Dear President Mnangagwa,

The International Centre for Trade Union Rights is writing to express grave concerns about the arrest on 11 October of 34 trade unionists, including Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions President Peter Mutasa and Secretary General Japhet Mayo.

As many as 150 police office are reported to have surrounded the ZCTU offices in Harare and arrested both of the country’s most senior trade union leaders in order to stop the holding of a planned demonstration against a transaction tax increase. Further arrests were reported in Mutare and Masvingo. This development follows closely after the violent repression of protests in Harare on 1 August, during which six protestors were killed, and in which live ammunition was fired against the offices of the ZCTU, resulting in damage to the building and injuries to ZCTU staff members.

ICTUR recalls that the arrest of trade union leaders constitutes a serious violation of the principles of freedom of association, while the authorities’ attempts to prevent public demonstrations constitute serious violations of other fundamental human rights principles, significantly: freedom of assembly. ICTUR recalls that these principles are protected under the UN’s international human rights Covenants and by the Conventions of the International Labour Organisation. They are also clearly protected by the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (Articles 6 – Protection from Arbitrary Arrest; 10 – Freedom of Association; and 11 – Freedom of Assembly).

According to the ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association, ‘the detention of trade union leaders or members for trade union activities or
membership is contrary to the principles of freedom of association’ 
(Compilation of decisions of the Committee on Freedom of Association, ILO, Sixth Edition, 2018, para 120) and that ‘the arrest, even if only briefly, of trade union leaders and trade unionists, and of the leaders of employers’ organizations, for exercising legitimate activities in relation with their right of association constitutes a violation of the principles of freedom of association (Compilation, para. 121). The Committee further notes that ‘the detention of trade unionists for reasons connected with their activities in defence of the interests of workers constitutes a serious interference with civil liberties in general and with trade union rights in particular’ (Compilation, para. 123).

ICTUR calls on the government to urgently address its approach to the protection of civil liberties, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly in order to ensure that it complies with Zimbabwe’s obligations under international law and under the African Charter. ICTUR will report these incidents in the journal International Union Rights, which was established in 1993, and which enjoys a readership in more than 100 countries.

Yours faithfully,

Daniel Blackburn, Director