

Brussels, 12 January 2005

JM/TJ/cd

Via Fax: 02-2981299

Ms. Benita Ferrero-Waldner
Commissioner for External Relations
European Commission
Berlaymont
1049 Brussels

Dear Commissioner,

Iran: Respect of International Labour Standards

We have noted with great interest that the European Commission will today resume negotiations with Iran on a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). We were also glad to note the EU's position, as in reflected in the Commission's statement on the subject, dated 11 January, that "*the deepening of economic and commercial relations between the EU and Iran should be matched by progress in other aspects of the EU's relationship with this country, and all phases of the negotiations of the TCA are conducted in parallel with a political dialogue*".

The ETUC is encouraged by the Commission's view that "*the two components make up one package, consisting of these two interdependent and mutually reinforcing elements, and one cannot be concluded without the other*". We would urge that questions of freedom of association and the respect by Iran of core labour standards as defined by the International Labour Organisation be taken into account in the negotiations.

In this respect, we would like to bring to your attention two immediate matters which the European trade union movement considers as important and highly relevant.

Firstly, you may be interested to note a statement dated 11 January by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), with which we cooperate closely, welcoming the successful outcome of a protracted strike in Iran's textile industry, which accounts for a sizeable part of the EU's imports from Iran. The strike at "Kurdistan Textile" (in Sanandaj City, Kurdistan Province), was one of several which had taken place at the factory since November 2004. It was held in protest at the sacking of long-term employees, who were being replaced with temporary workers, not protected by the labour legislation. At least 175 workers had been dismissed in 2004 under such circumstances.

The striking workers were demanding better severance pay for the dismissed senior workers or their reinstatement, an end to temporary contracts, better working conditions and improved occupational health and safety for the factory's workers.

Security forces had surrounded the factory during the November strike and negotiations at the factory earlier this month were held in the presence of Interior Ministry officials.

As Iranian employers and authorities have a record of renegeing on collective bargaining agreements struck with workers, we would appreciate it if the European Commission would call the Government's attention to the need to respect relevant international labour standards and to impress this on the country's employers.

Secondly, we should be very grateful if the Commission would intervene with the Iranian Government in order to facilitate the issuing of entry visas to international observers whom the ICFTU has been attempting to send since September 2004 to attend the trial of a group of 7 independent labour leaders and activists, arrested during an attempt to hold a peaceful workers' rally on International Labour Day, 1st May 2004, in the city of Saez (also in Kurdistan Province). Though they had been released after 12 days in prison, owing to a major international union campaign, the ICFTU and ETUC remain concerned that criminal and political charges are still being pressed against them.

The seven persons in question are MM. Mahmoud Salehi, Mohammad Abdipour, Esmaeel Khodkam, Mohsen Hakimi, Hadi Tanoumand, Jalal Hosseini and Borhan Divangar. While their trial had been suspended after strong protests by the international trade union movement, it was resumed on 25 December 2004. Following further ICFTU protests in the last days of the year it seems that the hearings may once again have been postponed. The ICFTU is however still insisting on obtaining entry visas for one or more of its observers to attend the trial when it resumes. The Government has so far kept silent about this request.

We have no doubt that an intervention by the European Commission at the appropriate level would contribute significantly to allowing international observers to attend the trial of these courageous Iranian workers.

We enclose copies of ICFTU correspondence to the Government of Iran on this matter and of relevant press releases about both the Saez trial and the "Kurdistan Textile" industrial dispute and remain at your disposal for any further information that you may require on this subject.

Yours sincerely,

John Monks
General Secretary