

In Algeria, a dangerous crackdown on independent trade unions

Monday 10 February 2020, by [ROSSMAN Peter](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2020).

Independent trade unionists in Algeria face escalating repression for their role in the ongoing democracy movement.

For the past two decades, workers in Algeria have been fighting for the right to form trade unions independent of the government and the official trade union organization UGTA. And, for decades, the government has responded with systematic harassment and repression. A 2014 Human Rights Watch article, [Algeria: Workers' Rights Trampled](#), traces their struggle and sums it up in these words: "The government punishes peaceful protesters and strikers, including with retaliatory suspensions or dismissals from public service jobs, and arbitrarily arrests and prosecutes union activists on politically motivated charges."

Trade union militants now face a double-barreled repression. They are targeted as trade unionists challenging the monopoly of the UGTA, and under attack for their role in driving and sustaining the ongoing democracy movement, the magnificent *Hirak* which erupted in February last year.

The *Hirak* dislodged Bouteflika, but could not shake the structure of power, at the heart of which is the military. The street could not prevent the December 12 electoral farce which millions of Algerians understandably view as thoroughly illegitimate. Behind the façade of an election in which citizens were asked to select one of five presidential candidates approved by the military, the crackdown on civic activists, including trade unionists, has intensified.

Human Rights Watch, in the 2014 article, called on the International Labour Organization (ILO) to "urge Algeria to end its repression of independent union activity." In response to complaints filed with the ILO, with the support of international trade union organizations. The ILO has done just that. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association and its Committee of Experts on the Application of Standards have systematically urged the government to register the independent unions, reinstate dismissed trade unionists to their jobs and allow the independent organizations to function free of harassment and victimization. The government response has been more of the same.

Raouf Mellal, president of the independent union of workers in the public gas and electricity company SONEGAS as well as the national confederation COSYFOP, continues to face new punitive charges, most recently a defamation lawsuit filed against him by the then Minister of Labour in retaliation for ...complaints against the government at the ILO. Mellal's persecution, which began in 2017 when he [exposed a financial scandal at SONEGAS](#), has intensified with COSYFOP's engagement in the *Hirak* and successful calls for strikes in March and again in December last year. On February 5, police sealed the COSYFOP headquarters in Algiers.

Mellal has now been [convicted and sentenced in absentia dozens of times](#), including another defamation lawsuit stemming from his union's defense of a victim of sexual harassment. He faces cumulative penalties of years in prison and punitive fines.

Kaddour Chouicha, president of the independent union of higher education workers SESS, member of the executive committee of CGATA, the independent union confederation which has been fighting for legal recognition since 2013, and representative on the governing body of the ITUC, [was arrested and immediately sentenced to one year's imprisonment](#) on December 10 - International Human Rights Day - for criticizing the military and civil authorities. Provisionally released after one month, he was rearrested on January 14. Chouicha is vice-president of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights and president of its Oran section.

Union militant Ibrahim Daouadji was [arrested on October 12](#) on similar charges and remains in prison. He was arrested together with his 3-year-old son, who was only released after lawyers intervened.

Algerian rights defenders have documented the cases of hundreds of civic and political activists known to be in detention

Rym Kadri of the COSYFOP-affiliated education workers, was [arrested on November 24](#) for her participation in a sit-in demanding the release of political prisoners. Released after 4 days, she remains subject to strict legal and police controls.

Hamza Kherroubi, president of the COSYFOP-affiliated union of nurses' assistants, was [arrested](#) on December for his support for the general strike called by COSYFOP beginning December 8, charged with 'incitement' and sentenced to a year in prison. Provisionally released due to his medical condition, he was placed in police detention on January 21.

Trade union activists not yet behind bars or subject to strict police supervision are at imminent risk of being arrested as the authorities seek to destroy the democracy movement.

Algerian rights defenders have documented the cases of hundreds of civic and political activists known to be in detention for having joined peaceful demonstrations or for criticizing the government on social media, including the young student activist Nour El Houda Oggadi, [imprisoned since December 19](#).

The actual number of the arrested is certainly higher. Virtually no information is allowed to escape from the south of the country, and freedom of movement is severely restricted everywhere. Farcical legal proceedings are carried out in absentia; those found guilty are often informed of the sentences only at the moment of arrest.

Human rights defenders internationally have done a good job of documenting the ongoing repression, in real time, but the specific role and contribution of the independent unions is scarcely, if at all, appreciated or acknowledged. An exemplary resolution of the European Parliament. [On the situation of freedoms in Algeria](#) adopted in November of last year denounced the growing attacks on civil and political rights and called for the release of all detained activists.

The European Union continues to fund legal 'training' for Algerian judges who execute the military's orders

The words 'trade union', however, occur only once, where they are subsumed in a long list of victimized *Hirak* activists. Meanwhile, the European Union continues to fund legal 'training' for Algerian judges who execute the military's orders. Resolutions and recommendations have, at the very least, shown their limitations. The ILO, when its governing body meets in March, can be expected to again provide strong criticism and strong recommendations, but it has no power to sanction governments.

The independent unions in Algeria have been in the forefront of every struggle in defense of democratic civil society. They have built committees of the unemployed, defended press freedom, organized solidarity with sub-Saharan migrants. SNAPAP, the independent union of workers in the public administration founded in 2003, and the unions grouped together with it in CGATA, have anchored the fight for autonomous democratic trade unions (the police closed their Algiers headquarters in December last year). The persistent struggle of SNAPAP and the organizations it has inspired by its example helped sustain a democratic space before the *Hirak*, and when the mass protest emerged, the independent unions played a vital role.

Many-sided international support - from unions, human rights defenders, governments - is needed now, more than ever, to ensure that the independent trade unions survive the new wave of repression and remain in the forefront of the fight for democracy - and can play their role as essential guarantors of freedom in the democratic society millions of Algerians are committed to winning.

Peter Rossman

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/algeria-dangerous-crackdown-independent-trade-unions/>