

Mass protests erupt in Bangladesh over factory collapse

Patrick O'Connor
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Mass protests have erupted in Bangladesh over the collapse of a textile factory near the capital, Dhaka—the latest in a series of devastating industrial disasters in the impoverished country.

Many of the demonstrating workers carried black flags and blockaded highways in at least three industrial suburbs. A local police inspector told Associated Press that workers attacked several factories whose management had refused to suspend production.

Protests erupted in several parts of the country, with the British *Guardian* reporting that several thousand garment workers staged actions in the Savar industrial zone, around 20 miles outside the capital.

A reported 1,500 workers also marched to the Dhaka headquarters of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), to demand that the execution of the owners of the collapsed factories. The deputy commissioner of the Dhaka police claimed that some workers had smashed windows and vehicles before they were “chased away” by police.

The *Huffington Post* reported that at least 25 protesting workers were injured after police “interrupted an emotional memorial procession with batons, just 200 yards from the scene where the building crumbled”.

Successive Bangladeshi governments have violently suppressed any move by garment workers to defend their interests. In December 2010 the current administration deployed police against striking workers and shot dead four unarmed protestors.

The confirmed death toll in the collapse has risen to 261. Many of the survivors have suffered horrific injuries, including amputated limbs. Some had been partially protected by large weaving machines that shielded workers from the building cave in, also creating pockets of air that could allow more people to

be pulled from the rubble.

There are also reports of missing children, who were in a crèche on the top floor of the seven-storey complex when it collapsed. The structure had comprised five garment factories, as well as a bank and 300 shops.

Rescue efforts are continuing, however, and with as many as 900 garment workers still missing, there are fears that the death toll could surpass 1,000.

The owner of the collapsed factory complex, Mohammad Sohel Rana, has close ties with the ruling Awami League. The Bangladeshi media reported that Rana was a senior leader of the local unit of the Awami League’s youth wing, the Jubo League.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday addressed the national parliament to deny these reports, declaring that she had personally inspected the Jubo League’s list of office bearers and had not found Rana’s name.

Hasina added: “Those who are responsible for the tragic incident must be punished. None would be spared. Whoever might be the culprits and if even they belong our party they won’t go scot-free.”

In reality, the entire Bangladeshi political establishment is complicit in creating the conditions that led to this industrial disaster. Numerous politicians and military figures have personally enriched themselves through the construction and ownership of the garment factories that now generate 80 percent of the country’s \$24 billion annual exports.

The country’s ruling class function as corrupt contractors for the international clothing conglomerates, whose relentless drive for greater profits encourages local factory owners to cut costs and neglect security. Wednesday’s building collapse comes just five months after Bangladesh’s worst-ever factory fire, at Tazreen Fashion in Dhaka, in which 112 workers were killed.

Bangladesh has risen to the world's second largest garment producer, behind China, by giving international investors and their local subsidiaries and suppliers a free hand.

An estimated 4 million garment workers, mostly women, are among the most super-exploited sections of the world's working class, enduring poverty-level wages and terrible working conditions. Many workers reportedly receive about \$US37 a month for working up to 15 hours a day.

Safety regulations are virtually non-existent, and industrial laws routinely flouted. Bangladesh's labour ministry reportedly employs just 18 inspectors to monitor conditions in more than 100,000 factories in Dhaka, according to Human Rights Watch.

The international clothing companies who exploited the collapsed factory have rushed to feign sympathy with the victims, while denying any responsibility.

Several non-governmental organisations have again condemned the major retailers. John Hilary, executive director of the British-based anti-poverty group War on Want condemned so-called corporate social responsibility programs, explaining that for their inspections, "the workers are trained in what to say, the factories present favourable books and keep back the real books".

The *Wall Street Journal* has reported that at least two of the factories in the collapsed complex had cleared a recent audit by the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI), run by an industry body representing about 1,000 European retailers, including Adidas, Esprit, and Hugo Boss.

The auditors declared that they were not "building engineers" and that it was "up to local authorities to ensure that construction and infrastructure are secure". BSCI's managing director Lorenz Berzau told the *Journal*: "It's very important not to expect too much from the social audit."

The *Los Angeles Times* bluntly wrote off any possibility of improving working conditions in Bangladesh: "Corruption, a powerful garment industry, and Western consumers' insistence on low prices will keep working conditions poor, say labour and business experts."

Information is continuing to emerge about the collapsed complex. Its owner, Mohammad Sohel Rana, built the centre in 2007 after draining a pond and

establishing concrete foundations on the swampy land. He allegedly failed to secure a permit for the new factories from the agency in charge, instead getting authorisation from one of his political allies in the local municipality.

Rana has been the focus of much of the workers' anger, after he forced the factories' employees back into the complex on Wednesday morning despite large cracks appearing in the building on Tuesday. Just before the disaster, the businessman reportedly told a meeting of workers that the complex would stand "for another hundred years".

Bangladeshi news outlets today reported that another of Rana's factory complexes, less than a kilometre away from the disaster site, has been evacuated after a large crack was discovered.



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