



Brussels, 20 February 2017

EU-based affiliates demand a GSP investigation for Bangladesh

Dear colleagues,

The International Trade Union Confederation, the European Trade Union Confederation, UNI Global Union and UNI Europa and IndustriALL Global Union and IndustriALL Europe call on their affiliates in the European Union to urge their respective governments and members of the European Parliament to support the immediate launch of an investigation under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) into the serious and systematic violations of fundamental labour rights in Bangladesh.¹ Despite having agreed to the EU Sustainability Compact for Bangladesh in 2013, which committed the government to enact legislative reforms and respect fundamental labour rights, the government and employers have instead engaged in widespread and systemic violations of the right to freedom of association. This includes companies in the garment sector, which earn billions of euros in exports to the European market while workers struggle to survive on a mere 60 euros per month. The government's failure to respect fundamental rights was most recently confirmed when the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards included Bangladesh in a special paragraph of its report indicating a serious violation.

While the ITUC, ETUC and Global Unions have previously urged the EU to conduct an investigation under the GSP, the matter is even more urgent today. Using the pretext of a non-violent strike for a living wage and dignity at work in December 2016, the government has launched an all-out attack on trade union activists and organisations operating in the garment sector. Over two dozen union leaders and activists were arrested on bogus criminal charges and some were beaten severely while in custody. Charges have also been filed against hundreds of other "unnamed" workers. At the same time, garment employers engaged in mass, illegal dismissals of at least 1,500 workers; many were forced to sign severance agreements and told to leave under fear of arrest. Police have closed several union offices and even interrupted and shut down an ILO-supported meeting on health and safety.

¹ Bangladesh benefits from the "Everything But Arms" GSP scheme, which grants "least developed countries (LDCs)" tariff and quota free access to the European market for all products except arms and ammunition. However, the EU requires that GSP beneficiary countries respect international human rights standards, including core labour rights. Failure to do so should trigger an investigation which could lead to a suspension of the preferences only if no action is taken by the beneficiary country.

Despite these shocking facts, the EU has stubbornly refused to commence a GSP investigation, arguing instead for more dialogue. We do not oppose dialogue; however, it is clear that the manner in which the EU has conducted dialogue has been ineffective given that the situation has only worsened substantially over the last several years. The EU must continue its dialogue in the context of an investigation, which will demonstrate to the government of Bangladesh that the EU is serious about promoting human rights in its external relations. Indeed, the EU will merely be enforcing its own existing regulation. *Failure by the EU to conduct an investigation now will only render it complicit in future acts of repression in Bangladesh.*

Please send the attached model letter to your government and MEPs and tell them that Europe cannot be complicit in labour rights violations in Bangladesh. It must initiate an investigation now.

Yours sincerely,



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