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Sri Lanka: Labour Rights Violations threatening GSP benefits

Brussels, 3 November 2010 (ITUC Online): The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) reported today to the World Trade Organisation that "while Sri Lanka has ratified all eight of the International Labour Organization's core conventions, it has largely failed to implement these conventions," as noted by Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the ITUC.

In response to human rights violations in Sri Lanka, in August 2010 the European Union withdrew the trade preferences previously granted under its Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The United States Trade Representative is currently investigating whether workers' rights violations warrant removing Sri Lanka from its own GSP scheme.

Sri Lankan employers routinely delay certification votes and fire union activists to prevent workers from joining unions. These problems are especially severe in Export Processing Zones, where the government has encouraged employers to recognise "employees' councils" instead of trade unions. Even where collective bargaining occurs, the government can and does make strikes illegal by declaring any industry an "essential service."

Sri Lankan law does not prohibit gender discrimination in the private sector and some industries still pay different wage rates to men and women doing the same job. While the law prohibits child labour and forced labour, both are prevalent in practice.

"As a first step toward maintaining normal access to its largest export markets, Sri Lanka must set out a clear timetable to reform its legislation and practice to meet its international commitments to uphold basic labour rights," said Burrow.

To read the full report: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/report-for-the-wto-general-council,7890.html>

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 301 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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