

## **GLOBAL LABOUR INSTITUTE: Activities Report 2013**

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### **Introduction: The Political Situation**

Democratic popular revolts, against authorities perceived to be dictatorial, oppressive or simply unresponsive to people's needs, increased in numbers and intensity in 2013.. Although conspiracy theories, spread by some of the authoritarian regimes targeted by the protest movements, and their apologists, attributed many of these revolts to intervention of outside forces, the available evidence shows that these are in fact revolts mostly by ordinary people angry about abuse of power, state violence, official impunity and corruption.

A study of world protests from 2006 to 2013, published in September 2013(\*), reviewed 843 protests occurring between January 2006 and July 2013 in 87 countries covering over 90% of world population. It is worth quoting at some length from the conclusion:

"In summary, this study finds that between 2006 and 2013 outrage and discontent expressed in protest is increasing worldwide. ... The leading cause of rising protests is a cluster of grievances related to economic justice and against austerity policies that include demands to reform public services and pensions, create good jobs and better labor conditions, make tax collection and fiscal spending progressive, reduce or eliminate inequality, alleviate low-living standards, enact land reform, and ensure affordable food, energy and housing. ... Although the breadth of demand for economic justice is of serious consequence, the most sobering finding of the study is the overwhelming demand, not for economic justice *per se*, but for what prevents economic issues from being addressed: a lack of real democracy. ... Not only authoritarian governments but also representative democracies both old and new are failing to listen to or represent the needs and views of ordinary people, and people are increasingly responding in protest.

"Governments need to listen to the messages coming from protesters and protests, whether these are articulate or communicate only through frustration and violence. A real transformation is required beyond the calls for "policy shifts" and "transformational change", which are by now standard buzz-words of the world's governments and intergovernmental organizations. Leaders, policymakers and advisors will only invite further unrest if they fail to prioritize and act on the one demand raised in more of the world's protests between 2006 and 2013 than any other—the demand for real democracy."

Of the protests studied in the report, 37 involved over one million people, and "the largest of these may well be among the largest protests in history (e.g. 100 million in India in 2013 protest low living standards, attacks on wages and the need for better labor conditions and attention to inequality, and 17 million people in the streets of Egypt in 2013 overturning the government led by President Morsi, although Egypt's military took control shortly afterward)."

Trade unions have been involved in many of these protest movements, but rarely as initiators or leaders, with the exception of India and (partially) of Tunisia, the only country where the "Arab Spring" has so far succeeded in replacing a dictatorship by a stable democracy.

Mass democratic movements in the United States such as the Occupy movement from 2011, or indeed mass workers' protests against corporations, such as Walmart or the fast-food industry in 2013, were also supported, but not initiated, by the unions.

What is happening here is a world-wide mounting popular push-back against "the system" (targeted by 43% of the protests), in many forms, a symptom of the crisis of really existing capitalism. Once again, the absence of a class analysis of this crisis, and of a coherent strategic response, on the part of the international trade union movement and of most national centers, must be a major concern.

A related issue is the acceptance of really existing capitalism by most social-democratic and labour parties, and consequently the growing gap, in many countries, between the trade union movement, committed to defending workers' interests, and its traditional political allies, now committed to administering the neo-liberal agenda, hostile to workers' interests. Some analysts have described this process as the "de-socialdemocratization" of social-democracy, and its mutation into "social-technocracy". Developing a political response to these developments remains an increasingly urgent task for socialists and trade unionists.

(\*) *World Protests 2006-2013, Institute for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung New York Office, by Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohammed Berrada, Hernán Cortés, September 2013, 91 p. (on the GLI website under "The Occupy Movement")*

### **The GLI in 2013**

A major activity of the GLI Geneva, as part of the GLI International Network, has again been the GLI International Summer School (GLI ISS), in co-operation with the GLI Manchester. In 2013, the GLI ISS was attended by 96 participants from 20 countries.

GLI Geneva has also been, together with Center Praxis (GLI Moscow), a co-sponsor of the International Conference "The New Trade Unions and the Democratic Left", held in Kiev in November, with the participation of independent democratic unions from Belarus, Georgia, Russia and the Ukraine. A follow-up conference is planned for 2014 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

In the first half of the year, the GLI attempted an outreach to Syriza in Greece, which resulted in a well-attended meeting in June. However, while the political message was well received, the trade union message (Rebuilding Unions From Below) did not attract the support of the trade union apparatus, including Syriza trade unionists in the official structures. The relations with Syriza are therefore on hold.

The GLI has continued its close co-operation with WIEGO. In co-operation with WIEGO and the IUF, it has assisted domestic workers' unions in gaining an ILO convention recognizing their status as workers and establishing standards for their working conditions and, further, to establish their international federation. The founding congress of the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF) in Montevideo in October 2013 was the outcome of a highly successful joint organizing project of domestic workers' unions, an international trade union federation (IUF), an international women's network (WIEGO) and a labour service organization (GLI), which was eventually endorsed and supported by many other organizations. The GLI remains committed to support the IDWF in an advisory capacity. (In March 2013 the GLI had to vacate its office at Avenue Wendt 12, where it had been working since 1997, because the building was undergoing heavy renovation. In June, it was able to relocate to new premises at Avenue Cardinal Mermillod 18. As may be expected, the move created considerable disruption in its work, which is being gradually overcome.)