



Trades Union Congress

British MEPs  
European Parliament

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date:        23 February 2017  
contact:     Stephen Russell  
email:        srussell@tuc.org.uk

Dear colleague

### **Initiate a GSP investigation on Bangladesh**

On behalf of the TUC, its 50 affiliated unions and 5.7million British workers, I am asking 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. Despite it having agreed to the EU Sustainability Compact for Bangladesh in 2013, which committed it to enact legislative reforms and respect fundamental labour rights, the government of Bangladesh has instead engaged in widespread and systemic violations of the right to freedom of association. Among sectors affected by the government's actions is the garment industry, which earns billions of euros in exports to the European market while workers struggle to survive on a mere 60 euros (£51) per month. The Bangladesh government's failure to protect or respect fundamental rights was most recently confirmed by a 2016 High Level Tripartite Mission, when the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards included Bangladesh in a 'special paragraph' of its report to the 2016 Conference.

While the situation has been serious for some years, the matter is even more urgent today. Using the pretext of a non-violent strike for a living wage and dignity at work in Ashulia, in December 2016, the government has launched an all-out nationwide 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 shut down an ILO-supported meeting on health and safety.

Despite these shocking acts, the European Commission has stubbornly refused to undertake a GSP investigation, arguing instead for more dialogue. We do not oppose dialogue; it is clear that the

manner in which the European Commission has conducted dialogue has been ineffective given that the situation has only worsened substantially over the last several years. It is also clear, from the brazen nature of the recent actions against trade unionists, that the government of Bangladesh feels that it is acting with impunity. 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. Bangladesh would have ample time under such an investigation to come into compliance before any threat of loss of benefits.

In our view, failure by the EU to conduct an investigation now will only render it complicit in future acts of repression in Bangladesh. I therefore urge you to support an immediate investigation under the GSP into the serious and systematic violations of fundamental labour rights in Bangladesh.

Yours sincerely

**FRANCES O'GRADY**

General Secretary