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Trade Unions Must Be at the Forefront in Demanding WTO Action to Ensure Survival of Textile and Clothing Industry
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ABOUT US

PRESS RELEASES

English

Español

Français

Deutsch

ITGLWF PRIORITIES

Organising & Defending Workers Rights

Eliminating Child Labour

Wages and Working Conditions

Health and Safety

Women's Issues

Homeworking

Second Hand Clothing

Linking Trade and Worker Rights

Free Trade Zones

Multinationals

Technological Change and Vocational Training

Textile Services

Codes of Conduct

FACTORY LIST

EDUCATION

ITGLWF Regions

Africa

Americas

Asia

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Trade Unions Must Be at the Forefront in Demanding WTO Action to Ensure Survival of Textile and Clothing Industry

Adequate trade measures as well as attention to the social dimension of trade in textiles and clothing are vital to avoid global burnout in the sector, warns Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the Global Union Federation representing the sector.

Speaking at the Fourth Federal Congress of FIA-UGT in Santander in Spain, Neil Kearney, the General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation outlined the union action required in the lead-up to the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in December.

Said Mr. Kearney : "This is a tough time for workers in the textile, clothing and footwear sectors, where ten months after the ending of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement the industry is in crisis and many are suffering.

"In Europe, one thousand jobs are being lost a day. The US is expected to see two-thirds of its textile and clothing industry disappear in the next couple of years. And across much of the developing world, textiles and clothing jobs are being wiped out, leaving families and communities in poverty. Meanwhile, the industry is booming in China on the back of the exploitation and near-slavery of millions of workers.

"The World Trade Organization has done its best to ignore the turmoil trade liberalisation has created in textiles and clothing. Even the ILO has been slow to acknowledge the growing threat to decent work.

"True, the bleakest forecasts for trade and employment trends for 2005 have not materialised. True, the industry has remained relatively stable in countries forecast for burnout this year.

"But, this has not occurred by accident. The threat of safeguard action followed by the introduction of new trade restraints in the EU and the US caused a rethink by many intent on relocating production to China. So, the real impact of trade liberalisation is not likely to

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LINKS

CALENDAR

Affiliates only

be clearly felt globally till 2007 or 2008 when safeguard action must end.

“However, the US and EU agreements combined provide a breathing space for governments and the industry itself to take measures for its medium and longer-term survival.

“But this requires a continuing need for trade measures designed to help emerging and struggling industries, particularly in developing countries, adjust to meet the threat posed by dominant producers such as China, including clear restraints on some such dominant producers.

“And it requires attention to the social aspects of trade. The refusal of governments to enact or enforce effective labour legislation and the subsequent failure of voluntary initiatives involving corporate codes of conduct to eradicate the key abuses makes it essential that the WTO and the ILO collaborate in creating combined trade and labour mechanisms to help outlaw the use of exploitation to gain competitive market advantage.

“In the weeks leading up to the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in December trade unions need to be in the forefront in demanding action to stabilise and grow the textile and clothing industry around the world.

“First, we need to be demanding of our governments that the issue of textiles and clothing be on the agenda of the Hong Kong WTO Ministerial meeting with time for a specific discussion on the impact of trade liberalisation on the sector and with a view to the WTO developing measures to help emerging and struggling industries adjust to meet the threats posed by dominant producers such as China and including the possibility of a permanent safeguards clause.

“Second, to protect jobs in the industry in the poorest countries, textiles and clothing needs to be detached from the general NAMA discussions in Hong Kong and treated separately.

“Third, Countries outside the EU and the US being flooded by Chinese imports need to take safeguard action as provided for in China’s WTO accession agreement.

“Fourth, the brands and international retailers should maintain their current country supply base, maintaining production in those countries that respect and enforce international labour standards and in those companies which provide decent work. Further, the brands and retailers should, in co-operation with the relevant trade unions, embark on a campaign to ensure that all suppliers’ labour standards are raised to comply with the core ILO Conventions and with national Labour Law.

“Fifth, trade unions everywhere need to campaign on these trade and labour issues drawing attention to the threats to jobs and livelihoods and emphasising the need for worker organisation in the face of these threats.

“Finally, we all need to combine our efforts to pave the way to the establishment of free and democratic trade unions in China so that the millions of workers there are freed from exploitation. That is the only sure way to a better future for those workers and for workers in the textile and clothing industry everywhere”.

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