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Belarus: improve record on labour rights or risk losing trade benefits

Brussels, 8 June 2005 (ICFTU Online): Belarus risks being stripped of its EU trade benefits if it fails to respect labour and social rights, said the international trade union movement today.

Following a speech by EU Commissioner for trade, Peter Mandelson, there is growing speculation that Belarus' incessant repression of trade union rights - which has seen the arrest and harassment of trade union leaders - will result in the withdrawal of benefits under the EU's Generalised System of Preferences.

"[...] where countries systematically flout core labour standards, we will not hesitate to take away the positive trade incentives that we have put in place. Both international trade unions and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have evidenced the systematic violations of freedom of association in Belarus. As a result, I now intend to recommend to the Commission and our Member States that we proceed with the temporary withdrawal of GSP benefits for this country", said Commissioner Mandelson to an audience gathered for an ILO /European Commission forum in Turin, Italy .

The international labour movement, which has long campaigned for economic sanctions against President Lukashenko's regime, welcomed the statement by Commissioner Mandelson.

"The Belarus authorities cannot expect that their flagrant abuses of trade union rights will go unnoticed. This week's statement by Commissioner Mandelson shows that the flouting of core labour standards will not escape the scrutiny of international institutions. The ICFTU, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and World Confederation of Labour (WCL) will continue to campaign for freedom of association and the right to organise, as enshrined in the conventions of the UN's International Labour Organisation" said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder today.

For Peter Mandelson's full speech, see:

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/05/302&type=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

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