

INTERVIEW

Bangladesh & the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Savar: Fighting to stop these tragedies

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At least 500 workers died and more than 2,500 were injured in the collapse of a building at Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The building housed five garment factories that employed mostly women and produced clothes for some of leading retailers of the Global North. This is by far the worst industrial disaster in a country that has seen many. On May Day, more than 1,000 workers marched through the streets of the capital demanding justice.

An activist in Bangladesh's garment industry, whose real name will not be used to protect his identity, spoke to Tithi Bhattacharya about the history of this exploitative industry and what lies ahead for the Bangladeshi working class.

HOW LONG have you been organizing in this industry, and do you see these accidents as being related in any way to the overall nature of the garment industry itself?

I HAVE been organizing in the garment industry in Bangladesh for the last five years. Contrary to what the mainstream media wants us to believe, I actually do not think there has been a sudden spurt in the number of accidents in the garment industry. Accidents have been happening in this industry for the last decade.

The international spotlight on this issue is a recent one. The reality is much more harsh. If we take 2005 as an arbitrary starting point (I could go further back), there has been a series of accidents that have claimed the lives of workers: Spectrum Sweaters factory (64 dead in 2005), Garib and Garib factory (21 dead in 2010), Hamin (2011), Tazreen (more than 100 dead in 2012), Smart (2013) and, finally, the Rana Plaza disaster.

Moreover, we should understand that while these are accidents where lives are lost, there are nonfatal accidents involving fire and damage to life and property every month in this industry.

HOW MANY people work in the garment industry in Bangladesh?

ROUGHLY 4 million.

WHERE ARE these factories located?

MOST OF them are concentrated in and near the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka. There are also a few in Chittagong and the Narayanganj area. Geographically, though, these factories are most concentrated in and around Dhaka.

Interestingly, this is also the region of the highest population growth. Instead of spreading out the garment industry throughout the country, they have concentrated it in and around the capital. When you walk the streets of Dhaka, there are garment factories in every alley and every back lane.

Within the city, the factories are inside high-rise buildings, with shops and retail stalls in the first few floors of the building. There are multiple factories within each of these buildings. Entrances to these buildings are narrow doorways, crowded with wares and goods from the various retail stores.

WHAT ARE the conditions of work in these factories?

THE WORKING conditions inside these factories have not improved since the 1980s, a period when Bangladesh first started entering the garment export sector. Since then, the workers' conditions have not changed or improved one bit.

Throughout the 1980s, leading multinational brands—the buyers—came up with their own “code of conduct” for these factories as minimal standards for labor. These codes were drawn up not because of the generosity of the corporations, but because the consumers in the host countries for these companies exerted pressure on them through various forms of consumer activism. But these codes never percolated down to the actual factories in Bangladesh.

If we take wages to be the primary indicator of work conditions, then you will see the real state of affairs in these factories. Real wages have consistently declined in the Bangladesh garment industry—roughly a 2.7 percent decline in the last decade.

We should also compare the wages workers receive to the living wage. A “living wage” is simply a wage that ensures a basic, decent standard of life, not any luxuries. Garment workers today earn only 14 percent of the living wage. [This is after massive strikes in 2010 compelled the government and bosses to raise the minimum wage.]

The minimum wage currently ranges between 3,500 to 5,000 takas (\$45-64) a month. According to estimates done by organizations such as the Center for American Progress and Worker's Rights Consortium, the living wage in Bangladesh is anywhere between 18,000-21,000 takas (\$230-269).

If we plot current wages on a graph, the lines of what a garment worker actually receives and the living wage keep diverging and, in point of fact, never meet. So unless the industry changes in fundamental ways, a Bangladeshi garment worker can never ever earn a living wage.

WHAT ROLE did the strikes play in raising the minimum wage in 2010?

BANGLADESH DID not have a minimum wage board for a very long time. The government passed a labor law in 2006, but it did nothing to address the question of wages. A spate of strikes, some spontaneous and some organized by the existent trade unions, erupted in the following years.

WHAT ABOUT the trade unions? Did they try to shape the strikes?

INITIALLY THE trade union leadership, forced by mass action, demanded 10,000 takas (\$128) as the minimum wage. But then the leaders scaled this very reasonable demand to a mere 3,000 takas (\$38) and the government was happy to broker this deal with the workers and the manufacturing agencies.

WHAT ABOUT international monitoring agencies? Do they play any role in determining working conditions?

YOU MUST understand that today the international audit industry itself is a multibillion-dollar industry. If one could force the money from this industry to actually paying workers or improving work conditions, we would not need auditing.

Nevertheless, the factories maintain a certain appearance because they have to meet international audit requirements. They have neat and tidy spaces in certain parts of the factory that they open up for inspection to national and international monitoring bodies. But these spaces are very different from the actual area of production where workers sit in overcrowded room jostling for room.

To give you one example, none of these factories provide workers with seats that have backrests. The average workday in these factories ranges from 12-15 hours. This is why you will not find a worker in this industry over 40 years of age, people burn out by the time they are 35.

The most common worker in this industry is a young woman who starts at 18 or 19 and by the time she is in her thirties she has been spewed out by the system.

THIS BRINGS us to the important question of gender. You describe an incredibly exploitative system that sucks the life out of the worker, and yet women dominate this labor force. Why?

ONE IMPORTANT reason, as I see it, is that the garment industry is the first tier of organized industrial work. In the way it operates, it is actually midway between the organized and unorganized or informal sector. For instance, wages in this industry are not determined by experience, only by inflation.

Combine this devaluation of experience and the semi-informal nature of the industry to the existing patriarchal framework of society: and what you get is a strong reluctance from male workers to work in this sector. Male workers often do not see this as worthy of man's work. Sexism in society also bully women in various ways and try to make them more compliant as a worker.

CAN YOU talk a little about how the workplaces are particularly pernicious for women?

TAKE THE very vital question of child care for the woman worker. The Bangladesh law says that every factory must provide a crèche for the children of workers. The international corporations too have a standard line in their code of conduct that the local laws ought to be respected. How far are these rules followed?

First, most factories have no crèches. Second, where factories do have child care, one cannot call it a crèche, if we think of the term meaning a space safe and appropriate for young children.

It's usually one small windowless room where children are thrown in on top of each other. No food is provided for the children, not even milk. Mothers will carry food for the children, but then, mothers are not allowed to look in on their children during the day, because they have to meet the production targets. So at the end of the day, it makes little sense for the mothers to use these crèches. So mothers end up trying to cobble together some form of care in the home, or in the village.

Let me give you an example of how the bosses value child care and women's labor in the industry, best exemplified by the "crèche" at the infamous Tazreen factory where workers lost their lives in November last year.

The floor plan for the factory, a plan approved and audited by all sorts of agencies, marked out a clear area for a crèche. When I went inside the factory after the fire to figure out at how they had deviated from this approved plan, I found that the place where the crèche should have been, stood a

giant transformer! The bosses thought that a transformer was more beneficial than a space where the children of overworked women could be cared for.

WHO ARE the bosses of these factories?

SOHEL RANA the owner of Rana Plaza is a typical example. He has ties with both the major political parties of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League. Some of the leading garment industry bosses are MPs for the current ruling party, the Awami League. The condition of the workers do not change with a change of government, it remains the same.

But foreign capital also plays a fundamental role in pushing the national politicians.

The garment industry is a completely export driven industry. It forms only 4 percent of production but accounts for 77 percent of the total exports of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is the second-largest exporter to the U.S. Four-fifths of the manufactured garments produced in Bangladesh are exported to the European Union (EU) and the U.S.

Despite the tremendous loss of human lives in the recent industrial accidents, all politicians thus take a very soft approach towards the garment bosses. They say that they don't want to upset the bosses because this could jeopardize Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings.

WHAT ABOUT our side? What is the state of organizing against these forces?

THERE ARE 68 trade union federations in the garment industry. But these are often bureaucratic unions with little shop floor organizing. This is why when spontaneous strikes take place many opportunities are lost, as trade unions fail to channel these strikes to become more sustained protests.

This does not mean that radical grassroots organizers do not exist.

Aminul Islam was one such shop floor organizer who played a fantastic role after the fire in the Hamin factory in directing industrial action. He was a member of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and was watched by both the garment bosses and the Bangladesh Industrial Police.

After the wane of the strike wave, Aminul's body was found, with signs of torture, outside the city limits of Dhaka. His killers have never been found.

ARE THERE any connections between the spontaneous strikes against labor conditions in the garment industry and the recent eruption of community protests in Shahbag?

AT FIRST glance no. Since industrial struggle is yet to generalize, and civil society protests such as we saw in Shahbag are yet to concretely come out in solidarity with the working class.

But this is not the whole story and the situation is changing rapidly because of the feeling of anger and dispossession that exists at every level of society.

I see the industrial accident at the Tazreen factory in 20 as a breaking point. The fire at Tazreen raged through the night and the number of dead, for the first time, crossed the 100-figure mark.

In one stroke it revealed the criminal nature of the garment industry and the callousness of an elected government.

It is after Tazreen, that I saw for the first time, professors and students from Jahangirnagar University and Dhaka University came out to protest in solidarity with the workers. They came in busloads to the factory to stand with the workers and their families. A group of anthropologists from Jahangirnagar University put together a fact-finding team to investigate the fire. All this was happening outside the official trade unions.

What was urgently needed was an integration of this kind of work with trade union work but unfortunately this did not happen.

YOUR INTERVIEW will be read by people in the U.S. who are involved in labor struggles and anti-oppression struggles at the community level against the same corporate giants like Wal-Mart and Gap who are devastating lives from Detroit to Dhaka. What message do you have for activists fighting in the developed world against what seems to be a common enemy?

THE WAY the corporations work and the way capital moves today, whether it is in the developed world or the Global South, it is clear that until and unless there is a linkage between struggles, we cannot defeat them. We need a North-South linkage of trade unions and workers. We need a network of grassroots organizers sharing experiences and lessons across borders.

Workers in the global south alone cannot win this fight with capital. And this is equally true of workers in the North. We need international solidarity. If we take Bangladesh as an example let me show you how trade unions and labor organizers in the developed world can play a crucial role in building our fight.

The international corporation Inditex, the owner of the brand Zara, has significant investment in the Bangladesh garment industry. When the labor organizing began in these factories, the Bangladeshi owners tried to bust these unions with every violent means at their disposal. Inditex of course stood by silently as this happened, because the production of clothes continued apace.

But as an EU-based company Inditex has to have a Works Council and several trade unions are part of this Works Council. The trade unionists fought tooth and nail with Inditex on this council and finally forced the company to speak to the local bosses and put an end to union busting.

This is the kind of solidarity work that needs to develop internationally.

BY PUTTING international solidarity at the heart of your organizing, are you asking for the workers of the world to unite?

[Laughing] YES. WE have no other choice if we want to win.

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/05/06/fighting-to-stop-these-tragedies>