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Georgia: Abandon 'Foreign Agent' Registration Law

Proposed Bill Poses Grave Threat to Civil Society, Including Trade Unions



Protesters march outside the parliament building in protest of "the Russian law" in Tbilisi, Georgia, April 9, 2024. © 2024 AP Photo/Shakh Aivazov

(Tbilisi, April 12, 2024) – The Georgian government should withdraw permanently its plans to reintroduce so-called “foreign agent” legislation, Human Rights Watch and five labor rights organizations and trade unions said in a statement released today. The bill would require foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations, media and trade unions to register as “agents of foreign influence.”

The following is the statement:

The Georgia Fair Labor Platform condemns the government’s plans to reintroduce its so-called “foreign agent” legislation, which would require foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations

and media to register as “agents of foreign influence.”

Many have already detailed how the bill is a transparent attempt to control, stigmatize and limit the influence of independent media and civil society. We believe it would also do severe damage to workers' rights. Trade unions are considered NGOs under Georgian law and would thus be affected by the bill if they receive more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources.

The fact that only certain types of organizations are singled out in the law – and not, for example, businesses or NGOs receiving government funding – is a clear and calculated tactic by the government. Their goal is not transparency; it is to attack our basic rights and silence critical organizations that speak out against abuses and injustice.

The government's goals also clearly include crushing independent trade unions, which have been instrumental in sounding the alarm about Georgia's dismal wages, poor record on worker safety, union busting and more. Unions allow employees to fight unfair labor practices, promote democratization of the workplace, and raise workers' voices in an environment thoroughly dominated by the power of big capital and the state. The foreign agent bill threatens this.

Trade unions generally receive most of their funding from membership dues, but some also accept funds from foreign donors to conduct research, provide legal services, attend conferences and more. The funding that is not available from other sources is utilized to serve the interests of workers and independent unions remain accountable to their membership.

In addition to threatening trade unions, the new bill also threatens NGOs that provide legal services to workers – helping them fight labor rights violations in court or bring them to the Labor Inspectorate. Legal services are expensive, and for many, pro bono legal services are the only option. Foreign donors who fund such services are filling a gap that both the government and domestic donors have proven unable or unwilling to address.

We also believe that the proposed bill would decimate small, independent media outlets which workers rely on to raise awareness of labor rights violations. Georgian mainstream media usually ignores the struggles of victims of labor rights violations. Without the support of alternative media, our problems would become even more invisible and limit our ability to build public support during strikes, protests and other labor disputes.

Finally, the bill raises serious concerns about Georgia's prospects for European Union accession, as [noted by the EU itself](#). This is problematic for workers' rights because EU labor protections are stronger than Georgian law in virtually every area, from minimum wages to overtime regulations to social security. Georgia would be required to adopt these protections prior to gaining EU membership, meaning EU accession would be a net positive for labor rights. Any move that threatens this process would be bad for workers.

We reiterate our condemnation of the draft foreign agent bill. Its passage would deprive Georgians of essential mechanisms to protect their labor rights, stigmatize many organizations in the labor movement and ultimately be harmful for workers. We call on the government to permanently abandon its attempts to enact this bill or any similar legislation.

This statement is endorsed by the following Fair Labor Platform members:

- Social Justice Center
 - Trade Union of Science, Education and Culture
 - Guild
 - Civil Society Foundation
 - Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)
 - Human Rights Watch
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