



## London Retired Members Branch

# STATE VIOLENCE IN MANAMA: FOUR YEARS ON

by David Binns (UCU London Retired Members branch)

14 February 2015 marked the fourth anniversary of the opening of the most recent phase of struggle for political and social transformation in Bahrain.

The movement began with anti-regime protests in the capital, Manama. Initially led largely by young activists inspired by events then unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt, the demonstrators immediately became the target of state attacks. These in turn provoked much wider support for the demonstrations, which rapidly assumed mass proportions. Evidently fearing for its own future, the regime reacted with further, intensified violence.

Amidst these developments the *New York Times*

[\[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17bahrain.html?pagewanted=all&r=0\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17bahrain.html?pagewanted=all&r=0) reported how on Thursday 17 February 2011:

*"Without warning, hundreds of heavily armed riot police officers rushed into Pearl Square...firing tear gas and concussion grenades at the thousands of demonstrators who were sleeping there as part of a widening protest against the nation's absolute monarchy.*

*Men, women and young children ran screaming, choking and collapsing."*

The new pro-democracy, and increasingly anti-monarchy, movement clearly alarmed the regime. Its response was a massively intimidatory display of direct violence against street activists combined with equally repressive measures against reform supporters within the trade unions - notably the leadership of the Bahrain Teachers Association.

[\[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/r/t/davidbinns\\_bahrainopenletter\\_sep13.pdf\]](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/r/t/davidbinns_bahrainopenletter_sep13.pdf)

A recent report from the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

[\[http://birdbh.org/2015/02/ngos-commemorate-the-four-year-anniversary-of-bahrains-peaceful-uprising-2/\]](http://birdbh.org/2015/02/ngos-commemorate-the-four-year-anniversary-of-bahrains-peaceful-uprising-2/) outlines subsequent developments:

*"Four years later, more than 3,000 prisoners are in jail, an estimated 5 Bahrainis per day are subjected to enforced disappearance, and dozens have been killed at the hands of their government, which has committed these violations with impunity. Just as protests have not stopped, the excessive use of tear gas and birdshot pellets continue to cause serious injuries to individuals, including children. Additionally, the government continues to employ policies that fuel sectarian divisions and marginalize peaceful opposition.*

*Bahrain has also issued legislation that allows for harsher penalties to be used to silence dissent. Misuse of anti-terrorism legislation has led to the revocation of citizenship of at least 115 individuals without due process, as well as the arrest of prominent opposition leaders...Human rights defenders and activists also face ongoing judicial harassment, with the majority of them currently imprisoned or awaiting trial..."*

Despite sweeping and open ended state threats against potential protesters, a substantial demonstration marking the anniversary took place in Manama. *Al Jazeera* [<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/02/protests-mark-fourth-anniversary-bahrain-uprising-150214074700114.html>] cites the account by human rights campaigner Najeeb Rajab of mass arrests and injuries:

*"Every five minutes protesters were shot at by police. We have a lot of people wounded now and we can not take them to hospitals because we are afraid they will be arrested...Thousands of police have been deployed in the streets. And for the first time i have seen hundreds of armed people in civilian clothes attacking protesters."*

The picture portrayed is confirmed by Mohammed Al-Tajer of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory. Interviewed by the AFL-CIO linked Solidarity Center [<http://www.solidaritycenter.org/repression-still-reigns-in-bahrain-on-feb-14-anniversary/>], Al-Tajer describes how:

*"...the situation has worsened. Security police are everywhere, military police are everywhere. Bahrain is a totally militarized place."*

In addition he confirms the ongoing anti-union thrust of state repression and the centrality of workers organisation to the broad struggle for change. As the Solidarity Center observes:

*"Since 2011, Al-Tajer says 166 people have been killed and thousands are still in jail, many of whom are teachers, doctors, nurses and journalists. Union leaders have been especially targeted. Some...have been jailed, others have been fired, or given dead-end jobs and 4,500 union members have been fired for participating in the 2011 actions, Al-Tajer says. Banning workers from certain jobs, a tactic for repressing dissent, continues: Al-Tajer says he sees several new cases a week as workers seek to appeal their dismissals."*

*'Anybody who Tweets, anybody who speaks about freedom, about labor rights, might go to jail, might lose his job,' he says, adding that anyone who calls for a strike is jailed."*

There is every indication that more arrests and political frameups are in the pipeline. Since 17 February leading opposition group, al-Wefaq, has been subject to a Ministry of the Interior criminal investigation into allegedly illegal content posted to its website. The offending material, notes *Jurist* website: "... involves pictures of wounded protesters from the Saturday protests, and claims that the authorities fired buckshot and tear gas to disperse protesters. Al-Wefaq is accused... of publicly inciting hatred against the government, encouraging illegal rallies and

distributing false news." [<http://jurist.org/paperchase/2015/02/bahrain-initiates-criminal-investigation-into-online-content-of-opposition-party.php>]

It is clear that the regime is becoming more rather than less resolved to attack any opposition that manifests. Equally, popular hostility to the tyranny shows no sign of yielding to intensified state aggression. Rights activists are warning of sectarian agendas becoming entrenched within the simmering stalemate that persists in the protracted aftermath of 2011.

There is much that trade unionists internationally can do and should be doing in solidarity with the Bahraini struggles:

- ~ Support independent unions and democratisation movements in Bahrain;
- ~ Oppose the planned British military base there as a further defence of tyranny;
- ~ Watch and, more important, share the *Al Jazeera* documentary, *Bahrain: Shouting in the dark*. This still topical report tracks in detail the unfolding of the bloody state riot in Manama four years ago . A valuable introduction to those events, it is posted online at:  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html>.