

Made in Bangladesh: The Terror of Capitalism - Over three hundred workers dead

Saturday 27 April 2013, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2013).

Delhi.

On Wednesday, April 24, a day after Bangladeshi authorities asked the owners to evacuate their garment factory that employed almost three thousand workers, the building collapsed. The building, Rana Plaza, located in the Dhaka suburb of Savar, produced garments for the commodity chain that stretches from the cotton fields of South Asia through Bangladesh's machines and workers to the retail houses in the Atlantic world. Famous name brands were stitched here, as are clothes that hang on the satanic shelves of Wal-Mart. Rescue workers were able to save two thousand people as of this writing, with confirmation that over three hundred are dead. The numbers for the latter are fated to rise. It is well worth mentioning that the death toll in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City of 1911 was one hundred and forty six. The death toll here is already twice that. This "accident" comes five months (November 24, 2012) after the Tazreen garment factory fire that killed at least one hundred and twelve workers.

The list of "accidents" is long and painful. In April 2005, a garment factory in Savar collapsed, killing seventy-five workers. In February 2006, another factory collapsed in Dhaka, killing eighteen. In June 2010, a building collapsed in Dhaka, killing twenty-five. These are the "factories" of twenty-first century globalization - poorly built shelters for a production process geared toward long working days, third rate machines, and workers whose own lives are submitted to the imperatives of just-in-time production. Writing about the factory regime in England during the nineteenth century, Karl Marx noted, "But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its wear-wolf hunger for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight.... All that concerns it is simply and solely the maximum of labour-power that can be rendered fluent in a working-day. It attains this end by shortening the extent of the labourer's life, as a greedy farmer snatches increased produce from the soil by reducing it of its fertility" (Capital, Chapter 10).

These Bangladesh factories are a part of the landscape of globalization that is mimicked in the factories along the US-Mexico border, in Haiti, in Sri Lanka, and in other places that opened their doors to the garment industry's savvy use of the new manufacturing and trade order of the 1990s. Subdued countries that had neither the patriotic will to fight for their citizens nor any concern for the long-term debilitation of their social order rushed to welcome garment production. The big garment producers no longer wanted to invest in factories - they turned to sub-contractors, offering them very narrow margins for profit and thereby forcing them to run their factories like prison-houses of labour. The sub-contracting regime allowed these firms to deny any culpability for what was done by the actual owners of these small factories, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of the cheap products without having their consciences stained with the sweat and blood of the workers. It also allowed the consumers in the Atlantic world to buy vast amount of commodities, often with

debt-financed consumption, without concern for the methods of production. An occasionally outburst of liberal sentiment turned against this or that company, but there was no overall appreciation of the way the Wal-Mart type of commodity chain made normal the sorts of business practices that occasioned this or that campaign.

Bangladeshi workers have not been as prone as the consumers in the Atlantic world. As recently as June 2012, thousands of workers in the Ashulia Industrial Zone, outside Dhaka, protested for higher wages and better working conditions. For days on end, these workers closed down three hundred factories, blocking the Dhaka-Tangali highway at Narasinghapur. The workers earn between 3000 taka (\$35) and 5,500 taka (\$70) a month; they wanted a raise of between 1500 taka (\$19) and 2000 taka (\$25) per month. The government sent in three thousand policemen to secure the scene, and the Prime Minister offered anodyne entreaties that she would look into the matter. A three-member committee was set up, but nothing substantial came of it.

Aware of the futility of negotiations with a government subordinated to the logic of the commodity chain, Dhaka exploded in violence as more and more news from the Rana Building emerged. Workers have shut down the factory area around Dhaka, blocking roads and smashing cars. The callousness of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Association (BGMEA) adds fire to the workers' anger. After the protests in June, BGMEA head Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin accused the workers of being involved in "some conspiracy." He argued that there is "no logic for increasing the wages of the workers." This time, BGMEA's new president Atiqul Islam suggested that the problem was not the death of the workers or the poor conditions in which workers toil but "the disruption in production owing to unrest and hartals [strikes]." These strikes, he said, are "just another heavy blow to the garment sector." No wonder those who took to the streets have so little faith in the sub-contractors and the government.

Attempts to shift the needle of exploitation have been thwarted by concerted government pressure and the advantages of assassination. Whatever decent lurks in Bangladesh's Labour Act is eclipsed by weak enforcement by the Ministry of Labour's Inspections Department. There are only eighteen inspectors and assistant inspectors to monitor 100,000 factories in the Dhaka area, where most of the garment factories are located. If an infraction is detected, the fines are too low to generate any reforms. When workers try to form unions, the harsh response from the management is sufficient to curtail their efforts. Management prefers the anarchic outbreaks of violence to the steady consolidation of worker power. In fact, the violence led the Bangladeshi government to create a Crisis Management Cell and an Industrial Police not to monitor violations of labour laws, but to spy on worker organisers. In April 2012, agents of capital kidnapped Aminul Islam, one of the key organisers of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. He was found dead a few days later, his body littered with the marks of torture.

Bangladesh has been convulsed this past months with protests over its history - the terrible violence visited among the freedom fighters in 1971 by the Jamaat-e-Islami brought thousands of people into Shanbagh in Dhaka; this protest morphed into the political civil war between the two mainstream parties, setting aside the calls for justice for victims of that violence. This protest has inflamed the country, which has been otherwise quite sanguine about the everyday terror against its garment sector workers. The Rana building "accident" might provide a progressive hinge for a protest movement that is otherwise adrift.

In the Atlantic world, meanwhile, self-absorption over the wars on terror and on the downturn in the economy prevent any genuine introspection over the mode of life that relies upon debt-fueled consumerism at the expense of workers in Dhaka. Those who died in the Rana building are victims not only of the malfeasance of the sub-contractors, but also of twenty-first century globalisation.

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P.S.

* From Counterpunch, WEEKEND EDITION APRIL 26-28, 2013 :
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/04/26/the-terror-of-capitalism/>

* Vijay Prashad's new book, The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South, is out this month from Verso Books.