard today what this has meant in human terms for teachers in Ethiopia. We've heard of the intimidation and harassment, mistreatment and torture, of the deadly penalties suffered by those who seek to defend their rights.

And this state harassment is backed up by a web of legal and administrative requirements which have been developed, placing a new obstacle in the way of the teachers' association, every time it changes path to try to find a way through to free and unrestricted activities. As if it is playing a game of chess, the Government moves to close off each route to freedom of association.

Firstly the ETA was forced by court order to give up its name, property and check off arrangements to a government-backed organisation. It was forced to reinvent itself in order to seek registration under a new name of National Teachers Association.

Secondly, as a matter of administrative proclamation, the Ethiopian teachers' organization must be officially registered with the government authorities before it can

operate legally. This requirement is in itself a breach of the Government's obligations under Convention 87.

But more than that, before that registration will be accepted by the Ministry of Justice, it is required that the employer accepts and agrees to the registration. So when the National Teachers Association has sought registration with the Ministry of Justice, that request has been referred to the Ministry of Education for an opinion.

I should also say that my own organization, the UK National Union of Teachers, was so concerned at the plight of teachers in Ethiopia, and the inability of the NTA to be recognized by the Government, that my General Secretary raised the matter with our own government. The UK government received an assurance from the Ethiopian prime minister that the Ethiopian government would of course recognize and register a new teachers' organization.

However despite that assurance and the report of the Experts after a direct contact mission last year, instead of removing the obstruction to freedom of association, the government decided to turn it into a barricade. Since the date of the Experts' report, the authorities have refused registration to the independent teachers association, leaving it unable to operate lawfully. Instead of meeting its obligations under Convention 87, the government maintains its programme of exclusion of the union from its proper role in Ethiopian civil society.

Chairperson, by a series of bureaucratic manoeuvres and legal sleights of hand, some 120,000 Ethiopian teachers have been prevented from exercising their rights to organize within an independent trade union. Not only this, but the chilling effect must spread far wider, discouraging all public servants from striving to form and join independent workers' organizations.

And still the horrors of arrest, detention and torture that you have heard from my friend Brother Gomoraw Kassa continue. The Ethiopian government joins the list of governments who seek to disguise their intimidation and brutality under the pretext of combating subversion. The Government says that these same teachers who have sought legal registration, who have gone to court to defend the

name and legitimacy of their organization, and who still now seek the protection of Ethiopian law, who have sought to abide by every requirement that has been thrown at them, they say that these teachers are subversives seeking to undermine the government.

This is not a new case for this Committee. The Committee of experts urged the Government to conduct a full and independent inquiry, without delay, into the allegations of mistreatment and torture. The Committee noted that there should be an immediate judicial inquiry to prevent the risk of de facto impunity. No such inquiry has been conducted, and there is no known plan for such an inquiry. It is critical that the restrictions on freedom of association are removed as a matter of urgency and that the harassment and persecution of trade unionists is ended.

We believe that it is necessary that a timetabled programme of action is set out so that the NTA is able to exercise its legitimate rights to organize and defend its occupational interests. The workers group has no confidence that any progress will be made without determined and detailed requirement for action being set by this august committee, and no confidence that teacher trade unionists will be safe in exercising their rights under the ILO conventions until that is done.

- Amanda Brown was the TUC delegate on the Committee on the Application of Standards at the 2009 International Labour Conference. She is the legal officer of the National Union of Teachers (NUT).