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Trade unions worldwide urge EU to deny Belarus trade preferences

Brussels, 30 May, 2006 - The ICFTU, ETUC and WCL have written to European Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, and many of their affiliates have written to the countries in the European Union committee that decides which countries will benefit under their Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), urging them to suspend Belarus's trade preferences due to the serious nature of the Lukashenko regime's trade union rights violations.

"Along with the whole international community we observed in the last presidential election the denial of democracy in Belarus. Trade unionists were among the activists who demonstrated in the center of Minsk. They were also amongst those who were beaten up and sent to jail. The international community cannot continue to turn a blind eye to such abuses and the GSP agreement gives the Commission the opportunity to send a clear message that the EU and its member states are serious when they link respect for human and trade union rights with trade cooperation", Guy Ryder, the General Secretary of the ICFTU said today.

The GSP Committee, which meets tomorrow will examine the Belarus case and make a recommendation to the European Commission about whether or not Belarus should receive trade preferences. That advice will then be taken on board by Peter Mandelson, the EU Trade Commissioner in his recommendation to the EU Council.

In 2005, imports into the EU from Belarus receiving GSP tariff reductions amounted to EUR 388 million. The principal import categories from Belarus which benefited from GSP were mineral products (19% of effective GSP benefits), textiles (13%) & clothing (12%) and wood (10% or EUR39 million).

According to Willy Thys, the Secretary General of the WCL, "We must remain vigilant in ensuring that where we have the leverage of trade to improve respect for workers' rights, we do so. Not only has the Belarus government not implemented any of the 12 recommendations of the ILO Commission of Inquiry (CoI) set up in 2004, but the situation has gotten worse."

In a 37-page report on the lack of implementation of the ILO CoI recommendations

(<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223773&Language=EN>)

the ICFTU and WCL note that: amongst other repressive measures:

- * Criminal liability was introduced for "discrediting the republic of Belarus" which could include trade union complaints to international bodies such as the ILO concerning violations of their rights
- * Legislation which allows the government to dissolve trade unions was adopted and put into practice
- * Further steps, including legal ones, were taken to secure the exclusive privileged position of the government-supported trade union FBP, which further threatens the existence of independent trade unions.

"We not only urge the committee to recommend the suspension of trade preferences to Belarus which it has every power to do, we also urge Peter Mandelson, other Commissioners and the Council to follow through. The workers of Belarus deserve our support in their fight against this repressive regime, and the citizens of Europe deserve to know that their leaders are promoting democracy, freedom and decent work when they make their trade decisions," John Monks, the General Secretary of the ETUC commented today.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. <http://www.icftu.org>. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions.

The WCL represents 30 million workers worldwide (www.cmt-wcl.org).

The ETUC represents 60 million trade unionists from 36 countries in Western, Central and Eastern Europe.

The letter to Peter Mandelson :

<http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/ICFTUWCLLETUClettertoEUCoMMandelsonsurviol0406REV.pdf>

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