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Statement on Congressional Letters in Defense of Labor Rights Leaders in Bangladesh

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Attached Files

- ILRF Statement on Congressional Letters Final Mar-8-2011.pdf [1]

The International Labor Rights Forum applauds the eighteen members of Congress who, for a second time in four months, expressed their deep and continued concern for Bangladeshi labor rights defenders facing unsubstantiated charges of fomenting and/or participating in garment worker unrest. On February 11, 2011, members of the Congressional International Worker Rights Caucus and others urged the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to communicate the U.S. Government's deep concern to the Bangladeshi government and insist that violations of the rights of peaceful labor rights defenders are fully rectified as one precondition for Bangladesh to retain its benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). In a parallel letter to six major U.S. importers of Bangladeshi apparel, the Congressional members also urged the companies to use their influence to help protect the rights of Bangladeshi labor rights leaders.

The Congressional letters focused on the cases of the staff and leaders of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS): Kalpona Akter, Babul Akhter, and Aminul Islam. There are a combined total of ten unsubstantiated charges pending against these individuals. They are facing years in prison, and possibly capital punishment for charges based on the Explosive Substances Act of 1908, should they be convicted.

"I remain extremely concerned about ongoing abuses against Bangladeshi labor leaders," said Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, Chair of the International Worker Rights Caucus. "The U.S. government must support the fundamental human rights of all labor rights defenders to operate freely and without fear of detention. I hope that the U.S. Trade Representative will make trade benefits for Bangladesh conditional on the protection of the rights of labor leaders and workers."

In their letters to USTR and the apparel companies, the Congressional members insisted that all unsubstantiated criminal charges against BCWS leaders and staff must be dropped. They urged the six companies—Cintas, H&M, JC Penney, Sears/Kmart, VF, and Walmart—to suspend any current orders with two factory conglomerates, the Nassa Group and the Envoy Group, and make the placement of future orders contingent upon these companies withdrawing all their false and/or unsubstantiated complaints that have led to or could lead to criminal charges against BCWS leaders.

The Congressional members' demands are based on evidence that:

- Kalpona Akter, Babul Akhter, and Aminul Islam were not physically present at any of the sites the government has identified as the locus of alleged misconduct.
- Company claims to the contrary, the Nassa Group and the Envoy Group, two of the largest Bangladeshi apparel manufacturers, are currently pressing charges against the staff and leaders of BCWS.
- Managers at the Nassa Group and Envoy Group threatened workers that they would file false criminal charges against workers who claimed their rights or that they would "teach BCWS a lesson."

Additional background on the specific false charges against the BCWS leaders and staff, and the faulty evidence on which they are based is available at http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/sweatshops/resources/12469 [2].

We call on the U.S. Government to continue to demand accountability and press the Bangladesh government to fully implement internationally protected worker rights, as specified by the AFL-CIO in their petition for review of Bangladesh's continued participation in the GSP program. The GSP program is intended to promote long-term sustainable development. It requires that industries and countries that benefit from the program respect strong labor standards and acceptable conditions at work. Until the Bangladesh government implements the needed reforms raised by the AFL-CIO, particularly in the shrimp sector and the readymade garment (RMG) sector, and ends the persecution of BCWS, Bangladesh is in violation of the statute and must receive no benefits.

Source URL: http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/sweatshops/news/12470

Links:
[1] http://www.laborrights.org/sites/default/files/news/ILRF Statement on Congressional Letters Final Mar-8-2011.pdf
[2] http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/sweatshops/resources/12469