
AdvocacyNet

News Bulletin 18, February 12, 2004

NEW ARAB NGO REGIONAL INITIATIVE SEEKS GREATER FREEDOM FOR TRADE UNIONS IN MIDDLE EAST

- AP partner from the Palestinian Territories to serve as Coordinator; application expected from Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions

Washington, D.C., February 4, 2004: In a development that could contribute towards greater democracy to the Middle East, NGOs from five Arab countries have established a new regional organization to promote independent trade unions in the Middle East and lobby for more democracy within trade unions themselves. The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions is one of three other organizations that have expressed interest in joining.

The new organization is to be called the Arab Federation for Democracy and Workers Education Associations (AFDWEA). Hasan Barghouthi, General Director of the Democracy and Workers Rights Center – a partner of the Advocacy Project - will serve as the first coordinator. The DWRC is based in Ramallah, in the Palestinian territories.

In a telephone conversation, Mr. Barghouthi said that protecting the rights of workers would improve democracy throughout the Arab world – something that is very much on the minds of civil society in the region and indeed the entire international community. “We believe the trade unions in the Arab countries face a crisis of identity, a crisis of direction, and a crisis of education,” he said.

This gloomy assessment is born out by the respected International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which promotes freedom of association throughout the world. According to the ICFTU, independent trade unions are rare in the Middle East. In the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar, they are banned outright. Syria only permits a single, state-sanctioned union. Throughout the region, union activity is strictly controlled by the state or ruling party. Of the ICFTU’s own 233 global affiliates, only 19 are in the Middle East (Israel, Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan and Cyprus).

The Palestinian Territories is a case in point. Palestinian NGOs like the DWRC are among the freest in the Arab world, and have been subject to very few constraints by the Palestinian National Authority since the 1993 Oslo accords. They have even been able to force through a law that allows NGOs to receive independent funding and is considered one of the most liberal NGO laws in the region.

However, trade union activity in the Territories is carefully regulated by Yasser Arafat’s political machine and the two main trade union confederations are under Arafat’s direct control. The DWRC has been pressing for years for an independent teacher’s union.

The AFDWEA hopes to educate and train workers in collective bargaining skills, as well as lobbying for the right to organize independent unions. “[Workers] must call for accountability of government, for transparency, and for peace,” said Mr. Barghouthi. “Our role is to strengthen citizenship and to organize the labor force to launch civil struggle against dictatorial regimes.”

The new organization is now seeking affiliation with the International Federation of Workers Education Associations (IFWEA), a coalition of 120 unions and NGOs in 65 countries. The IFWEA is due to meet in March to decide whether to designate the AFDWEA as a new regional representative, on a level with IFWEA regional groupings in Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Asian-Pacific region.

Mr. Barghouthi and other members of the executive committee are currently working to draft an AFDWEA constitution, which will be presented to member organizations for discussion in April. AFDWEA hopes to hold a general conference later this year, and will continue to recruit members in other Arab countries.

The founding AFDWEA member organizations are: The Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) (Egypt); The Lebanese Trade Union Training Center (LTUTC); Center for Democracy and Trade Union Services (CDTUS) (Morocco); The Center for People's Rights (Morocco); The Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (ACHRS); and The Democracy and Workers' Rights Center (DWRC).

Three other organizations have expressed an interest in joining the AFDWEA: The Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD), Association Club Mohamed Ali de la Culture Ouvrière (ACMACO) (Tunisia), and the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.

* For more on the DWRC visit the website: www.dwrc.org/

* For more information contact Laura Stein: laura@advocacynet.org

* For a profile of the Democracy and Workers Rights Center, visit:
<http://www.advocacynet.org/partners/dwrc/>

The Advocacy Project is based in Washington D.C. Phone: +1 202 758 3328. Visit the AP web site for information about current projects: <http://advocacynet.org/>. For more information please e-mail dcoffice@advocacynet.org.