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Bangladesh Government and Global Brands Share Responsibility for Factory Deaths

Brussels, 12 September 2016 (ITUC OnLine): The tragic deaths of at least 30 workers and injuries to many more in Saturday's fire at the Tampoco Foil factory in Bangladesh shows the callous disregard of the Bangladesh government for workers' safety, and the failure of multinational companies doing business with the factory to take responsibility for the lives of workers in their supply chains.

The workers died when a boiler exploded in the factory building, an old structure to which extra floors had been added, spreading fire and eventually causing the building to collapse. The cramped building, full of flammable materials, was entirely unsuitable for a factory, and according to information received by the ITUC, had only one working exit.

Factory owner Syed Mokbul Hussain, a former member of parliament, is being sued by the parents of one of the deceased, for culpable homicide. More than half the members of Bangladesh's parliament have business interests, many of them factory owners. Requests by factory workers in Bangladesh to register their trade unions are routinely ignored by the government; thus, workers have been able to organise in only a tiny percentage of factories. Major multinational companies, including British American Tobacco, Mondelez and Nestle have been publicly named as using the factory in their supply chains.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "These global brands all claim to have strict supplier standards to protect workers from just this kind of tragedy. When companies make bogus claims to regulators and shareholders there are real sanctions, but when it comes to protecting workers' lives there are no legal consequences. There is no substitute for the rule of law; however, even the most basic right for workers to form unions to protect their rights and safety is routinely suppressed by the Bangladesh government. Yet again, the need for legal accountability and compliance across global supply chains is evident and we call on governments, starting with the G20, to make this a reality as a matter of urgency."

The ITUC represents 180 million workers in 162 countries and territories and has 333 national affiliates.

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