

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

EU must push for fundamental rights in Bangladesh garment sector

Brussels, 5 May 2013 (ITUC OnLine): The global union movement has welcomed the European Commission's commitment to press Bangladesh to meet international labour standards. European Commissioners Catherine Ashton and Karel De Gucht made the pledge in a joint statement following the horrific building collapse in Savar, Bangladesh that has claimed some 600 lives and left many more seriously injured in one of the world's worst industrial disasters. The threat of EU action under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), rarely invoked, further underscores the concern.

"The EU should use its considerable leverage to encourage brands sourcing from Bangladesh to sign up to a binding and enforceable agreement on fire and building safety, in which workers and trade unions play an active role," said Jyrki Raina, General Secretary of IndustriALL Global Union.

"The industry's promotion of corporate auditing to identify and remedy problems is yet again revealed as a cruel hoax, as corporate auditor BSCI had recently certified factories operating in the Rana Plaza building," said Raina. "A voluntary approach that relies merely on corporate goodwill - which has been largely absent - would be a mistake. Promotion of more corporate auditing is no solution to the problem," said Raina.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said "Once again, workers have paid with their lives for the cosy but ultimately lethal relationships between global brands, ruthless suppliers and corrupt politicians in Bangladesh. The EU must follow through on its pledge, and act to stop the sham corporate CSR industry doing any more damage."

The factories in which garments are produced in Bangladesh for the leading global retailers are well known to be death traps. The situation is made worse by the complete hostility towards trade unions by both the government and garment producers' associations in Bangladesh. The government has for years refused to register unions in the garment sector. Only due to substantial international pressure have new unions begun to receive legal recognition in the past months.

Philip Jennings, general Secretary of UNI Global Union which organises workers in the retail sector, said "UNI and its affiliates are demanding that retailers around the world sign an enforceable agreement which protects workers in Bangladesh from the unacceptable dangers of fire and building hazards and ensures these workers will have full access to the best form of health and safety protection: a union. They can't hide from their responsibility - the time to step up to a real agreement is now."

The ITUC, IndustriALL Global Union and IndustriAll European Trade Union say that the EU must also not view the situation as a safety and health matter alone. If workers have a strong union, it is far more likely that they will be able to negotiate for safer workplaces and to remove themselves from danger quickly when it arises. The EU must therefore ensure that freedom of association is at the centre of any engagement with the government. Along with this, pressure must be put on the industry and the government, to ensure that workers are paid a living wage. The government, under employer pressure, has refused to raise the \$36 minimum monthly wage.

"New legislation that complies with ILO standards and the efficient registration of new unions will be vital to avoid future tragedies. The current labour code amendments recently passed by the cabinet leave many issues raised by the ILO and trade unions regarding freedom of association wholly unaddressed," said Sharon Burrow.

"The EU must also insist that those responsible for the torture and murder of trade union activist Aminul Islam last year be arrested and prosecuted without further delay," said Burrow.

Bernadette Ségal, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) calls on the Commission to adopt a new strategy for the Corporate Social Responsibility programme 2011-2014. "We must ensure that all multinationals operating in Europe commit to respecting the International Labour Organisation's declaration on tripartite principles concerning multinational enterprises and social policy."

A recent report by the US trade union centre AFL-CIO "Responsibility Outsourced" http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/csreport_final_en.pdf details the appalling track record of corporate-backed "social audit" firms, including other cases where auditors failed to act on fatally dangerous factories and helped companies with US-style union avoidance strategies.

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