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**HTUR/JB**

**20 March 2017**

**Mass arrests of trade unionists and activists**

Mr President,

I write on behalf of the International Trade Union Confederation representing 181 million workers in national trade union centres in 163 countries, including Belarus, to express our serious concern over the mass arrests of trade unionists and activists protesting against a tax levied against the unemployed under Decree No.3 on Prevention of Social Dependency.

Your government demanded from more than 450 000 citizens around 200 EUR in tax payments for having been unemployed for more than six months under Decree No.3. This is a clear contravention of the recommendations of the 2016 ILO Committee on the Application of Standards, which noted with deep concern the possible exaction of forced labour as a result of this decree and requested Belarus to bring its legislation in line with ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus also warned about the impact of such a scheme on vulnerable persons in society and its contravention of international labour standards, which may lead to a further deterioration in employment conditions and to forced labour.

We are extremely disappointed about the failure of Belarus to act on these recommendations. Instead, your government has chosen to violently repress peaceful and legitimate protests by its citizens whose dire economic situation is exacerbated by this tax. Around 50 protesters were arrested recently, including twelve trade unionists. We have also been informed about gang violence against individual protesters with impunity. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association has repeatedly stated that the detention of trade unionists on the grounds of trade union activities constitutes a serious obstacle to the exercise of trade union rights and an infringement of freedom of association entailing the risk of creating an atmosphere of intimidation and fear.

Therefore, we urgently call for the unconditional release of all arrested protesters, including the twelve trade union leaders and the revocation of Decree No 3. We look forward to receiving information, without delay, about the measures taken in response to our concerns.

Yours sincerely,



General Secretary