

Internationaler Nürnberger Menschenrechtspreis

Festakt zur Preisverleihung am 27. September 2015

im Opernhaus Nürnberg

Rede von Sandra Polaski

ILO Deputy Director General for Policy

Sperrfrist: Sonntag 27. September 2015, 12.00 Uhr

- Es gilt das gesprochene Wort -

On behalf of the International Labour Organization, it gives me great pleasure to be here today for the presentation of the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award 2015.

This year's honored recipient is Amirul Haque Amin, a trade union leader who for many years has fought for workers' rights and better conditions in the Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment industry.

Mr. Amin is the President of the National Garment Workers Federation of Bangladesh (NGWF), a Federation he helped establish in 1984. Under his leadership, and in league with like-minded unions, garment workers have waged many struggles to improve working condition in the ready-made garment industry. Their successes over the years include the establishment of paid holidays, paid maternity leave, and bonuses paid on the two Eid Festival holidays. But the challenges faced by workers in this industry in Bangladesh and remain intense, as they do in some other countries that produce garments.

After the collapse of the Spectrum Garment Factory in Savar, which produced garments for major brands, he and other local and international unions campaigned for and won compensation for victims and the families on the basis of loss of earnings. The formula they developed in 2005 was based on ILO Convention 121 and called for minimum compensation of the equivalent of USD \$6400.

Mr. Amin collaborated in this effort with the late Neil Kearney, who was the beloved General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF, later merged with IndustriALL). Together they campaigned to make the international brands take responsibility for the companies and factories that produced products for them.

Today, after the horrific tragedy of Rana Plaza, Mr. Amin works with the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, an alliance of trade unions and international garment brands, which has so far inspected and initiated remediation in over 1600 buildings, making sure that worker activists and organizers can report building faults and progress on remediation works.

At the heart of his work has been the enormous task of building union membership and workplace unions. The NGWF currently has around 45 registered unions and has at least members or union factory committees in around 1000 of the 3500 RMG factories. The new unions also have an extremely steep learning curve to effectively represent their membership. And some these union leaders have been dismissed, which is unfortunately not uncommon. In fact, it is estimated that only 300,000 of 4.2 million workers are organized. Meanwhile, no unions at all are allowed in Economic Production Zones where there are some 400 RMG factories.

Awarding the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award to Amirul Haque Amin will help to shine a light on the challenges and problems faced by workers and trade unions in Bangladesh. On September 17 the Government of Bangladesh finally issued Implementing Labour Rules, which are meant to clarify and operationalize the 2013 amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act. Those amendments were urgently needed to expand the space for worker organization in the country and to establish Occupational Health and Safety Committees across the RMG sector.

At the moment, Mr. Amin and the NGWF are launching a campaign for a Living Wage, as the Minimum Wages Board for garment workers will hold triennial hearings on the topic in mid-2016. Wages for garment workers in Bangladesh are currently the second lowest of the 25 top apparel exporting countries—only Sri Lanka has lower wages. By contrast, many other garment producing countries have been raising wages significantly over recent years, including China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar. It is time for Bangladesh to follow these positive examples.

The 2015 Nuremberg International Human Rights Award honors Mr. Amin personally, and at the same time gives recognition to the long and ongoing struggles of other Bangladeshi unions and the four million garment workers of Bangladesh—mainly women workers. Their struggles are for justice, rights, dignity, the wages that will give them and their families a better standard of living and the safe and healthy working conditions that should be a basis and inalienable right for all workers everywhere. The award should encourage all those who struggle for the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively, to have a say in their own workplaces.

The growth of the RMG sector in Bangladesh over the last 35 years has provided previously non-existent opportunities for economic and employment growth and accounts for 80% of all export revenue. However, this rapid development has also laid bare many fundamental challenges relating to workplace safety, workers' rights, extreme hours and non and late wage payments, to name a few.

The loss of 1,136 lives when Rana Plaza collapsed on 24 April 2013 sent shockwaves worldwide. If any good can come from such a disaster, it will be based on global attention and global demands for improvement in the safety and working conditions in the country and the ability of workers to form unions to defend their own rights and responsive changes within Bangladesh.

There has been intense engagement from brands and retailers. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which I mentioned, brings together over 150 international brands along with unions and civil society to enhance safety in the factories that its members source from. The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which comprises 26 additional brands, is carrying out similar work with its factories.

A Sustainability Compact supported by the EU, the governments of Bangladesh and the US as well as the ILO sets out a series of commitments and deadlines for changes relating to safety, legislation and working conditions.

For its part, ILO has been actively working to promote workers' rights and to build capacity of trade unions and support firms that want to improve conditions in Bangladesh. A workers education programme is underway in collaboration with the National Coordination Committee for Workers Education and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council. Recognising that the majority of garment workers are women, special emphasis is also being placed on training women trade union leaders and organizers on key labour rights.

We are also working to help the Government set up a dispute settlement and mediation system to address anti-union discrimination and terminations through a pilot hotline telephone service and electronic database established within the Bangladeshi Department of Labour to facilitate trade union registration.

At the end of the day, progress (or the lack of it) almost always comes down to people. Amirul Haque Amin has been one of the trade union activists and leaders who has been on the front line of the battle to establish workers' rights in Bangladesh for over three decades. On behalf of ILO, I congratulate him on receiving this award. I hope that it can offer him further encouragement for his work. Likewise, I hope that it can help the Bangladesh union movement, others in Bangladesh and the international community open new pathways to achieve respect for workers' rights and improve pay and working conditions in the ready-made garment industry.

Thank you.