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Suspension of EU trade preferences to Belarus: ITUC General Council urges the government to implement international labour standards

Brussels, 21 June 2007 (ITUC OnLine): With the decision of the European Commission to suspend access by Belarus to trade preferences under the EU Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) today, the ITUC General Council meeting in Brussels has adopted a resolution urging the government to take all necessary measures to bring national legislation and practice into compliance with the international labour standards.

“The decision to suspend the benefits enjoyed by Belarus is the inevitable result of the persistent repression of basic trade union rights by the Government of Belarus for many years,” said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder. “The Government simply refused to implement the recommendations of the special Commission of Inquiry of the ILO, and so it alone is responsible for triggering the suspension.”

The multi-year procedure was initiated by the EU Commission under its GSP procedure in December 2003, in response to evidence of rights violations presented by the ITUC’s predecessor organisations and the ETUC. The GSP system allows countries which comply with core international labour standards to benefit from reduced tariffs on certain products exported to the countries of the European Union.

The European Commission states that the withdrawal will affect around 10% of Belarus exports. In 2005, Belarus exported some 3.34 billion Euros worth of goods to the EU.

So far, the GSP has been withdrawn in only one other case, that of Burma, in 1997 for its systematic imposition of forced labour on the civilian population.

In a recent letter to President Lukashenko of Belarus, the ITUC stated that the steps undertaken by the Government to implement the ILO’s recommendations have proven to be half-hearted, insufficient, equivocal and in no way leading towards the full respect of trade union rights and freedoms. The Committee of Application of Standards of the International Labour Conference last week defined these actions as “clearly insufficient”, stated that they “did not address the heart of the matter” and recalled “the imperative need for the Government to act without delay to ensure that all workers’ and employers’ organizations could function freely and without interference and obtain registration without previous authorization”.

The ITUC General Council called for the Government of Belarus to take real action now, saying that if it does so, then tangible progress could already be discussed by the Governing Body of the ILO at its next session in November 2007.

The General Council further expressed its full solidarity with the independent trade unions and the workers of Belarus and reiterated that only implementing the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry in full and without delay could give a clear signal to the European Union that international labour standards are respected in Belarus.

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

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