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55 die in Morocco fire - employer greed and official negligence blamed

Brussels, 29 April 2008 (ITUC OnLine): "It's an inevitable mass murder arising from employer greed and official negligence," said Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) a day after the fire that killed at least 55 people, including 35 women, in the Rosamor Ameublements mattress and furniture factory on the edge of Casablanca, Morocco's biggest city.

The ITGLWF and the ITUC are calling for murder charges to be brought against those responsible, not only the owners but also officials in government ministries and agencies who had ignored violations of labour rights and breaches of basic safety regulations in the factory.

According to survivors of the fire, workers were being paid less than the minimum wage, weren't registered for social security and worked in appalling conditions. Despite the presence of highly flammable raw materials, windows and doors were locked during working hours, supposedly to stop materials being removed from the factory, thus making it impossible to escape, and the fire extinguishers were empty.

"This was an accident waiting to happen and could have occurred at hundreds of locations in Morocco and tens of thousands across the world where textiles and household textiles' manufacturers exploit workers and ignore basic safety standards while the authorities turn a blind eye to death trap factories," claimed Neil Kearney, demanding that exemplary compensation be paid to the families of the dead and the best medical care be offered to the injured.

With reports this morning of a blaze in another textile factory in the Casablanca suburbs, this time specialising in curtain-making, ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder gave notice that "the whole of Moroccan industry, and in particular the textile and clothing sectors" must change its working practices, which all too often contravene labour legislation.

In Morocco large numbers of workers aren't registered for social security, don't receive the statutory minimum wage and aren't offered the protection of basic health and safety measures.

Given that such hazardous workplaces and irresponsible employers contribute nothing to economic and industrial development, the ITUC is joining the ITGLWF in calling on the Moroccan authorities to promptly inspect working conditions and safety in all production sites, immediately stop any activities that pose risks for workers' health and safety and start legal action against any employer breaching the labour legislation on wages, working hours and safety standards.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: www.ituc-csi.org
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