

### BAHRAIN UPDATE: MAHDI ABU DHEEB RELEASED, REPRESSION CONTINUES

*An earlier version of this report appeared in issue 6 (May 2016) of UCU London Retired Members' Newsletter. Changes include provision of a fuller set of references/links and some textual additions, in particular concerning recent repressive measures against Bahrain Teachers Association vice-president, Jalila al-Salman.*

Alongside some welcome news from Bahrain, recent developments strengthen the case for not only continuing, but further intensifying solidarity with popular struggles against the regime, above all with independent Bahraini trade unions.

The good news, first, is that in April Mahdi Abu Dheeb, president of the Bahrain Teachers Association (BTA), was released from prison. Mahdi was convicted by a military court following involvement in the protests of Spring 2011. His imprisonment was an element of the regime's response to mass support for democratic reform. As such it provoked trade union opposition internationally. Mahdi's release, five years on, is widely welcomed, but not an ounce of gratitude is owed to the regime and its allies.

As Chris Keates, General Secretary of British teachers' union NASUWT, has observed:

*“While the news that Mahdi has finally been released is wonderful, the fact remains that he has lost the last five years of his life and been subjected to repeated abuse and torture while in prison simply for doing nothing more than organising and representing the interests of teachers, and calling for quality education for all children and young people in Bahrain.”*

The victimisation of Mahdi is far from being an isolated phenomenon. Nor are the underlying issues in any sense resolved or even addressed by his release, any more than they were by that of BTA vice-president Jalila al-Salman in November 2012. What persists is a reign of diffuse state terror, directed especially against trade unionists and other regime critics. Arrests continue, as do assaults, inflicting of torture and revoking of citizenship as retaliation for expression of dissent or resistance in any form.

The imprisonment in February of Ibrahim Sharif, former leader of established secular opposition Waad party and veteran of the 2011 mass mobilisations, is a well publicised example. Formal arrests and incarcerations, however, are only part of the picture. Other repressive restraints and forms of harassment are repeatedly enforced to silence regime critics, especially where international solidarity is involved. On 13th June of this year, indeed, Jalila al-Salman was banned from leaving Bahrain and her passport was confiscated over precisely such an issue. Education International notes:

*"The travel ban can only be understood as a direct response to her union activism and commitment to human rights issues," explains the joint statement by the Norwegian Arthur Svensson Foundation, Education International (EI), and the Norwegian Industrial Union.*

*The ban means that al-Salman is unable to return to the very ceremony where last year she herself received the...[Arthur Svensson International Prize for Trade Union Rights]...The move shows 'a lack of respect for basic union rights from the Bahraini government', the global organisations note. They strongly condemned this attack against the union movement and urged the government of Bahrain to lift the travel ban immediately and fully respect international labour standards."*

Many similar instances are documented at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) website. The simmering stalemate of opposition versus repression continues, as do the apologetics of allied state spokespersons, above all in Britain.

But the support which the British ruling class and their state are providing for the dictatorship involves more than Whitehall reassurances. Nor is their engagement entirely covert. In fact while doubtless they are fragments of the totality of such transactions, from time to time aspects of the British military dimension receive mass media attention. In January 2016, for example, the British *Mirror* newspaper reported parliamentary figures revealing that, since 2006, Sandhurst military school *"has offered taxpayer-subsidised training to 843 officers from other countries"*, including Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. These graduates, the *Mirror* adds, *"include 66 recruits from Bahrain which is accused of engaging in systematic torture, extra-judicial killing and enforced disappearances."*

In addition there is the matter of the arming as well as training of Bahraini state power. British prime minister David Cameron publicly celebrates commercial dispersal of British weaponry on a wide front, including to allied tyrants. In late February the *Guardian* quoted his defiant assertion, made during a visit to the BAE Systems Preston factory: *"I promise I will not be taking my eye off the ball, making sure the brilliant things you make here at BAE Systems are available and sold all over the world."* Bahrain, of course, is well known as a "priority market" for UK armaments.

So what of those Bahrainis whom economists might term *final consumers* of the sort of "brilliant" deadly products of twenty first century British capitalism that so excite David Cameron? Gratitude may not fully describe their response to a recent report of *"elite Royal Navy commandos...running week-long training courses for Bahraini personnel."* Writing in the *Independent*, Jamie Merrill notes that sniper firing is amongst the skills being passed on to the Bahraini armed forces by British professionals. The trainees are members of the state gangs who, alongside Saudi and Emirates detachments, went on a murderous rampage against non-violent Bahraini protesters at Pearl Roundabout in Manama just five years ago. The incarceration of the BTA leaders was part of the same campaign of repression, while the Union Jack fluttered discreetly in the wings.

On the other hand, the UCU originated inter-union statement published last Autumn remains a resource to extend, develop and disseminate through further solidarity work and political struggle. It is an antidote to pessimism and confirmation that neither successive bourgeois

governments nor more core elements of the British state speak for the labour movement on Bahrain and wider issues concerning the Gulf and global capitalism.

*David Binns (UCU London Retired Members)*

19th June 2016

**Some online sources:**

NASUWT account of release of Mahdi Abu Dheeb:

[http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/Whatsnew/NASUWTNews/PressReleases/NASUWT\\_015536](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/Whatsnew/NASUWTNews/PressReleases/NASUWT_015536)

The imprisonment of the BTA leaders was the catalyst for my original *Open Letter* to UCU members and figured centrally within it:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6002/David-Binns-Defend-the-Bahrain-Teachers-An-Open-letter-to-UCU-Members.-Sep-13/pdf/davidbinns\\_bahrainopenletter\\_sep13.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6002/David-Binns-Defend-the-Bahrain-Teachers-An-Open-letter-to-UCU-Members.-Sep-13/pdf/davidbinns_bahrainopenletter_sep13.pdf)

On the repeated imprisonment of Ibrahim Sharif:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/24/bahrain-jails-ibrahim-sharif-national-democratic-action-society>

Education International reports the ban against Jalila al-Salman leaving Bahrain:

[https://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news\\_details/3996](https://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/3996)

For an interpretation of the award of the Svensson International Prize to Jalila al-Salman and Mahdi Abu Dheeb last year and its significance for UCU policy see:

<http://www.ucu-retired-london.org.uk/pdf/Solidarity-Teachers-Bahrain.pdf>

David Cameron's eulogy to brilliant British military products and their global dissemination:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/david-cameron-brilliant-uk-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-bae>

Jamie Merrill on Royal Navy commandos running sniper courses for Bahraini state personnel:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-commandos-training-bahraini-armed-forces-to-use-sniper-rifles-a6952836.html>

*Mirror* report on Sandhurst training of Bahraini officers:

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/sandhurst-academy-training-officers-brutal-7228239>

See also:

[http://www.salon.com/2016/01/22/britains\\_royal\\_military\\_academy\\_is\\_paid\\_millions\\_to\\_train\\_officers\\_for\\_repressive\\_gulf\\_dictatorships/](http://www.salon.com/2016/01/22/britains_royal_military_academy_is_paid_millions_to_train_officers_for_repressive_gulf_dictatorships/)

On the September 2015 inter-union statement on Bahrain, including a link to the complete text:

<http://www.ucu-retired-london.org.uk/pdf/Bahrain-TU-breakthrough.pdf>

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy:

<http://birdbh.org/>