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**Recruit, recruit, recruit**

UNISON continues its successful recruitment drive to ensure that workers in public services have access to the 'essential cover' union membership provides. In informing potential members of the benefits attached to union membership, branch international officers are using international issues to link the wider work of the union to what is happening globally.

Using international issues as a way of showcasing the work of the union can also be a good way of attracting your colleagues to join UNISON. If you are considering running a stall or holding an event with one of UNISON's solidarity organisations, the international unit can provide advice on how to get involved. The activity could involve collecting signatures for a petition calling for tax justice or an end to the persecution of workers in Colombia. It could be an event organised by others to which UNISON could provide details of our work such as support for the safety accord in Bangladesh or helping unions in Botswana to campaign for gender policies, building trade union capacity in the Philippines and Swaziland or supporting a legal advice centre in Nicaragua and Israel. There are over twenty solidarity organisation to which UNISON has links including Amnesty International, Justice for Colombia, Action for Southern Africa and the Robin Hood Tax campaign. If your branch is not yet affiliated, you could consider putting a request to your branch committee.

Recruiting people into the union is a key objective of the union – combining this key objective with international work is an innovative way of doing it. As key international dates are marked by the international community and the trade union movement, including Human Rights Day, International Migrants' Day and International Workers' Memorial Day, regions and branches are using these days to demonstrate UNISON's global vision and inclusivity.

The union has a dedicated page on the [website](#) on joining UNISON. Please encourage activists to direct prospective members to the page.

If you would like an updated list of all our solidarity organisations and the calendar of international days please email [I.Relations@unison.co.uk](mailto:I.Relations@unison.co.uk) for a copy.

## **International seminar**

A date for the diary! UNISON's international seminar for activists will take place at Croyde Bay 11-13 April 2014. Priority will be given to those who have not attended a seminar in the past so branches should encourage branch international officers who haven't previously attended a seminar to register. Young members who are interested in getting involved in international work in their branch should also be encouraged to register.

Details will be sent out to branch secretaries and through social media and eFocus in the coming weeks.

## **Grants for UNISON international activists**

UNISON has a fund to allow individual members and branches/regions to undertake international work abroad. The individual grants are available to part-fund activists who, with their branch and region's support, wish to undertake a study tour abroad. This could include participating in a regional delegation or conducting an individual visit in line with UNISON international policy. The branch/regional grants are available to part-fund outgoing delegations or setting up/following up on twinning agreements.

This year the grants enabled: two branch international officers to take part in an international human rights conference in the Philippines; a Northern region delegation to Colombia; and an activist to join the May Day Brigade organised by Cuba Solidarity Campaign.

There are a limited number of grants available annually. All applications will be considered by UNISON NEC international committee once the region has approved the application. Interested individuals should first speak to their branch about applying for the grant to see if they qualify. Application forms are available from [I.Relations@unison.co.uk](mailto:I.Relations@unison.co.uk)

## **Philippines typhoon - UNISON response**

The devastating typhoon that tore through the Philippines on 8 November has now led to the deaths of almost 6,000 people according to official records, and estimates put the number as high as 10,000. Millions of people have been displaced and are struggling to obtain basic supplies such as food and water. The international community responded quickly by pledging donations to assist with the emergency relief operation including providing food, water, medicines, equipment and personnel. UNISON donated £10,000 to the Disasters Emergency Committee ([DEC](#)) who initiated an immediate response. Some of the NGOs in DEC are working with local

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Philippines including the Philippines Red Cross. Members are being encouraged to donate to DEC as the relief operation is still ongoing.

As soon as the news broke, UNISON contacted its partner organisations in the Philippines, including trade unions and NGOs, to pass on its sincerest condolences and to let them know that UNISON would consider requests to the union's international development fund for future projects that would assist in the rebuilding of their communities and infrastructures.

The typhoon has also affected Filipinos in the UK, including UNISON members. The union sent an open message of sympathy to the Filipino community in the UK, and said it would endeavour to support members who were trying to locate their families or who were suffering stress as a result of the disaster. UNISON activists are being encouraged to speak to colleagues from the Filipino community and ask how we can help. UNISON also has a registered charity, [There for you](#), which may be able to provide some support to members who are affected by the disaster. Please speak to your branch welfare officer about it.

## **Agricultural workers' union under attack in Colombia**

Alirio Garcia, general secretary of the Colombian agricultural workers' trade union FENSUAGRO, spoke to UNISON's NEC international committee recently on the continuing persecution of his union by the authorities. Over 1,000 FENSUAGRO members have been assassinated in recent years, and many have been imprisoned or exiled. Mr Garcia has been the victim of several assassination attempts himself. In August 2009 he was detained by the Colombian authorities, accused of 'rebellion' and jailed. After an international campaign he was absolved of all charges and, on 23 March 2010, he was released from prison. Mr Garcia's wife, a fellow union activist was also imprisoned for two years on trumped up charges: something that is being used frequently to deter workers from joining unions and campaigning for their rights.

In August this year Alirio's colleague, fellow FENSUAGRO leader Huber Ballesteros, who is vice-president of the union, was imprisoned and accused of rebellion and terrorism – the union had been organising mass strikes across the country as land disputes continue and legislation favouring multinationals is introduced. Mr Ballesteros had been due to address the TUC annual congress in September but was arrested before his visa could be issued. Justice for Colombia, together with online campaigning group, Labour Start, set up a petition calling for Huber's release. Peers, MPs and trade union general secretaries, including Dave Prentis, were among the more than 13,000 signatories to the petition that was handed into the Colombian embassy in November.

Speaking outside the embassy, Mariela Kohon, director of JFC said: "The unjust imprisonment of leaders like Huber and the violent repression of legitimate social protest raise questions as to the sincerity of the government's commitment to democratic values, like free speech."

Chair of UNISON's NEC international committee, Jean Butcher, said it is imperative that trade unionists in this country paid heed to what is happening in Colombia as social activists continue to be criminalised. She urged UNISON branches and regions to affiliate to JFC to ensure that those campaigning for peace and social justice are not forgotten.

Branches and regions should affiliate to Justice for Colombia. More information is available on the website [www.justiceforcolombia.org](http://www.justiceforcolombia.org)

## **Campaign for safety in Bangladesh garment factories**

Seven months after the collapse of a garment factory in Dhaka which killed over 1,200 workers and injured many more, four UK high street brands are still refusing to sign a safety accord that commits signatories to a process of independent inspection and a number of other health and safety improvements such as fire safety training and worker representation.

Since the accord was introduced over 110 global brands have signed up including UK-based retailers H&M, Zara, Next and Primark, although some needed a 'gentle reminder', in the form of petitions, of their responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of the people who make their clothes. The four remaining brands: Bank Fashion, Bench, Mexx and Republic are being urged to sign the accord. The petition is here <http://tiny.cc/thfi7w>

Meanwhile, on the first anniversary of the Tazreen fire in which 112 workers lost their lives, the families of the victims and those who were injured are still seeking compensation. A number of global unions and NGOs together with garment workers' unions in Bangladesh are campaigning on their behalf as most companies whose clothes were made there are refusing to compensate the families of the victims and those who were injured. <http://tiny.cc/qqhi7w>

Safety at work is a key priority for the trade union movement. UNISON and other unions will be taking solidarity action on 28 April 2014 as this is the day when we commemorate the hundreds of thousands who died in workplace 'accidents' and the millions who died of occupational diseases. International Workers' Memorial Day will be marked across the world to honour those workers, and we hope that UNISON activists will mark the day in their workplaces. At a time when governments including the UK, are cutting 'burdensome regulations', it is time to stand up for workers' safety and declare: 'red tape saves lives!'

Helpful links

Hazards [www.hazards.org/wmd](http://www.hazards.org/wmd)

TUC <http://tiny.cc/kcii7w>

ITUC <http://tiny.cc/cfii7w>

## **Guatemala killings continue**

Over the past year several members of the National Health Workers' Union of Guatemala (SNTSG) have been murdered. According to Public Services International (PSI), the global union to which both SNTSG and UNISON are affiliated, SNTSG members have been targets of a murderous campaign after the union had exposed mismanagement of the country's public health facilities and filed an official complaint against the previous health minister, accusing him of corruption.

Because of the scale of intimidation against trade unionists, PSI conducted a delegation in August this year to meet with affiliates and government officials to try to halt the killings. During a meeting with the president, Otto Pérez Molina, he acknowledged that, "It is very shameful for us that our country is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists today." PSI general secretary, Rosa Pavenelli, said: "that these [murders] appear

to be part of a concerted campaign of terror against trade union leaders – particularly targeting women leaders. It's a double shame that the law on femicide in Guatemala is grossly abused to target trade unionists." Thirty healthcare union leaders have been imprisoned on charges related to the femicide law, including cases that are linked to patients' deaths that are due to the lack of medicines and other deplorable healthcare and working conditions. This means that a good law is not used to protect women, but to attack union activists. PSI pledged to expose this practice as part of an international campaign to end violence against women.

UNISON has been in touch with colleagues in SNTSG to convey its sympathy for the families of those who were murdered, and to offer support to the union in combating the campaign of intimidation against it.

You can download the PSI delegation report here. It also includes a list of recommendations <http://tiny.cc/swmi7w>

## **International commission for Cuban Five**

'Voices for the Five' is an online campaign of international campaigners fighting for freedom and justice for the Cuban Five (or Miami 5 as they are known in Britain), unjustly imprisoned in the United States for 15 years on charges of terrorism. UNISON has added its support for an international commission of inquiry. 'Voices for the Five' is calling on activists to show their support for the commission by adding their names to the campaign at <http://voicesforthefive.com>.

The international commission of inquiry will take place in London in March 2014. It will hear first-hand testimonies from family members, Cuban victims of terrorism, legal experts, international jurors, human rights campaigners, academics and politicians. Those endorsing the commission include UNISON general secretary, Dave Prentis; former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams; Nobel laureate, Günter Grass; novelist Alice Walker; Tony Benn and others.

Since 1959, nearly 3,500 Cubans have died in terrorist attacks carried out by Miami-based terrorist organisations including the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner which killed 78 people, and a series of hotel bombings in the 1990s aimed at destroying the island's economy and tourism industry. To save lives, Cuba sent men to Miami to infiltrate and monitor the groups. At the request of the US government, the information they gathered was passed to the FBI in 1998.

But instead of arresting the terrorists, the FBI used the information to identify and arrest the five anti-terrorists in Miami, where they were illegally held in solidarity confinement for 17 months. An unfair trial and harsh prison sentences resulted in terms of between 15 years to double life for the men. As extra punishment, visitation rights for two of their wives have been denied and visa requests for other members of the families severely restricted.

An international campaign has consistently called for the release of the four remaining Cubans (Rene Gonzalez was released earlier this year). The commission will offer an opportunity for the case of the Cuban Five to be heard by a wider audience.

## **Sudan - appeal from UNISON member**

UNISON member Ekhlas Ahmed was distraught when she heard that her husband Dr Sidqui Kaballo, a high-profile political and human rights activist in Sudan, was arrested at the end of September and held incommunicado on a visit to the country. Despite repeated attempts by the family to locate Dr Kaballo, the authorities would

not confirm that he had been detained. Ms Ahmed became very concerned for his health as he requires medication for a medical condition.

After his arrest UNISON, in particular Ms Ahmed's branch and region, campaigned vigorously for the release of Dr Kaballo. Torture and even killing of political prisoners is widespread in Sudan.

Ms Ahmed told UNISON: "When my husband was arrested, personally, emotionally I wasn't in a state to do anything. My colleague and UNISON rep Maureen Wade campaigned for his release, and drafted a letter for all the staff to send to their MPs. They all supported me very well, and they did a good job.

"I felt very well supported by my social work colleagues and my union, as well as Amnesty International and other organisations that joined the campaign."

Following countless interventions by those calling for Dr Kaballo's release, he was freed without charge after two weeks' imprisonment.

Ms Ahmed said she was "very relieved....The fact that he was treated well in prison was because of the campaign – otherwise his life would have been at risk. That was our aim from the beginning – to protect him."

UNISON's West Midlands regional secretary Ravi Subramanian said: "We are all very relieved that Dr Kaballo is safe and well. Ms Ahmed's branch have been fantastic and should be proud of the part they played in securing his release."

## **Qatar - no World Cup without workers' rights**

Footballer Zahir Belounis who had been trapped in Qatar under its draconian sponsorship system has been granted an exit visa so is now free to leave. For two years the French-Algerian professional footballer has been trapped in Qatar. The restrictive sponsorship laws give migrant workers no freedom to leave the country without their employers' permission.

Speaking after the news had been made public, Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation said: "A grave injustice is nearly over for Zahir and his family. One man and his family have come to illustrate the conditions faced by 1.3 million migrant workers in Qatar.

"The torment that Zahir and his family have been put through because of bad laws which give workers no rights should never be repeated. Sadly, today in Qatar there remain many workers who have no voice. The Qatar authorities should reform their laws to respect International Labour Organisation conditions."

Qatar is due to stage the World Cup in 2022, and the ITUC estimates that another 4,000 migrant workers will die building the stadia and infrastructure for the competition.

## **Democracy in Swaziland still elusive**

Despite recent attempts to give Swaziland a semblance of democracy, the king is still the absolute ruler of the land-locked impoverished state according to Wandile Dlodlu of the Swaziland Democracy Campaign on a recent visit to Britain. Swaziland has lived under state of emergency for 40 years and the environment is becoming very hostile especially after the banning of the country's national trade union federation (TUCOWSA). This hostility has led to democracy and trade union activists being jailed and hundreds more being forced into exile abroad.

Speaking at UNISON Centre, Wandile said political parties had effectively been banned and opposition to the king had been criminalised. Swaziland is the second most armed country in Africa, despite there being no external threat, so the security forces are able to exert firm control over any dissent.

The Swaziland Democracy Campaign intends to set up a chapter in Britain, and UNISON has pledged to continue its support for pro-democracy activists and trade unions, and to continue to work with Action for Southern Africa who had coordinated the visit to Britain with the support of UNISON.

You can listen to an interview with Wandile Dlodlu on Radio Labour  
<http://tiny.cc/n20i7w>

## **LAACTSA - get your local authority to affiliate**

Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA) is the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement whose remit is to eradicate poverty, support rights, justice, sustainable development and democracy across southern Africa. UNISON is affiliated to ACTSA and has worked in partnership on issues across the region including supporting visits of trade unionists and democracy activists to the UK and outgoing delegations to southern Africa.

Local Authority Action for Southern Africa (LAACTSA) was formed in 1995 from the authorities which had previously supported the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It was set up to assist in the reconstruction of southern Africa following the defeat of apartheid and undertakes work on many critical issues facing the peoples of the region.

LAACTSA relies on local authorities affiliating to assist it in its work. If you work for a local authority please ask them to consider affiliating. <http://tiny.cc/2dfk7w>

## **Take action: tell your MEP to vote 'no' to EU-Morocco Fishing Agreement**

A majority of EU Member States has approved the EU-Morocco fisheries protocol, which pays for EU vessels to fish in the waters of occupied Western Sahara. Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the UK and the Netherlands are the only countries that opposed the proposal. The agreement will now go to the European Parliament for approval.

The Western Sahara Campaign, to which UNISON is affiliated, is calling on UNISON members to help stop the agreement by writing to their MEPs urging them to oppose the agreement. You can find details of your MEP here <http://tiny.cc/n9bk7w>

The treaty has been condemned as 'fraud' by Saharawi fishermen who view it as an enabling mechanism for the theft and depletion of their local fishing stocks. A statement posted online by Saharawi fishermen from Dakhla said: 'This agreement doesn't respect the international legality, doesn't respect the damaged environmental status of the region because of over-exploitation and doesn't respect the political will of the Saharawi people....We wonder what [Maritime and Fisheries Commissioner] Maria Damanaki, was doing in Rabat, signing an agreement with a state that holds no legal sovereignty over Western Sahara to allow a fraudulent exploitation of the Western Saharan resources? Isn't this a bare act of buying stolen goods?'

The draft protocol, allows the EU to fish in any waters Morocco defines as its own and contains no human rights clauses, despite previous commitments by Brussels to seek these.

If you are contacting your MEP, the points to make are:

- Any agreement is illegal unless the indigenous population have been consulted and are shown to benefit.
- The Saharawi people have not been consulted as to their wishes. Saharawi NGOs are calling for the agreement to be rejected. POLISARIO, the UN recognised representatives of the Saharawi people have opposed the agreement.
- The European Commission has not shown that the Saharawi will benefit. Any benefit will go to Moroccan settlers.
- Supporting Moroccan settlements and the development of infrastructure in Western Sahara reinforces the occupation and creates blocks in the way of the UN led peace process.

Find out more about the campaign at [www.wsahara.org.uk](http://www.wsahara.org.uk)

## **Upcoming events**

### **Saturday, 25 January, London**

[Palestine Solidarity Campaign AGM](#)

### **Friday/Saturday, 7-8 March, London**

[International Commission Inquiry, Cuban Five](#)

### **Friday-Sunday, 11-13 April, Croyde Bay**

UNISON international seminar

### **Saturday/Sunday, 12-13 April, Edinburgh**

[Amnesty International AGM](#)