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Defend the Bahrain Teachers: An Open Letter to UCU Members

State Violence in Manama

Almost a year ago UCU London Retired Members branch passed a motion in solidarity with our sisters and brothers of the Bahrain Teachers Association (BTA). As reported in the text *Repression in Bahrain*, posted on our website late October 2012, leaders of that body, which like UCU is an affiliate of Education International (EI), had been detained and subjected to what Amnesty International terms "torture" at the hands of state forces. The BTA itself has been forcefully abolished by the Bahrain regime.

The state assault on the BTA did not occur in a political vacuum. As a component of the "Arab Spring" that unfolded through 2011, a broadly supported protest movement for reform emerged in Bahrain. In some regards its demands echoed the transient experience of assemblies in the early 1970's, particularly the partly elected (exclusively by males) advisory legislative National Assembly (NA) of 1973. Those arrangements were abruptly terminated from above when NA members opposed both the state of emergency law and the American military presence - heir to longstanding British naval intimidation - in Bahrain. Refusing anything short of unconditional compliance, the regime dissolved the assembly in 1975.

By the 1990's a new wave of resistance was calling for renewal of the suppressed, relatively democratic constitution of two decades earlier. Mass arrests and imprisonments, torture and killings were the state response. The pattern was repeated in 2011, with a regional dimension. Supported by Saudi and Emirates security forces, the Al Khalifa dynastic regime responded aggressively, attacking the non-violent and, importantly, non-sectarian demonstration at Pearl Roundabout, Manama. Dozens of protesters were killed. Alongside the deaths were many injuries. Some medics who treated protesters were themselves singled out for additional state violence.

War on Rights

Draconian military and policing controls mean that information coming out of Bahrain is fragmentary. With that said, it is apparent that *simmering stalemate* distinguishes the present situation. On the one hand, at least sporadic overt opposition continues. Such information as does emerge - notably through the Bahrain and Gulf Centers for Human Rights - reveals a persistence to reform demands in the face of regime resolve to enforce mass compliance. But equally the repression itself is seeking new means of undermining core rights of association and activity. Late last year the Bahrain Interior Ministry announced withdrawal of nationality rights from 31 opposition figures, a step condemned by Amnesty as a breach of international law. This imposition of statelessness on persons deemed to have caused "damage to state security" took place in the aftermath of clashes between demonstrators and security forces. In direct response to those events, as AFP news agency reported 30th Oct 2012, the government "banned all protests and gatherings" to ensure "security is maintained".

War on Education

Consistent with that decree, street level state violence has been enforced in tandem with incarceration of pro-democracy activists. These include the core leadership of the Bahrain Teachers Association (BTA). Its Chairman, Mahdi Abu Deeb, was given a 10 year sentence while Deputy Chair Jalila al-Salman received three years. Subsequently Jalila was released from custody on health grounds. In a statement issued 7th September 2012, however, EI noted that Mahdi was still being denied bail despite suffering from diabetes with deteriorating health. EI, like Amnesty, speaks of "torture" of BTA leaders and has reported Mahdi being denied access to medical treatment.

Following repeated postponements and delays, on 21st October 2012 Bahrain's appeal court announced the final verdicts. The sentences for Mahdi and Jalila were reduced to five years and six months respectively. That development, however, should not detract from the broader assault on education still taking place in Bahrain, the scope of which is difficult to exaggerate. In October 2011, EI responded to the imprisonment of Jalila and Mahdi with wide-ranging condemnation of the state's offensive as a whole. Titled *Bahrain: End the violations against teachers, unionists and students*, EI's statement observed:

"King Al Khalifa's regime has ...(in addition to incarceration of key BTA leaders)... dissolved the BTA and has repressed teachers using harassment and intimidation that includes the suspension of salaries, mass dismissals, arbitrary arrests, detentions and, in some instances, allegations of torture. Many teachers had indeed responded to the call for strike action made in March to raise concern about the physical security of academics, education workers and students in education institutions. The government response has been violent repression and persecution."

Echoing the accounts of others, including the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) established by the monarch himself, EI additionally noted:

"Many teachers are currently awaiting trial while dozens have been sacked only to be replaced by unqualified volunteers. This is resulting in the deterioration of the quality of education in Bahrain as the volunteers are high school graduates with no background in teaching whatsoever. The educational environment in schools is of high risk for both students and teachers who have been attacked by riot police and are constantly being attacked by the pro-government administration."

The Case against the BTA

A further EI report issued 2nd February 2012 summarised the assault on BTA rights and the character of the state's case against its leadership:

"Jalila and Mahdi are appealing the decision of the military National Safety Court that, in September, sentenced them to respectively three and ten years imprisonment, for unwarranted accusations, including inciting others to commit crimes, calling for hatred and overthrow of the ruling system, leaving work on purpose and encouraging others to do so and taking part in illegal gathering."

Their strong involvement in the peaceful protests of March 2011 led to a crackdown where teachers and trade unionists became subjected to arbitrary arrests, military prosecution, investigation, suspensions, dismissals, salary cuts and torture.

EI also condemns the dissolution and the arbitrary procedures against the BTA which are in

clear violation of the free exercise of human and trade union rights in Bahrain, and violate Bahrain's own labour laws as well as Bahrain's obligations as a member state of the International Labour Organisation."

The detention, harassment and hounding of our Bahraini colleagues and many of their students is confirmed and denounced by leading human rights NGO's and forums. In August 2011 Amnesty International stated: "...(*Jalila and Mahdi*) appear to have been targeted solely on account of their leadership of the BTA and their legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly." The following month a Human Rights Watch spokesperson reported: "*Bahraini authorities have punished students and professors – along with thousands of other Bahrainis – simply for exercising their right to criticize the government...Attacking students and professors who dare to dissent flagrantly violates their right to freedom of opinion and expression.*"

Trade Unions and the Logjam in Bahrain

Exclusion of foreign journalists and NGO's by the Bahrain state has combined with at best sporadic media interest to marginalise such accounts. Nonetheless, and importantly, international trade union support for union rights in Bahrain, voiced for example through the ITUC, is substantial and growing. Within this context, Education International has advanced proposals which UCU London Retired Members branch believes address some issues and principles relevant to an appropriate union response. Accordingly we encourage debate on them within the UCU and the wider labour movement. Specifically, in Spring 2012 EI concluded an analysis of the crisis of academic freedom in Bahrain with the following declaration:

"Education International invites the Bahraini authorities and the University of Bahrain:

- *To release immediately and unconditionally all teachers, academics and students detained for charges in relation to the peaceful pro-democracy marches,*
- *to implement the BICI's recommendations and reinstate all faculty and students dismissed or expelled, to their former study position,*
- *to guarantee the right to academic freedom, including its constituent freedoms of opinion, expression, assembly and association,*
- *to revise the University by-laws to reflect internationally recognized standards of academic freedom and professional rights, including those elaborated in the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation,*
- *to turn all education establishments, including higher education institutions, into safe sanctuaries for every citizen."*

[Education International *Bahrain: Academic freedom under threat*, 27 March 2012]

As far as Jalila and Mahdi are concerned, it is important that the call to "*release immediately and unconditionally*" all detained academics, teachers and students be taken up with urgency. Reduced sentences, together with the accelerated release of Jalila from prison in November 2012, are welcome concessions won through opposition. Nonetheless, subjection to arbitrary authoritarian actions is a continuing threat to trade unionists and others. Closely related are efforts by the minority Sunni dynasty to exacerbate sectarian tensions within the society. One

persistent device is to casually and routinely blame the equally anti-working class Iranian Shia regime or Hezbollah for disorders. A parallel impulse to subvert solidarity and manipulate actual or potential divisions within Bahrain is evident in the regime's decision to handle the BTA leaders in a differential, divide-and-rule manner.

Such manoeuvres, likely learned from colonial role models, are no surprise from a regime that, alongside other Gulf tyrannies, maintains a severely disadvantaged migrant workforce as a core element of policy. There is no legendary market "hidden hand" at work here. Equally absent is the enriching, humanising development that could accompany non-alienated encounters and contacts among workers from different regions, backgrounds and experiences. On the contrary, now comprising a clear majority of the total workforce in Bahrain, the largely south Asian migrant workers exist in a *politically created and managed* sphere of social isolation. The split between "foreign" and "national" components is so acute that some analysts, including Laurence Louer, use the metaphor of "caste system" to characterise the Bahrain labour market. Often migrant workers are physically segregated in labour camps or within equally invisible domestic labour employment. Key to the arrangement, described in Andrew M. Gardner's book *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain*, is the *kefala* system of sponsoring. *Kefala* entails workers seeking visas requiring a local, ie Bahraini sponsor. Normally this will be the employer, exposing workers to conditions potentially including incarceration. Human Rights Watch has documented how debts arising from recruitment fees combine with employer practices such as withholding wages and passports to intensify direct subordination of migrant workers. The ostensibly modernising regime, then, presides over a reactionary mutation of wage labour. Effectively this grants crypto-feudal powers of *personalised control* to employers, thus minimising scope for worker independence. A parallel if mainly less immediate regulatory regime operates across the whole society, since for workers more generally rights stand or fall very much on the whim of this or that presently ascendant royal family member. Such rights, in other words, do not exist.

Union rights, then, inevitably figured centrally in the GCHR/BCHR response to the Bahrain Court of Cassation's rejection, in July of this year, of the BTA leaders' final appeals. The two groups jointly declared:

"The GCHR and BCHR call on the Bahraini government to immediately release Mehdi Abu Deeb and to revoke the sentences issued against him and his colleague Jalila Al-Salman and to respect the trade union's freedom to work. We also call on government of Bahrain to stop arbitrary procedures against the Teachers Association of Bahrain and allow it to work freely and reinstate the dismissed teachers to their previous jobs and the abolition of all administrative penalties issued against them and their colleagues."

The implications of those demands are far-reaching. Assertion of union rights - and their extension to other worker sectors - implies abolishing the use of military courts against workplace organisation. But a profoundly anti-democratic matrix of local and global exploitation has further implications for workers. Centrally, the interlinked suppression of civil liberties and trade union freedoms in Bahrain, *including among migrant workers*, distorts class development and the potential of the labour movement to provide social coherence and political focus within the democratic movement as a whole. Unions and working class bodies elsewhere can assist by finding ways to promote and support the rights of all workers in the face of an intransigent regime and its international support network.

Class Solidarity with Bahrain Teachers

Specifically regarding suppression of the BTA, London Retired Members proposed the following motion at UCU Congress 2013:

Free Imprisoned Bahraini Teachers

We call upon the UCU to:

Contact Education International, to which UCU is affiliated, for discussion of practical steps that the union should take to advance the cause of colleagues imprisoned in Bahrain. These include individuals in the leadership of the Bahrain Teachers Association. The chair and deputy chair of that body have been sentenced, by a military court, to imprisonment for involvement in the movement for democratic political reform.

Address their plight in conjunction with Education International and MENA Solidarity;

Publicise on our union's website the campaign against the detention of our fellow trade unionists in Bahrain and other countries;

Commission an article on the subject for the next issue of UC;

Write to the British Government expressing our concerns and request that diplomatic pressure be applied towards securing the freedom of all Bahraini colleagues;

Raise the situation in Bahrain with the TUC.

Congress passed the motion unanimously and the way is now open for all measures indicated to be acted on without delay. In addition to the specific initial national level steps mandated, London Retired Members appeal to UCU regions and above all branches to support and promote solidarity activity to *raise support for our Bahraini colleagues within both UCU and the wider labour movement and society*. Mahdi must be released, but more enduring gains than "bail", on terms set unilaterally by the current regime, could be secured through union-led, international efforts to *force the overturn of the repressive charges*. Most immediately the issue can be raised through special open meetings as well as lectures and seminars. Solidarity against torture of Bahraini academics calls for campus forums to be mobilised in public and imaginative ways.

A dissenting, independent class voice must override the barely audible "regrets" expressed by governments of long term regime allies Britain and the United States. Their "quiet word in your ear" approach, as intended, only confirms the *status quo*. To overcome strategic international ruling class solidarity against trade unionists and workers rights in Bahrain, developing initial alliances with the NUS and other staff unions against repression of the BTA should become a UCU priority, as a matter of urgency.

An injury to one is an injury to all - including when the injurers are major operatives within strategic global oil (and capital) flows as well as key British armaments purchasers who also host the US Fifth Fleet.

Brief Notes on Selected Recommended Sources

(1) Trade Union and Human Rights Movements and Organisations:

Education International *Bahrain: End the violations against teachers, unionists and students* (24 October 2011)

www.ei-ie.org/en/uaas/uaa_details/31

Education International *Bahrain: academic freedom under threat* (27 March 2012)

www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/2117

Education International *Bahrain: Free Jalila al-Salman and Mahdi Abu Dheeb!* (23 November 2012):

www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/2372

Education International *Bahrain: Call for Mahdi Abu Dheeb's release on the second anniversary of his imprisonment* (05 April 2013):

www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/2529

(These four EI texts demonstrate the scope and depth of the Bahrain regime's offensive against education and academics.)

International Trade Union Confederation *Statement on The Situation in Bahrain* (28 September 2012):

www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-statement-on-the-situation-in

(The ITUC here elaborates its charge that in 2011: "...thousands of workers, many of whom were trade unionists and union leaders, were illegally fired based on their political opinion and/or in violation of the right to freedom of association.")

Amnesty International *Teachers to be tried in a Military Court* (23 August 2011):

www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/043/2011/en/d54a1870-4e39-4115-8634-eda3fefdf93b/mde110432011en.html

(Amnesty's response to the initial trial announcement concerning the BTA leadership.)

Amnesty International *Bahrain: New decrees ban dissent as further protests organized* (7 August 2013):

www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/bahrain-new-decrees-ban-dissent-further-protests-organized-2013-08-07

(A recent update from Amnesty on rule by royal decree in Bahrain.)

Bahrain Center for Human Rights website:

www.bahrainrights.org/

Gulf Center for Human Rights website:

www.gc4hr.org/

GCHR & BCHR joint statement *Bahrain - No justice for human rights defenders* (28 July 2013):

www.gc4hr.org/news/view/461

(A major statement on human rights violations in Bahrain outlining both background and recent developments.)

Human Rights Watch *Bahrain: Reinstate Ousted Students, Faculty: Hundreds Dismissed for Peaceful Dissent* (24 September 2011):

www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/24/bahrain-reinstate-ousted-students-faculty

(HRW here provides important information on the contribution of Bahrain's Special Military Courts to state repression of students and academics.)

(2) Other Writings:

Gardner, Andrew M. *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain*, Cornell University Press, 2010

(This important source is discussed in the main text, above.)

Hiltermann, Joost *Bahrain: A New Sectarian Conflict?* (2012):

www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/may/08/bahrain-new-sectarian-conflict/

(Hiltermann, in *The New York Review of Books*, examines regime manipulation of sectarianism within Bahrain in the context of state relations with Saudi Arabia.)

Kerr, Cortni and Jones, Toby *A Revolution Paused in Bahrain* (23 February 2011):

www.merip.org/mero/mero022311

(In their account of the February 2011 events for *Middle East Research and Information Project*, the authors briefly outline developments during the preceding decade. They chart the changing tactics and influence of key oppositional groupings and the rise of new movements by 2005-06. A picture of a diverse, non-violent national movement broadly calling for constitutional reform, combined with steps promoting economic and social justice, emerges from this and other writings from the period.)

Louer, Laurence "The Political Impact of Labor Migration in Bahrain", *City and Society*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, (June 2008)

(Louer charts shifts as well as continuity within the "split labour market" of "national" labour on the one side and "foreign", or migrant workers on the other. He describes how, through the 1970's, oil money fuelled *Bahrainization* of the workforce, with enlarged public welfare and widespread public employment opportunities for citizens. While what Louer and others term the "caste system" of that decade briefly conceded key "national" labour movement demands, new jobs in the generally lower paid and less prestigious private sector almost all went to migrants. Louer further documents the subsequent demise of paternalistic cushioning of the "national" workforce, or sections of it, in response to declining oil reserves and diminishing public sector opportunities. "Bahrainis now compete with foreigners at all levels of the employment scale...", he observes (p.46), implying transformed relationships among workers as a whole and new potential for more comprehensive class organisation.)

(3) Audio-Visual Media:

Bahrain: Shouting in the dark:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html>

(First broadcast in August 2011, this *Al Jazeera English* documentary follows the emergence, ferocious suppression and immediate aftermath of the Pearl Roundabout mass movement for democratic reform. *Shouting* offers a vivid glimpse into the heart of global capital accumulation. The film should be shown and discussed at open meetings in every university and college.)

17 September 2013