

WTUC Speech on Freedom of Expression in Support of Motion 34 on Free Speech

President, Congress, Kathy Dyson Musician's Union proposing motion 34 on Free Speech.

Background

Why is freedom of expression so important for musicians, actors and all kinds of artists and why should it be protected? The short answer is that individual musicians and bands are often able to encapsulate or articulate a feeling or idea that many people can relate to and enjoy. In addition to the celebratory and dance aspects of music, it is and has historically been a powerful tool to bring people together and to empower them; to draw attention to injustice and excesses of power and to protest against them.

Indeed, I think that we in the trades union movement have neglected the communally empowering nature of music over the past 20 odd years and should be embracing it again, particularly in the current political and economic climate.

We only have to look at past musical /political campaigns such as Feed the World or Rock Against Racism to understand how strong a force music is in bringing people together around an issue that needs to change. This is why so many oppressive leaders, dictators and governments seek to stifle freedom of expression by threatening, persecuting, prosecuting and sometimes murdering musicians, across the globe.

Actuality

The Pussy Riot case, though high profile is just the tip of the iceberg. In 2012 there were 173 reported and documented incidents against musicians over 30 different countries:

- 5 threatened -12 attacked -2 abducted -6 killed -84 detained -16 prosecuted
-14 imprisoned - 34 censored

The Taliban and other minority Islamic extremist groups, are particularly oppressive and view music as sinful. In Pakistan for example, Pashto music has been banned and a popular young singer Ghazala Javel, was murdered with her father, by unknown gunmen- no-one has yet been prosecuted for the crime.

The Punjab assembly has banned concerts in educational institutions and for a decade or more, the Taliban have bombed and torched record and music shops and closed down concert halls and clubs.

Musicians there have had three choices: to go into hiding, to go into exile or to leave the profession. Many who have had successful careers are now living in dire poverty. The tide is turning against the Taliban in Pakistan, but very slowly.

Especially relevant to us at WTUC is the all-girl rock band from Kashmir called Pragaash which has been forced to disband after a fatwa was issued by the local iman who called the band 'obscene' and continued: 'Music is bad for society and such behaviour is a catalyst for the growing number of attacks in India' meaning the rapes, which have been in the news and been the source of mass and angry protest by women in India.

This is particularly ironic, as Kashmir has a long tradition of women making music and was known for it's cultural tolerance, but since the 1990s has experienced horrors at the hands of extremists and many have been killed.

The powers that be and those in authority understand very well the positive effect that music has on people and the strength it gives to society. It also

builds individual identity and agency, all of which are threatening to an oppressive regime.

In Tanzania, the Zanzibar Festival has a special focus on freedom of expression and is entitled: Speaking Truth to Power. It has invited many artists from across the African continent who have been censored and persecuted, to perform. One, Khaira Arby from Mali, was threatened with having her tongue cut out by Islamic militants if she sang her 'desert laments' again.

Freemuse

That I am able to tell you all this is due to the Scandinavian organisation Freemuse which is documenting and publicising the persecution, actively promoting freedom of expression and is in the process of creating safe havens for musicians in scandinavian countries. They are doing sterling work and we ask conference to promote the organisation in order to provide practical help to musicians and to protect freedom of expression.

I'll end with the words of Rebecca Yeong Cory MD of the Zanzibar Festival:

“Music is one of the most powerful tools we have to speak out against injustice, to celebrate life, and to express the triumphs of the human spirit. Freedom of expression is a human right — and it benefits us all when it is observed and respected.”.

Please support this motion.

Kathy Dyson March 12th 2013