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Council of Global Unions Statement on the Suppression of Democratic Rights in the Philippines

The Council of Global Unions (CGU) – representing more than 200 million workers from across the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Global Union Federations including the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD join Philippine trade unions in condemning the Philippine government’s continued attacks on democratic institutions and its relentless suppression of the democratic rights of Filipino workers.

We register alarm over the passage of Republic Act 11479 or the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020. This law could easily be abused. While human security, the supposed aim of the anti-Terrorism Act, is a real concern, the same should not be pursued through undemocratic means. The Act undermines due process as it empowers the Executive Branch to identify “terrorist” individuals or groups and to conduct warrantless arrests for at least fourteen (14) days. With its deplorable record of human rights violations in the past four years in its “war on drugs”, the Philippines does not need another legal instrument to legitimize illegal arrests and extrajudicial killings.

We support the initiative of NAGKAISA (United Coalition), Federation of Free Workers (FFW), Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), SENTRO and other labor groups to petition the Philippine Supreme Court to stop the implementation of this law “for being inimical to workers’ interests and for being unconstitutional”.

In the ITUC Report of 2020, the Philippines is included in the top 10 most dangerous countries in the world for workers. The Philippine trade union movement can attest to the alarming level of repression of workers’ rights in the country. There have been too many unexplained disappearances and killings of labor leaders and members. Moreover, in its attempt to silence dissident labor leaders, the Philippine government has resorted to ‘red-tagging’. This tactic has not only jeopardized the lives of labor leaders, it has also undermined efforts of trade unions to hold employers and government accountable for anti-labor actions since these efforts are always maliciously exposed as bearing ‘communist sentiments’.

The United Nations and the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations have on several occasions expressed disquiet about government’s use of anti-terror and other public order legislation to suppress human rights. The Anti-terrorism Act is a violation of ILO Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and other international human rights obligations.

In the context of COVID-19, the situation of Filipino workers has worsened. The Philippine government itself projects that some 10 million Filipinos will be out of jobs by the end of this year. Hundreds of thousands of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are also expected to return to the country due to job loss.

The health pandemic has also been used as a pretext by many employers to cut costs and further labor flexibility. The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has bolstered employers’ efforts to circumvent existing labor standards by issuing advisories that allow employers to negotiate new terms of work. Under Labor Advisory No. 17 issued May 16, for example, employers are allowed to do the following: transfer employees to another branch or outlet of the same employer, assign employees to another function or position in the same office or branch, reduce normal working hours, rotate jobs, and, partially shutdown some units while continuing work in other units. Needless to say, employers have been given the



elbow room to “negotiate” reduction of pay along with these flexible work arrangements. The pandemic has also been used by some to justify or deliberately conduct union-busting activities. For example, at Coca-Cola Philippines three union leaders who were asserting the right of their members to a safe workplace were terminated for “economic sabotage”. The government is also using the pandemic to attack informal sector workers who are most vulnerable, denying them the right to livelihood. The government is attempting to phase out jeepneys – a move that would deny the livelihood of more than 500,000 transport workers around the country.

On top of this economic situation, the Philippines now has the second highest number of COVID-19 positive cases in Southeast Asia. Yet, the actions of government do not reflect the worsening situation. Instead of focusing on boosting its public health system and planning for economic recovery, the Philippine government has focused its energies on self-serving political agendas such as the anti-terrorism law and the closure of the ABS-CBN, the largest TV network in the country. The latter has resulted in the firing of at least 11,000 workers and the government does not seem to be disturbed by this massive job loss. Displaced workers of ABS-CBN have thus very little chances of finding new jobs. Ever since the Congressional rejection of the ABS-CBN franchise renewal on July 10, trade unions have been rallying the Philippine government to provide assistance and safety nets to displaced ABS-CBN workers. The government’s denial to renew its permit to operate, after Rappler editor Maria Ressa was convicted of libel, is clearly an attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

The situation of workers in the Philippines is beyond appalling. The attacks on the jobs and lives of workers must stop! We call on the Philippine government to rethink its current priorities and to focus instead on measures that will contain the pandemic and alleviate the lives of those severely affected – especially those of displaced Filipino workers, in the country and overseas.

We remain in solidarity with the Philippine trade union movement in its fight against increasing authoritarianism. We pledge our continued support for the efforts of Filipino unions and workers to restore democracy and peace in the country.

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