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New ITUC Economic Briefings series

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US Suspends Bangladesh Trade Concessions over Labour Rights Violations

Brussels, 28 June 2013 (ITUC OnLine): Pressure is mounting on Bangladesh to reform its labour laws with the decision of the US government to impose trade sanctions for repeated failure to respect fundamental workers' rights.

Filed in 2007, a complaint from the AFL-CIO called on the US to suspend trade preferences to Bangladesh under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) unless the government took steps to ensure respect for the rights of workers, including in the country's massive ready-made garment sector and the Export Processing Zones, where workers are banned by law from forming a union. Over that time, the situation for workers has only continued to deteriorate, resulting in the death of over 1,000 in the Rana Plaza disaster earlier this year.

"This long-awaited decision is an important step for workers' rights," explained ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow. "It sends a strong statement to all governments and employers that violation of the fundamental rights of workers will not be tolerated if a country expects to participate in the global economy."

The ITUC is backing calls by the AFL-CIO and the Bangladesh union movement in calling on the government of Bangladesh to act urgently and deliberately to ensure that the rights of its workers are respected in law and in practice. The ITUC also calls on international brands sourcing from Bangladesh to step up their efforts to ensure that the rights of workers in their supply chains are fully respected. The demands placed on companies in Bangladesh by international buyers are partly responsible for perpetuating the grueling sweatshop conditions prevailing in the country.

In the latest reported factory rights violation, workers at Sadia Garments Ltd have been subjected to a virulent anti-union campaign by factory management. Acting on complaints from workers, the police convinced Sadia management to agree to meet union representatives on 29 May. When the union representatives arrived, they were abused and threatened by around 20 armed thugs hired by the management, and then each worker was forced to sign a blank paper which was to be used as evidence that they had resigned from the union. After a second police intervention, management signed an agreement with the union, but then again started to intimidate and harass workers. On 22 June, the union's general secretary Maksuda was stabbed repeatedly and beaten by management representatives, and she and other workers were then forced to announce they had resigned from the union.

To read more on the Sadia Garments case: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/bangladesh_protest_letter_27_june_2013.pdf

To read the AFL-CIO's statement on the GSP decision: <http://www.aflcio.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/Statement-by-AFL-CIO-President-Richard-Trumka-on-News-that-U.S.-Government-Plans-to-Suspend-Bangladesh-s-Trade-Benefits>

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The next edition of this briefing will be published in the 3rd quarter of this year.

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