

MICHAEL SOMMER
PRESIDENT
PRÉSIDENT
PRÄSIDENT
PRESIDENTE

SHARAN BURROW
GENERAL SECRETARY
SECRÉTAIRE GÉNÉRALE
GENERALSEKRETÄRIN
SECRETARIA GENERAL

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban Tejgaon,
Dhaka-1215
People's Republic of Bangladesh

info@pmo.gov.bd

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Anti-Union Discrimination in RMG Sector

Honourable Prime Minister,

In recent months, your government has made the long-awaited decision to once again register trade unions in the ready-made garment sector (RMG). This is an important step, but insufficient. The government's registration of a trade union is meaningless if the government does not also ensure that unions are able to operate and carry out their activities without interference and to bargain collectively over the terms and conditions of work. However, we are learning that newly registered unions are facing significant obstacles to the exercise of their labour rights in practice. The case of Sadia Garments Ltd. is perhaps one of the most extreme.

On 16 May, Sadia Garments Ltd. Workers Union was registered, with the assistance of the Bangladesh Federation of Workers Solidarity (BFWS). On 27 May, management began an aggressive anti-union campaign, forcing workers into management's office to sign a statement declaring that they don't want a union. Management also threatened to call in local thugs if they did not comply. Workers called the police. Over the course of the day, representatives of the union, of management, of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Rapid Action Battalion had met. The following day, the parties reached an agreement to hold a meeting between union and management on 29 May.

When the union delegation arrived as scheduled, they were met by Managing Director Nasir Majumder, additional management officials, 25-30 non-union workers and roughly 20 hired thugs, some bearing firearms. They used abusive language and threatened physical harm towards the union officers. Mr Majumder told the workers that he would not allow a union and personally threatened to kill the BFWS lead organizer Smrity Akter and pay off her family. Management then forced each unionized worker to sign a blank page, no doubt to be used as evidence of resignation from the union. Complaints were filed by BFWS and the Sadia Garment Workers Union at the Rampura Police Station.

The following day, at the insistence of the local police, a meeting was held at the factory between the union, management, BGMEA and the police. Thereafter, management promised fair treatment and job protection to union members and signed an agreement to that effect. This industrial peace was short lived however. Management again began to harass union members, leading the union to file unfair labour practice charges with the Department of Labour on 10 June.

Following the complaint, threats of violence and intimidation escalated. On 21 June, management again demanded the signatures of union officials, in the presence of a local leader of the Chatra League, the youth wing of the Awami League, and his thugs. His thugs later appeared outside of the BFWS office, forcing the BFWS General Secretary to flee and not return home that night. On 22 June, a supervisor attacked the Sadia Garments Union General Secretary, Maksuda, with scissors on her back, chest and hands. Some management representatives and pro-management workers also attacked her and beat her. She was then dragged downstairs by management, who forced her and the other union committee members to announce their immediate resignation.

This behaviour by Sadia Garments management shocks the conscience of decent people worldwide. This simply cannot be allowed to continue in your country. We urge the immediate reinstatement of the union officers and compensation for the injury to the union's General Secretary, as well as future protection for the union and its federation, BFWS. Further, we urge you to act immediately to bring those responsible for these civil and criminal acts to justice. We will closely monitor this case as an indication to your government's commitment to labour rights in Bangladesh.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Rees', written in a cursive style.

General Secretary

cc:

Mr Srinivas Reddy, ILO Country Director, reddy@ilo.org

Mr Dan Rees, ILO Better Work, rees@ilo.org

Md. Atiqul Islam, President, BGMEA, president@bgmea.com

Mikhail Shipar, Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, shiparmikail@gmail.com

C. Q. K. Mustaq Ahmed, Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs,
secretary@mha.gov.bd