

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

### New Bangladesh Law Fails Again to Protect Workers' Rights

Brussels, 19 July 2013 (ITUC OnLine): Long-awaited amendments to Bangladesh's Labour Act passed by the parliament earlier this week fail to protect workers' rights to freedom of association, falling well short of international labour standards. These obstacles to organising a union and bargaining collectively with employers will continue to make it exceedingly difficult for workers to negotiate for fair wages and safe and decent conditions. The absence of unions in the vast majority of workplaces has up to now kept wages at poverty levels and has allowed employers to force workers to work in dangerous, even fatal conditions. The Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions disasters have shown how vulnerable workers can be without the protection of strong unions.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary said, "Bangladesh's workers and the international community had high expectations that the government would finally legislate to protect the rights of workers. It appears that once again factory owners triumphed over their employees through backroom lobbying and their own political power as members of parliament. While the new law does reflect some positive changes, including on occupational safety and health, the government largely failed to make good on its obligations to improve fundamental workers' rights."

Entire categories of workers, such as the hundreds of thousands employed in the country's export processing zones, are still prohibited from forming a union. They are only allowed to form associations, which have little power to in practice to improve working conditions in the zones.

The government will no longer give employers a list of union activists applying for registration, which was used in the past to target unionists for dismissal. Earlier this year, the government also lifted what was a de facto ban on registering unions in the garment sector and in the last several months has registered roughly 30 unions. This is progress, though questions remain as to whether this will be sustained. Leaders of some of these new unions have already faced anti-union discrimination, including physical assaults, threats and firings for their lawful activity. For years, the government has utterly failed to enforce the labour law. The ITUC calls on the government of Bangladesh to get serious about enforcement, including on anti-union discrimination as well as occupational safety and health.

"The ITUC will continue to keep up and indeed increase the pressure on Bangladesh until workers are able to exercise their fundamental rights at work. We urge all governments,

including the U.S. and E.U., to do the same,” urged Burrow. “We also call on the government of Bangladesh to immediately initiate a new tri-partite process to draft and adopt the legal reforms that should have been passed this week.”

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 308 affiliated national organisations from 153 countries and territories.

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