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Bangladesh Labour Law Changes Inadequate

Brussels, 11 June 2013 (ITUC OnLine): Changes to Bangladesh's notoriously weak labour laws being discussed in parliament are inadequate and will leave workers still without protection guaranteed under global labour standards, according to the international trade union movement.

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the ITUC, said, "After years of inaction, the government is trying to hose down criticism of a system which has cost thousands of lives and kept the country's garment workers on dollar-a-day wages to feed the corporate bottom line. The changes being debated in parliament won't change that, so major trading partners including the US and the EU will now need to step up pressure for real reform."

The 360,000 workers in the country's eight export processing zones will remain excluded from labour law coverage and instead relegated to a separate law that prohibits workers from even forming a union. Remaining union-free appears to be one of the promises made to investors who set up in the zones.

"With so many factory owners holding seats in parliament, it is no surprise that workers' rights are still being stifled," said Burrow.

One of the worst clauses in the old labour law, a requirement that factory owners be given the names of workers wanting to join unions, is likely to be scrapped; however, cosy relations between many government officials and the country's employers mean that workers will still risk their jobs by signing up to unions. The revised law, through a series of administrative obstacles, still makes it extremely hard for workers to form unions; such obstacles include high membership thresholds for registering unions, restrictions on who can serve as a union official and unreasonable limits on collective bargaining and the right to strike.

There is no sign that another common anti-union tactic, where government officials simply don't process union registration requests, will diminish. Registrations have often increased when previous factory disasters have put Bangladesh under the international spotlight, only to taper off when the global pressure eases.

"Partial measures are not good enough. Bangladesh needs to bring its laws fully into line with ILO standards, especially on freedom of association and collective bargaining. We're pressing for that in tomorrow's debate at the ILO Conference, and we're keeping up the pressure on the global clothing brands and on governments to convince Bangladesh to do the right thing by its own people," said Burrow.

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 315 national affiliates.

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