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Bangladesh: Government Must Support Decent Minimum Wage, and Cease Harassment of Union Rights Supporters

Brussels, 9 August 2010 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC is calling on the Government of Bangladesh to support decent wages and living standards for the country's workers, particularly in the garments sector, and cease harassment of trade unionists and other worker-rights advocates. Thousands of workers in the ready-made garments sector, a key industry exporting to countries around the world, protested against a government announcement in July that the minimum wage would only be increased to Taka 3,000 per month instead of the 5,000 proposed by unions, and to delay implementing the increase until November.

The ITUC is particularly concerned over arrest warrants issued against leaders of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS), who are currently in hiding. The government had already cancelled the BCWS registration as an ngo in early June, confiscated its property and frozen its bank account. A BCWS staff member was subsequently detained and severely beaten by security police before managing to escape. Factory owners supplying some of the biggest names in global retailing are thought to be behind the repression.

"The new minimum wage of 21 US cents per hour is not enough to live on, with workers putting in extremely long hours in difficult working conditions but still unable to make ends meet. It is an absolute disgrace that this industry, worth \$12bn a year, treats its workforce with such contempt. The government should stop the harassment of those defending the fundamental rights to a living wage and to union representation, and help push the multinational companies which control the global garment industry to ensure their workers get a fair deal," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina has described wages in the sector as "inhuman" in comments to the national parliament, and the government has called for unions to be established in the garment factories, which employ mainly young women.

"We are calling on the government to match its words with action, to end the appalling treatment of the millions of workers in the garment industry. They should start by immediately ceasing all actions against legitimate advocates of workers' rights, and ensuring that the employees have the right to join and form trade unions without interference," said Burrow.

Trade unions in the garment sector have called for proper provision of health, housing and childcare, and even rations of food staples, to supplement the meagre minimum wage as food prices continue to rise. They have also urged the government to fully respect trade union rights, noting that frustration amongst workers in the majority of factories where unions are not permitted, contributed to the levels of anger shown by many workers at the decision to hold the minimum wage below the level needed.

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 312 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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