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22 January 2026

Statement of the Council of Global Unions on the Trial of Lee Cheuk-yan

Today, Brother Lee Cheuk-yan, General-Secretary of the defunct Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) is facing yet another trial in court for exercising freedom of association rights as a trade union leader. He is facing a charge of inciting subversion of the state power of China and a sentence of 10 years in prison on conviction. The Council of Global Unions (CGU) representing the global trade union movement stands in unwavering solidarity with Brother Lee. Trade unionists are human rights defenders not criminals. We express our support to Brother Lee who has stood by his faith in democracy, human rights and non-violent struggles. We stand with the other trade unionists, civil society actors and human rights defenders under oppression in Hong Kong.

Brother Lee Cheuk-yan is a prominent trade unionist well-respected by the international trade union movement. He has dedicated himself to defending workers' rights and building the independent trade union movement in Hong Kong. It is his lifelong commitment to bear witness to the brutal crackdown of the pro-democracy movement at Tiananmen in China in 1989, and to call for the right to freedom of association and democratic reforms in China.

In 2021, Lee was convicted on politically motivated charges of organising public rallies during the wave of mass- public protests in 2019 demanding universal suffrage to elect the Chief Executive in Hong Kong. Today, Brother Lee is in court again after 4 years of pre-trial detention prior to which he had served a sentence of 20 months in prison on a separate charge.

The offence of subversion is stipulated under the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong (the NSL) which was adopted by China in 2020 to suppress the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

The CGU strongly condemns the prosecution of Lee and any other pro-democracy activist and human rights defender on trial and call for their immediate release. Exercising the right to freedom of association and assembly in pursuit of democracy and fundamental human rights promotes peace, social progress and larger freedom. It is in line with the UN Charter and other international human rights instruments. It is not a crime. What is happening to Lee and others is a travesty and no one should be subjected to arbitrary detention and penal sanction for exercising these internationally protected rights.

We reiterate our deep concerns regarding the NSL and the rapidly deteriorating human rights conditions in Hong Kong in the wake of its adoption. Trade unionists, activists, journalists and human rights defenders have been subjected to broadly framed offences of subversion, collusion and sedition, leading to the conviction of 8 independent trade unionists on lengthy imprisonment sentences from 19 to 81 months.

More than 200 trade unions, civil society organisations and independent press outlets have been forced to disband themselves as a result of systematic state orchestrated smearing and defamation, threats and criminalisations.

The NSL is being applied beyond the borders of Hong Kong further instilling fear in those forced into exile as a result of their legitimate activities and creating an environment resulting in self-censorship and a chilling effect for those continuing their human rights and pro-democracy activities abroad.

The Hong Kong government must stop using the national security law and criminal persecution against individuals exercising their fundamental rights and civil liberties. The government should repeal the NSL, the National Security Ordinance and all laws that infringe and restrict on the fundamental human rights of the people of Hong Kong.

We call on our global affiliates to stand in solidarity with Hong Kong trade unionists, workers under oppression, and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all those being prosecuted or imprisoned for the human rights and pro-democracy activities.

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This is a Council of Global Unions (CGU) Statement jointly signed by:

Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI)

Education International (EI)

International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA)

IndustriALL Global Union

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)

International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)

Public Services International (PSI)

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