

Bangladesh garment factory fire kills at least 16 workers

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On Tuesday, at least 16 workers died in a garment factory fire in the Mirpur neighborhood of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, and it is expected the death toll will increase. The fatal fire is one of the latest examples, along with the deaths of 16 workers at a munitions factory that exploded in the US state of Tennessee, of the systematic sacrifice of workers' lives on the altar of corporate profit.

The fire in Dhaka initially broke out in an adjacent chemical storage warehouse and then spread to a four-story building of the garment factory. It took three hours to extinguish the fire, but only in the garment factory. Firefighters are still struggling to control the blaze in the chemical warehouse.

The director of the fire service, Lt. Col. Tajul Islam Chowdhury, told local media that the fire broke out around 11 a.m. on Tuesday. "Sixteen bodies have been recovered so far, but there could be more casualties at the nearby chemical warehouse, where the blaze is not yet under control. It is unclear how many people were inside at the time," he said. He also added that the victims probably died "instantly" after inhaling "highly toxic gas" created by burning chemicals in the warehouse.

"The victims could not escape because the roof door was locked," said fire service official Talha Bin Zasim. "Most of them died from inhaling toxic gas, rather than burns."

Eyewitnesses gave harrowing account of the disaster.

"We heard a huge explosion," Russel Sheikh, an eyewitness, said. "Then we saw a massive fire. Then it spread to the next building."

Another eyewitness said: "The chemical warehouse contained bleaching powder, plastic, and hydrogen peroxide, all of which have the potential to worsen fires. Additionally, burning plastic releases toxic fumes."

Grieved family members rushed to the factory to find their missing loved ones.

The father of Farzana Akhter told Reuters news agency

that his daughter was still missing. He said: "When I heard about the fire, I came running. But I still haven't found her. ... I just want my daughter back."

Mohammad Nayeem stated that he was looking for his wife, Samia Akter, who was employed at the garment factory, and that officials had advised him to check nearby hospitals. "I went twice to Dhaka Medical, but couldn't find her," he said. "I still don't know where she is."

Fire Service Director Chowdhury stated that the owners of the factory have not yet been identified. He mentioned that police and the army are working to locate them. He also noted that neither the garment factory nor the chemical warehouse had received approval to operate at the location or had any fire safety plans in place.

The operation of such death traps is the norm. Government authorities turn a blind eye on employers violating basic safety conditions because they serve the profit-making capitalists, not the workers.

According to the preliminary findings, Chowdhury said that the garment factory had a tin roof and a grilled door that was kept locked. Because of this, desperate workers were unable to reach the roof and fresh air. "The chemical explosion triggered a flashover, releasing toxic gases that rendered many workers unconscious and trapped them inside, preventing their escape both upward and downward," he said. The victims' bodies "were so badly burned, DNA testing may be the only way to identify them."

Amidst popular outrage, Bangladesh's interim government head Muhammad Yunus issued a hypocritical condolence message expressing his "deep sorrow" and urged authorities to "investigate and support victims and families." As in past experiences, however, such investigations will not change the fate of workers who will be continuously forced to work under unsafe conditions.

Bangladesh is the second largest ready-made garment (RMG) exporter in the world, next to China, and accounts for 5-6 percent of the global market. RMG accounted for approximately 81.49 percent of the country's total exports in FY 2024-25, earning \$US38.48 billion. The sector employs more than 4 million workers, most of whom are women, working under brutal conditions.

According to Bangladesh's Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, 414 garment workers lost their lives in 213 factory fires between 2006 and 2009. The number of fatalities in the garment sector has exploded since then. In November 2012, 124 workers were burnt to death in the Tazreen Fashion Factory fire in the Ashulia industrial zone, north of the capital Dhaka. Most deadly was the Rana Plaza disaster, in April 2013, when 1,134 garment workers were killed and more than 2,500 injured when an eight-story commercial building collapsed.

Last October and November, tens of thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers were involved in protests and strikes to demand wage increases from the current monthly minimum of 8,000 taka (US\$67.00) to 22,000-25,000 taka (US\$184-209). They also demanded an increase in the monthly attendance bonus, the granting of annual leave, night shift pay and an extension of maternity leave for female workers. Other demands included the reopening of closed factories, the reinstatement of previously terminated employees, an end to harassment by management and government officials and improved workplace safety and conditions.

The interim government of Yunus responded by deploying police and army to suppress the protest.

The trade unions, including the Stalinist Communist Party-led Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Centre, have refused to organize any struggle against brutal working conditions and for the safety of the workers. They are working as defenders of economic interests of the crisis-ridden Bangladesh ruling class and the employers and investors in the apparel industry.

The working conditions of Bangladeshi garment workers will worsen as the sector faces mounting global competition and economic pressures. US President Trump's 20 percent tariff on Bangladesh, which was imposed in August, along with rising pressure from retail giants H&M, Walmart, Adidas, Levi's and VF Asia for "competitive prices," have destabilized the industry. Garment companies have responded by intensifying the exploitation of workers and subjecting them to unsafe sweatshop conditions.

After the massive outpouring of public anger over the

Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, various global brands, retailers, trade unions and supplier factories signed the toothless Bangladesh Accord on Health and Safety, now known as the International Accord on Fire and Building Safety. This was the first time, it was claimed, that global fashion brands acknowledged their direct responsibility for factory conditions in their supply chains.

Tuesday's disaster demonstrates once again that this was nothing more than a public relations operation. The multi-billion-dollar global fashion brands and retail giants are not concerned with workers' conditions and safety but lower prices and more profits.

Unless the working class fights against the capitalist profit system and places production under the democratic control of workers themselves, the death toll in Bangladesh and around the world will only increase. This is a worldwide struggle as the October 10 explosion at the Accurate Energetic Systems munitions factory in Tennessee shows.

The Bangladesh garment workers must build their own action committees in every factory to take the struggle for their basic rights, including decent wages, working and safety conditions, into their own hands. They can no longer have any confidence in trade union bureaucracies, who are acting as industrial police on behalf of local and foreign investors. They need to unify with their class brothers and sisters in other sectors in Bangladesh, throughout Asia and internationally to build a united global movement of the working class against globally operated corporations. For that aim, Bangladesh workers need to join the struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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