

Bangladesh: Factory fire kills seven workers

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A fire in a Bangladeshi garment factory killed seven workers last Saturday, just two months after 112 workers died in last November's inferno at Tazreen Fashions, the worst fire in the country's history. The latest disaster, in the capital Dhaka, again exposed the brutal conditions prevailing in the clothing industry.

A fire broke out on the second floor at Smart Export Garments in Dhaka's Mohammadpur district at 2 p.m., when about 300 employees were working. One of the two exit gates was locked and there was no emergency exit. Seven female workers died in the resulting smoke and stampede, and another 27 were critically injured. Some workers jumped from windows.

Among the dead were one girl aged 16 and four aged 17. One worker, Laizu Begum, said they were paid as little as 2,960 taka (\$US37) per month.

A fire department official told the *New York Times* the factory lacked proper exits and fire prevention equipment. "We did not find any safety measures," he said. According to a Bangladesh Fire Service official, the factory had no operating licence. "The owners set up some sewing machines on a floor without taking care of any safety issues," he told the AFP news agency.

Hundreds of angry workers demonstrated the following afternoon, demanding adequate safety measures and punishment of the owners, who have gone into hiding. Since the Tazreen blaze, Bangladesh has already had another 18 factory fires, although non-fatal. Since 2006, factory fires have killed between 500 and 700 workers.

This record underscores the hypocrisy of the Awami League-led government and the garment companies, both local and international. Following the Tazreen fire, factory owners "promised" to improve safety measures and the government pledged to "punish owners." International buyers said they would end deals with unsafe factories. Actually, the official investigations

into the Tazreen disaster were cover-ups, letting those responsible off the hook.

The government's inquiry identified "sabotage," combined with negligence by the factory owner, as the causes of the Tazreen tragedy, but no one was punished. An investigation conducted by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) claimed the fire was "pre-planned" and that "several factory officials were involved in the blaze." The BGMEA sought to wash its hands of the fire, saying the factory "was not approved" by it and was "not a member of the apex body of the readymade garment factories."

As for the "concerns" expressed by Western buyers, AFP reported: "Some have reportedly increased purchases [from Bangladesh] since the Tazreen fire, due to cheap manufacturing costs." Last Sunday, labels from several French brands were found in the burned Smart Export Garment factory. Among them were Sol's, Scott and Fox, and G Blog by Gemo. Other labels included Inditex, the world's largest fashion group, best known for the Spanish brand Zara, and the German low-cost brand, KIK.

In a bid to placate workers, local government minister Kabir Nanak and police chief Hasan Mahmud visited the factory. Disaster Management Ministry officer Nurul Islam promised just 10,000 to 20,000 taka (\$US125-250) for victims as compensation. The government initiated an investigation, as did the Fire Brigade and Civil Defence agency. Given the experience of the Tazreen fire inquiries, these investigations also will fail to make the real culprits accountable or change the unsafe conditions.

Sections of Bangladesh big business are in dilemma, fearing rising unrest and the loss of foreign orders. A *Financial Express* editorial said workplace safety was necessary to "stop frequent incidents of unrest" and "boost productivity." A *New Nation* editorial warned:

“Poor workplace safety and labour rights issues have even pushed US lawmakers to consider withdrawing GSP [Generalised System of Preferences] facilities.”

But the government is compelled to maintain the exploitative conditions, in order to attract investments and boost profits. Bangladesh’s garment exports increased fourfold during the past decade, to \$24.3 billion in 2012, which constitutes 80 percent of the country’s total exports.

Successive governments have ignored calls for improved conditions and safety and helped the garment companies enforce low wages. According to the Worker Rights Consortium, the country should “spend about \$3 billion over five years to bring safety standards at Bangladesh apparel factories to Western standards.” Citing a World Bank report in 2012, *Bloomberg* said “garment workers in Bangladesh, on average, earn about \$43 a month, compared with \$150 to \$250 in China and \$87 in India.”

Bangladesh has about 4,500 garment factories, employing around 3.6 million workers—80 percent of whom are female. Some big factories obtain orders from international suppliers, and then sub-contract them to smaller units. According to the BGMEA, at least 500 small factories pay minimum wages, and ignore safety regulations and building codes.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and the Socialist Party of Bangladesh (SPB) play crucial roles in diverting the mounting opposition of workers into the harmless channels of trying to pressure the government and factory owners into improving the conditions.

CPB president Islam Selim and SPB general secretary Khalequzzaman Bhuiyan visited the Smart Export Garments site last Sunday and asked workers to press the BGMEA and employers for their demands. SPB trade union leader Rabiuzzaman Ratan appealed to the “authorities” to make “factories comply with safety rules,” while demanding the arrest of “errant factory owners” and compensation of one million taka for each victim.

These pleas serve to mislead and politically disarm workers in the face of the on-going collaboration between the government and big business. The cut-throat competition in the region—including Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka—to attract investment by offering the lowest production costs, has produced a worsening

situation. Last September, a tragic factory fire in Pakistan killed nearly 300 workers, making it the world’s worst factory fire.



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