The Bangladesh factory collapse and the drive for profit

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More than 300 people are dead, mainly garment workers, and many more are injured following the collapse of the eight-storey Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh this week. The tragedy is one of the world's worst industrial disasters, but it will not be the last, as global corporations ruthlessly pursue greater profits through the exploitation of sweatshop labour.

The Rana Plaza complex was typical of the multi-level buildings that have been thrown up by the massive expansion of Bangladesh's clothing industry—now second only to China—with scant regard for the country's limited safety and building codes. It housed five garment factories, employing thousands of workers, as well as a maze of shops. The owner, a local politician connected to the ruling Awami League, had permission to erect only a five-storey building, but was not stopped from adding three more floors.

There was a temporary evacuation on Tuesday, when workers noticed large cracks in the building. But the owner, Sohel Rana, declared that the site was safe, despite warnings to the contrary. Factory managers, determined to meet production schedules, forced employees back to work. The building collapsed suddenly on Wednesday morning and, more than three days later, rescuers continue to extract bodies from the unstable tangle of debris.

As in previous disasters, the Bangladeshi government, business groups and global clothing corporations that profit from the country's cheap labour quickly swung into operation to limit the political and economic fallout.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina put the rescue operation on a "war footing" and dispatched troops and police, including units of the notorious Rapid Action Battalion, in order to suppress the anger of workers. Hundreds of thousands of garment workers took to the streets of Dhaka and nearby industrial areas on Thursday and Friday.

The prime minister blamed the building owner for the collapse, declaring that he would be punished. At the same time, Hasina made clear that nothing would be done to prevent similar catastrophes. She acknowledged that 90 percent of the country's buildings were not constructed to meet the official building code, but brushed the issue aside, declaring: "Shall we have to demolish all the buildings right now?"

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) cancelled the membership of the companies operating in Rana Plaza and called for those responsible for the collapse to be prosecuted. Like the government, however, employer groups know only too well that unsafe conditions are rampant throughout the industry.

Last November, 112 workers died in the country's worst factory fire, at the Tazreen garment plant in the Ashulia industrial zone. Supervisors ordered employees back to work after the fire alarm sounded, leaving workers trapped in the upper floors. Some 700 workers have been killed in factory fires in Bangladesh since 2005. Garment factory collapses in 2005 and 2010 claimed another 79 lives.

The overriding concern of the government and employers is to ensure that the country's thousands of garment factories, which account for 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports, continue operation as usual. They are acutely aware that any improvement in wages (on average $US37 a month), or in the appalling conditions confronting millions of garment workers, could undermine the country's competitiveness.

The global retail giants have gone into well-practised damage control—a few crocodile tears, and, where

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possible, denials of any involvement, or current involvement, with the particular suppliers in the Rana Plaza complex, followed by empty promises to improve conditions in the future. Labels for the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, the Spanish chain El Corte Ingles and JC Penney have been found in the rubble. Web sites for the factories in the building indicate that they also supplied Germany's Kik, Belgium's C&A, Benetton UK, Spain's Mango, Canada's Trimark, and Premark in Ireland, to name a few.

These companies' expressions of "shock" at the disaster are particularly cynical. All these corporations know very well the sweatshop conditions that are required to produce garments at the prices they demand. They operate through a complex system of middlemen and subcontractors to distance themselves from the actual production processes. Many have a system of factory audits, not to improve safety and conditions, but to provide a face-saving façade to protect their corporate images and brand names.

In the wake of the tragedy, governments, the media, trade unions and various NGOs declare, in one way or another, that something must be done and promote the illusion that the global corporations and Bangladeshi government can be pressured to improve safety and living standards for garment workers. The reality is that the government will do nothing to jeopardise exports or profits. Amid the deepening breakdown of global capitalism, safety standards will worsen, not improve.

The same processes are taking place internationally. Last September, nearly 300 workers were killed in the world's worst factory fire when Ali Enterprises in the Pakistani city of Karachi was engulfed in flames. In China, thousands of workers are killed every year in blasts and cave-ins in the country's notoriously unsafe mines. Late last month, two explosions in the Babao coal mine killed 34. Another 83 died in a landslide at a copper mine in Tibet.

The health, well-being and lives of workers are constantly sacrificed to the relentless drive for profit, not only in the sweatshops of Asia, Africa and Latin America, but in the advanced capitalist countries. Just last week, a fertiliser plant in Texas exploded, killing 14 people and injuring another 200. In April 2011, 11 workers died in an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico that resulted in the largest environmental disaster in US history.

These tragedies are crimes that are ultimately rooted in the profit system itself. Globalised production, which has the potential to provide everyone on the planet with a decent standard of living, is leading under capitalism to enormous profits for the wealthy few and the deepening immiseration of working people around the world.

The only solution lies in a unified struggle of the international working class to abolish this outmoded and reactionary social order and establish a rationally planned world socialist economy to meet the pressing social needs of humanity as a whole.

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