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To **Ms Ursula von der Leyen**
President, European Commission

Mr Charles Michel
President, European Council

Ms Roberta Metsola
President, European Parliament

Mr Valdis Dombrovskis
Executive Vice-President, European Commission

Mr Nicolas Schmit
Commissioner, European Commission

Mr Josep Borrell
High Representative, European Commission



EU position on Myanmar

As representatives of the trade unions of the world, we are writing to you to request that the EU reevaluate its policies towards Myanmar, in particular the Everything But Arms (EBA) preferential trade policy, and support for the Multistakeholder Alliance for Decent Employment in the Myanmar Apparel Industry programme (MADE in Myanmar).

EBA was introduced in 2013 as recognition of Myanmar's journey towards democracy. On the third anniversary of the military coup, we believe it is now obvious that this journey has gone into reverse and that EBA should be withdrawn.

MADE in Myanmar is supported financially by the EU in partnership with EU garment brands, and claims to support labour rights organisations and trade unions and address workers' grievances. Myanmar's trade unions – which were banned by the junta - have condemned this programme as a sham, designed to whitewash labour rights abuses and provide political cover for garment brands who find Myanmar a cheap and convenient sourcing location. The regime continues to arrest trade unionists and use military force to suppress protests and worker activism.

The military regime has killed more than 4,000 people, arrested almost 26,000, and suspended civil society organisations, including free trade unions. Many state employees, including 200,000 teachers, refused to work for the regime and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. Many were killed or imprisoned, while others have lost their jobs and are experiencing extreme hardship. The EU acknowledges this in its recent 10.5 million Euro aid package to address the hunger crisis.

The EU condemned the coup in February 2021, and has imposed targeted sanctions on named individuals and organisations linked to the worst abuses. In January 2023, ahead of the second anniversary of the coup, the EU warned that further measures would be taken if the situation did not improve. We believe it is past time to take those measures.

Myanmar's trade unions say that the banning of their organisations, and the absence of freedom of association, means workers face conditions of modern slavery. This finding was confirmed by the ILO Commission of inquiry, which reported far-reaching violations of freedom of association and forced labour Conventions. This means that clothing made in conditions of modern slavery is being sold to EU consumers by EU companies, with EU financial and political support.

Before the ILO report was released, the EU said it would consider its policies in light of the report's findings. The report is unequivocal, and details violence against trade union leaders, the issuing of arrest warrants and the cancellation of passports, instances of forced labour, the use of human shields, forced recruitment to the military and the imposition of martial law. Given the impossibility of conducting due diligence in an environment where freedom of association is not possible, the MADE in Myanmar programme is untenable.

The military junta is widely considered to be in a precarious position, losing territory to armed groups and facing sustained resistance in the areas it does control. Due to the refusal of many civil servants to work for the junta, the state barely functions. The regime desperately needs foreign exchange to buy fuel for transport and electricity generation, weapons and ammunition.

By supporting trade with Myanmar through EBA, and EU investment through MADE, the EU provides a vital lifeline to a despotic regime that is on its last legs. An extension of sanctions, the withdrawal of trade preferences and an end to support for EU brands in Myanmar would dramatically weaken the regime and hasten the return to democracy.

The National Unity Government (NUG), formed by the parties elected democratically in November 2020, is ready to resume the journey to democracy as soon as the regime falls. The NUG has formed a tripartite structure, with the main trade union federation and a democratic employers' association, that pledges to implement the recommendations of the ILO report when democracy is restored.

This structure, which reflects EU values, deserves to be supported. The EU must send a clear message that doing business with a repressive regime while a democratic alternative waits in the wings is not acceptable. We urge you to withdraw EBA and the MADE in Myanmar programme.

Yours sincerely,

General Secretaries of the following organizations, which are members of the Council of Global Unions: UNI Global Union, EI, ITUC, BWI, EI, IAEA, IndustriALL, IFJ, ITF, IUF, PSI, TUAC