

From: International Trade Union Confederation
IndustriAll Global Union
AFL-CIO
Service Employees International Union
Workers United
Clean Clothes Campaign
International Labor Rights Forum
European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights
Worker Rights Consortium
Solidarity Center
Canadian Labour Congress
Maquila Solidarity Network
International Union League for Brand Responsibility
Globalization Monitor – CCC East Asia
Korean House for International Solidarity
Labour Action China
Labour Education and Service Centre
PILER – CCC South Asia
UNIFOR
United Steelworkers
Agriculture Union (Canada)
Public Service Alliance of Canada
SACOM (Scholars and Students Against Corporate Misbehavior)
Yokohama Action Research - Japan
Worker Empowerment
HK Women Workers' Association (HKWWA)

To: International Brands Sourcing from Bangladesh

Date: December 23, 2016

Re: **Detention of Labor Rights Advocates in Bangladesh**

We are writing as labour and human rights organisations to express our deep concern at the detention of at least eleven union leaders and worker rights advocates in Bangladesh over the past several days, and to urge your firm, as a major buyer from Bangladesh, to immediately contact the government of Bangladesh and press them to cease detaining and/or arresting unionists and worker rights advocates under the pretext of the current wage strike, release the individuals currently in detention, and disclose the locations of all detained union leaders and advocates.

Starting on December 21, 2016, at least eleven union leaders and worker rights advocates have been detained or arrested in connection with the recent wage strike in Ashulia which has led to the BGMEA's decision to suspend production at 59 factories. Of the eleven who were detained, at this writing, one has been released, eight are in police custody, and two are still missing and unaccounted for. These actions come on the heels of threats to another trade unionist from the Bangladesh security apparatus. These detentions – some of which targeted individuals completely uninvolved in the strike – reflect the lengths to which the Bangladesh government

and some factory owners will go to limit advocates' exercise of their fundamental rights of expression and association. Some of the cases are as follows.

- On the morning of December 21, Md. Ibrahim, an employee of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), was detained along with 6 other trade union leaders from four separate trade union federations. All were held after voluntarily attending a meeting called by the police to discuss the strikes. After he was detained, Ibrahim was interrogated in an isolated building in the woods; his lawyers and allies were unable to contact him for 24 hours. He reports that while being interrogated, he was told that he could be killed and the killing covered up as a “crossfire” incident. In the afternoon of December 22, he was brought to the court and told he was being held under the 1974 Special Powers Act. This Act explicitly authorises the detention – without charge or trial – of an individual for up to six months and up to indefinite period if so sanctioned by the Advisory Board. It has been used to suppress political opposition and peaceful demonstrations, as well as to retaliate against individuals engaged in personal disputes with people in positions of authority.
- At 11:30 am, December 22, Moshrefa Mishu, the President of the Garment Workers Unity Forum, was stopped and detained by police on her way to a press conference. In a statement, the police claimed she had simply been invited “for a cup of tea” with security services. She was returned to her home at 5:30 that evening.
- Jahangir, the president of the union of Designer Jeans Ltd., one of the factories impacted by the strike, was taken from his home around 11:30 pm on Dec 21 by a group of men, some in police uniforms and some in plain clothes. On December 23, he was brought to court and told he was being held for questioning under the 1974 Special Powers Act.
- Asaduzzama and Golam Arif, two organizers with the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), were taken from their residence by the Detective Branch on December 22 at 11:15 pm. The two live above a BIGUF office in Gazipur and had just completed a meeting with workers. They have reported that they are being questioned regarding the strike and whether it will expand to Gazipur. At this writing, they have not yet been presented in court or formally charged.

The other individuals who have been detained or arrested are as follows:

- Shoumitro Kumar Das, President of Garment Sramik Front Savar-Ashulia-Dhamrai Regional Committee;
- Rafiqul Islam, President, Garment and Industry Sramik Federation;
- Al Kamran, President of Shwadhin Bangla Garment Sramik Federation Savar-Ashulia-Dhamrai Regional Committee;
- Shakil Khan, General Secretary of Shwadhin Bangla Garment Sramik Federation Savar-Ashulia-Dhamrai Regional Committee;
- Shamim Khan, President of Bangladesh Trinomul Garment Sramik-Kormochari Federation; and
- Md. Mizan, Textile Workers Federation.

We have also received reports that the owners of Windy Apparels Ltd and Fountain Garments Ltd, two of the factories impacted by the strike, have filed criminal complaints against 239 workers and that the Hameem Group is filing complaints against as many as 1000 workers.

As we are sure you are aware, the government of Bangladesh has a long history of targeting independent union and worker center advocates, including arbitrary detention, physical and psychological abuse while in detention, and possibly even assassination. In 2010, BGIWF president Babul Akhter and BCWS activists Kalpona Akter and Aminul Islam were arrested during a wage strike. While in detention, they were tortured, beaten, and threatened with death. In 2012, Aminul Islam was found brutally murdered. Human Rights Watch and other observers have noted the strong suspicion that the Bangladesh security forces were responsible for his death, and called for an independent and impartial investigation, but the Bangladesh government has done little on his case.

This new round of attacks against trade union organisations represents a clear step backwards for the Bangladesh garment industry. Even before this crackdown, both the ILO and the European Union had acknowledged the government's failure to protect the right to freedom of association for Bangladesh workers and urged the government to take concrete steps to ensure its laws and practice is in line with international standards. If the brands sourcing from Bangladesh wish to see a more sustainable and safe garment industry, it is vital that they also demand that workers' fundamental rights are respected.

We request that you immediately contact the Bangladesh government and urge them to release the detained labor leaders, disclose the whereabouts of any labor leaders or advocates who are unaccounted for, drop unsubstantiated charges against these leaders, and cease all forms of harassment and intimidation against labor activists exercise of their fundamental rights of expression and association. Given the risk to the detained individuals, we ask that you act as soon as possible, and not allow the holidays to unnecessarily delay your response.

Please let us know what action you are taking as soon as possible. Please direct your response to Laura Gutierrez (laura.gutierrez@workersrights.org) and Sam Maher (sam@cleanclothes.org).