Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 18, 2012

The Honorable Ron Kirk
United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Ambassador Kirk:

We are seriously concerned about the deterioration of working conditions and worker rights in Bangladesh. The latest apparel industry fire, with over 100 workers killed, in the Tazreen garment factory is the latest in a series of events and practices constituting this decline. Chillingly, concerns about fire safety and the failure of Bangladeshi authorities to enforce laws in this regard have been raised repeatedly by the labor community both here and in Bangladesh, including in an October 2012 filing by AFL-CIO urging removal of Bangladesh from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP).

The Tazreen fire is yet another wake-up call that these kinds of concerns must be vigorously addressed. We understand that your office has been reviewing Bangladesh's compliance with labor eligibility requirements under GSP in response to a 2007 AFL-CIO petition. We believe that it is time for you to accelerate and complete this review.

While the Tazreen fire is the latest concern, it is unfortunately not the only one. Earlier this year, prominent labor rights activist Aminul Islam was found tortured and killed -- many believe because of his labor organizing efforts. We understand that the perpetrators of that heinous act have yet to be brought to justice and that some authorities have resisted elevating the investigation. Fellow organizers of Mr. Islam also continue to face ostensibly baseless, multi-year criminal charges against them in connection with their own labor organizing efforts.

There are also long-standing systemic concerns. For example, there are recurrent reports of authorities thwarting attempts by unions to register. In addition, we have heard repeated concerns that authorities are not vigorously enforcing labor, health, and safety laws, not only with respect to fire safety, but also in many other respects, such as payment of minimum wages, mandatory contributions to social security funds and election of worker representatives.

We understand that the Obama Administration has made positive inroads working with Bangladesh in the past – for example, developing a work plan of reforms in 2010 and 2011. We are disappointed that these reforms have not been carried out and that change with respect to working conditions and labor rights in Bangladesh appears to be going in the opposite direction.

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Under GSP, a country must demonstrate that it is "taking steps to afford internationally recognized worker rights." This requirement is central to the development goals of the GSP program and helps ensure that GSP promotes sustainable growth that can be shared broadly. We believe it is vital that your office complete your assessment of Bangladesh's compliance with these requirements.

Thank you for your time and attention to this serious matter,

Sincerely,

Joseph Crowley
Member of Congress

Sander M. Levin
Member of Congress

Jim McDermott
Member of Congress

Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress

Charles B. Rangel
Member of Congress

Fortney Pete Stark
Member of Congress

John Lewis
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Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Ron Kind
Member of Congress

Chris Van Hollen
Member of Congress

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

James P. Moran
Member of Congress