

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2014

The Honorable Secretary Thomas E. Perez
Secretary of Labor
Frances Perkins Building,
200 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20210

The Honorable Secretary John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Perez and Secretary Kerry:

In advance of the March 2014 ILO Governing Board Meeting, we write to ask for your support for a proposed International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on gender based violence in the workplace and a standard setting discussion on violence against women and men in the workplace. Gender based violence was described as “the most prevalent human rights violation in the world” in a 2011 ILO working paper, and while the ILO recognized “gender-based violence as a critical and major global challenge to the goal of equality between women and men,”¹ the creation of such an international standard would be an important and appropriate mechanism for combatting the scourge of gender-based violence affecting workers -- especially women workers -- around the world and across industries.

This proposed convention is particularly important in the context of industries, such as the garment industry, where women make up the vast majority of workers. The garment industry is built on a production model where women workers are routinely denied appropriate compensation or workplace protections, including safety and health protections, and where a culture of verbal and physical abuse and exploitation by owners, managers and supervisors, is far too often the norm. Last year’s collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh, which killed 1,133 people of whom 80% were women, is a horrific manifestation of the violence faced by workers, and puts in sharp relief the callous disregard for worker and human rights so endemic in garment factories.

Yet women and male workers daily face sexual harassment, intimidation, and verbal and physical abuse. According to a 2011 report on the Bangladesh garment industry, 297 women of the 998 women surveyed said that they had been the recipient of unwelcome sexual overtures. 290 reported being touched inappropriately and an additional 328 said that they

¹ Cruz, Adrienne and Sabine Klinger, “Gender-Based Violence in the World of Work: Overview and Selected Annotated Bibliography,” International Labor Organization, Working Paper 3/ 2011, accessed at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@gender/documents/publication/wcms_155763.pdf.

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endured "threats of being forced to undress." Nearly half of the respondents reported being beaten and struck in the face by their supervisors.²

Maquiladoras in Mexico have also experienced sexual harassment since maquilas emerged in the 1970s. Women working in the maquila export industry in Mexico suffer from gender violence and discriminatory treatment,³ including being forced to take compulsory pregnancy tests and being paid less than the minimum wage.⁴ These types of gender based abuse and discrimination should not be tolerated in any context. It is becoming clear that today's global garment industry is a system organized around physical and economic violence against women. There has already been a backlash against 'Blood on your labels,' and rightly so. But a closer look reveals we should also be examining this issue through 'violence against women on your labels.' As such, the garment industry provides one example of an international production chain with a model of low-cost labor and record of labor violations, which demonstrates a need for this convention.

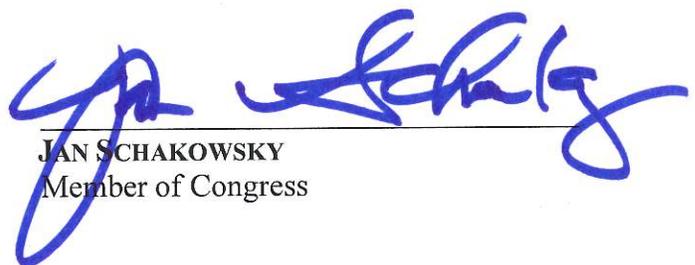
That is why we must move aggressively to establish international norms to address violence against women at work through the International Labour Organization. This would provide women workers and rights advocates with a standard to hold companies and industries accountable across borders. Working women have the right to be free from gender based violence in the workplace.

We urge you to put the full weight of the US government behind the proposal for a standard-setting discussion on violence against women and men at the workplace for the 2016 International Labor Conference.

Sincerely,



GEORGE MILLER
Member of Congress



JAN SCHAKOWSKY
Member of Congress

² "Stitched Up: Women Workers in the Bangladesh Garment Sector," The War on Want, July 2011, accessed at: <http://www.waronwant.org/attachments/Stitched%20Up.pdf>.

³ Colectiva Feminista Binacional, Servicio Desarrollo y Paz, A.C. (SEDEPAC), & Comité de Obreras y Obreros en Lucha "Sexual Harrassment a Maquila Reality," A Project of the Labor Rights Forum, May 2007, Accessed at: <http://www.laborrights.org/sites/default/files/publications-and-resources/Mexico2006.pdf>.

⁴ "What Impact Has the American Free Trade Agreement Had," AWID Factsheet, December 2, 2008, accessed at: <http://www.awid.org/Library/What-impact-has-the-North-American-Free-Trade-Agreement-NAFTA-had-on2>



HENRY A. WAXMAN
Member of Congress



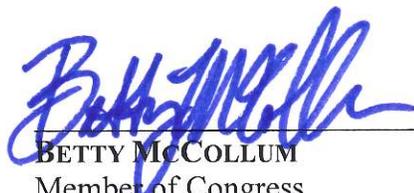
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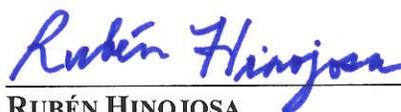
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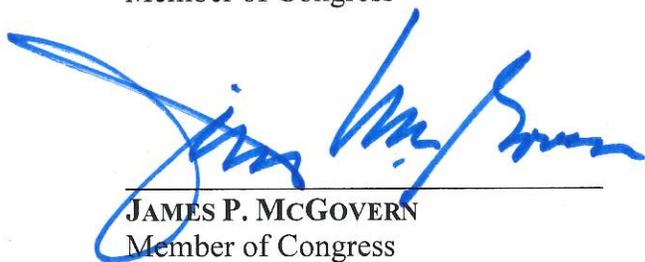
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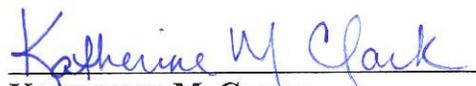
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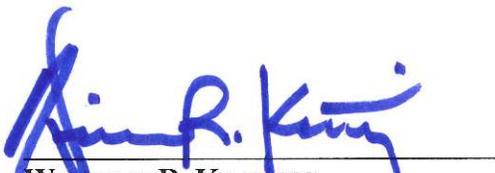

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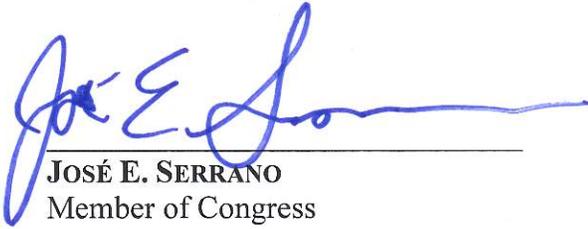

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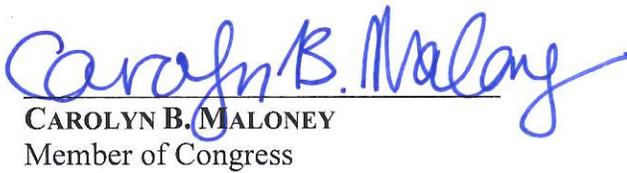

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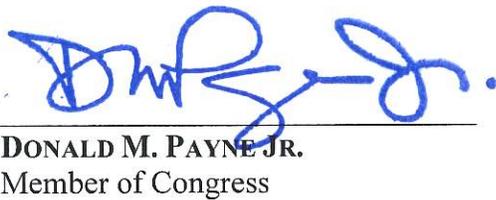
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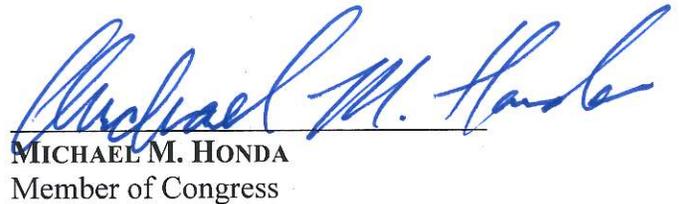
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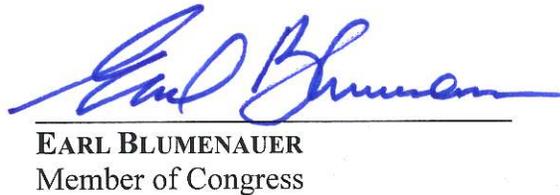
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