

One year after Rana Plaza collapse

Bangladesh garment workers still face dangerous conditions

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Recent reports on building safety and working conditions in Bangladesh reveal that little has changed for tens of thousands of garment workers since last year's Rana Plaza tragedy at Savar, just outside Dhaka. Last April 24, over 1,120 people were killed when the shoddy, eight-storey Rana Plaza building, containing garment factories, shops and other businesses, collapsed in one of the world's worst industrial disasters.

A report published last month by the Bangladesh Accord Foundation (BAF) reveals that major safety and construction flaws, such as lack of adequate fire doors, sprinkler systems and dangerously-high weight loads on buildings, still exist in hundreds of Bangladesh factories.

BAF, which was formed by US and European retailers with the support of the Swiss-based UNI Global Union (UNIGU) and IndustriALL Global Union (IAGU), claims that its inspection program will expose dangerous construction and working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories.

The organisation, however, only plans to examine about 1,500 of Bangladesh's 5,000 plants by September, looking for fire, electrical and structural deficiencies. Under its inspection scheme, international retailers and their local contractors will be shielded from legal liability. There is no guarantee that factory owners will rectify any of the identified problems, and they will be notified in advance of the inspections.

Despite the limited number of inspections, BAF teams have already found extensive fire-safety problems, including factory exits locked or used for storage and cracks in building beams. BAF chief safety inspector Brad Loewen said the lack of safety doors

remained a common problem throughout Bangladesh.

Referring to one factory, the report notes: "The high-rise building is not provided with automatic sprinkler protection. The large occupant loads, heavy fuel loading, and anticipated extended egress times warrant sprinkler protection."

Many factory owners responded to BAF's criticisms by effectively imposing the safety repair costs on workers. For example, when BAF asked the management of Softex and Fame KnitWears to close their factories and make immediate repairs, the companies stood down over 6,000 workers without pay.

After months of silence, the Rana Plaza Compensation Coordinating Committee finally announced that it will issue previously promised 50,000-taka (\$US644.33) compensation payments by April 15, just nine days before the tragedy's first anniversary.

The UNIGU and IAGU trade union federations are members of the committee's trust fund and the UN's International Labor Organisation is the trustee. While \$40 million is needed to pay compensation to the 3,000 workers and the families of those killed in the tragedy, only \$8 million has been donated by international retailers. Benetton, the Italian group, has reneged on a promise to compensate victims. Its annual revenue was \$US2.8 billion in 2011.

Mindful of the crucial role that trade unions play in dissipating mass anger and blocking any independent action by workers, the US government has called on the Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to encourage the establishment of unions.

US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Desai Biswal

told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in February that Washington was working with Bangladesh's Solidarity Center to "strengthen the capacity of independent worker organisations to recruit members, form legally-registered unions, and engage in collective bargaining" in Bangladesh.

The US State Department, she said, had provided over \$4 million since 2011 to the Solidarity Center, which is working with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). There also plans to appoint a full-time labour attaché to the US embassy in Dhaka.

US Foreign Relations Committee chairman Robert Menendez last month urged the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to allow the formation of unions. In a letter to the employer group on March 24, he threatened to end the preferential treatment of garment imports from Bangladesh, declaring: "I cannot support the renewal of Bangladesh's generalised system of preferences (GSP) benefits as long as union organisers are subjected to harassments, intimidation and violence."

Washington's calls have nothing to do defending workers' rights but are animated by concerns about the eruption of mass workers' struggles and deepening political instability in Bangladesh.

Over the past year, Hasina's government, which previously opposed the formation of trade unions, has registered 100 unions and dropped most of its criminal cases against labour activists. Following the Rana Plaza tragedy, the government amended local labour laws to facilitate the establishment of unions in the garment sector. In 2011-12, the government only registered two unions.

Dhaka has also recognised the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), which is associated with the Solidarity Centre. A trial is now underway over the murder of Aminul Islam, a BCWS union organiser who was killed in April 2012. Islam is believed to have been murdered by government security forces.

Early this month, formal charges were also brought against Delwar Hossain, the owner of Tazreen Fashions, where 112 workers died when the factory was gutted by fire in November 2012 (see: "Worst factory fire in Bangladeshi history"). No employer has ever been sentenced for criminal negligence over any of the disastrous fires and building collapses that have

destroyed the lives of hundreds of Bangladeshi workers. More than 1,900 Bangladeshi workers have died in factory fires and building collapses since 2005.

Washington and Dhaka are backing the formation of unions in order to politically straitjacket the garment workers and other sections of the working class.

Bangladesh's more than 4.75 million garment workers, mainly girls and young women, continue to endure appalling conditions, labouring between 10 to 16 hours a day, six days a week. They remain the lowest paid garment workers in the world. The minimum monthly wage was recently increased to 5,300 takas (\$68), far less than workers' demands for 8,000 taka.

Many workers have not even been paid the wage rise. In January, the BGMEA reported that only 40 percent of garment companies had increased monthly pay. The unions estimate that only 20 percent of Bangladeshi company had lifted wages.

The BGMEA insisted that the increases had been delayed by falling orders from international retailers concerned over strikes and political unrest. These claims are false. During the six months to December 2013, import orders rose by 20 percent compared to previous years.

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