

# **Dhaka (Bangladesh) factory tragedy: capitalism is guilty - “Strong unions are the key to preventing another Rana Plaza”**

Tuesday 21 May 2013, by [LEE Eric](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2013).

On the afternoon of 24 April, Rana Plaza, an eight-storey building housing textile factories in Savar, a suburb of the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, collapsed. When rescuers gave up searching for survivors on 29 April, the official death toll was 380.

Local police ordered an evacuation of the building on Tuesday 23 April after workers reported cracks in the building’s structure. The factory owners ignored these concerns and forced more than 2,000 workers to remain in the building. Workers reported the use of intimidation tactics, including threats of docking pay, to silence those who spoke out.

The police have arrested Mahbubur Rahman Tapas and Balzul Samad Adnan, the bosses of New Wave Style (the company which operated in the factory), and two engineers involved in the planning of the complex, on charges of criminal negligence. It is believed the foundations were laid inadequately. Mohammed Sohel Rana, the building owner, has been taken into custody after attempting to evade arrest.

The aid effort has been slow, with few resources pumped into it. The owner of the factory is influential and politically connected to the government. The building was never properly planned or regulated; the Mayor of Savar gave permission to build the complex on marshland without proper authority.

Textiles is one of the biggest industries in Bangladesh, employing around three million workers in 4,500 factories.

The minimum wage is around £25 per month. Bangladeshi factories produce garments for many major UK high-street retailers, including Primark and H&M. The Rana Plaza factory supplied Primark and Matalan.

While this tragedy has one of the highest death tolls, it is by no means unique. Official figures show that more than 700 people have died since 2005 due to poor working conditions, and countless more have been injured.

Only five months ago a factory fire in the same region claimed the lives of 117 workers. The factory failed to meet basic health and safety standards and had no fire safety certificate.

Three supervisors were arrested on charges of criminal negligence, which included padlocking the exits to stop workers leaving the building. Despite this, the owner denies his factories are unsafe, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina went as far as blaming the workers for the fire calling it an “act of sabotage” and citing other cases where workers were caught starting fires.

The 24 April collapse sparked a wave of protest across Bangladesh’s industrial regions. Thousands of

workers walked out of their workplaces, occupied major roads, and clashed with police, who reacted with rubber bullets and tear gas to control the crowds.

The strikes and protests have had an effect. The government's original reaction was to downplay the incident and defend the bosses, with Hasina claiming that the building was in the process of being evacuated and that workers became trapped because they went back to collect their belongings.

Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, the head of the Ministry of Home Affairs, blamed the collapse on members of the opposition Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) physically shaking the building in a strike they called two days previously.

This stance changed due to public pressure. Hasina later promised justice for the workers and called for the arrest of the factory owners. The Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu told reporters: "I wouldn't call it an accident... I would say it's a murder."

As the anger of the workers in Bangladesh grows, the tragedy is being used as a point scoring device between the political parties. The BNP, along with 17 other opposition parties, has called another general strike for 2 May under the banner of solidarity with the affected workers.

Recent upsurges in garment worker militancy have not been controlled by the bourgeois political opposition, however.

Formal union organisation is difficult due to legal restrictions on unions' right to access workplaces. Independent unions such as the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) have organised some campaigns and direct action, but are forced to function more as external workers' advice centres, with only a clandestine presence in workplaces themselves.

Many strikes and protests have been semi-spontaneous. In June 2012, there were mass strikes, protests, and a four-day lockout of more than 500,000 workers. Workers were demanding increases in the minimum wage.

Between right-wing bourgeois opposition parties, Stalinist parties, and Islamists, Bangladeshi workers risk becoming a political football whose struggles are manipulated. They need to form independent unions and political organisations to assert their own interests.

The deaths at Rana Plaza are modern global capitalism stripped bare. Every corner is cut, every possible saving made, to allow bosses to squeeze out more profits, even if it means risking the lives of hundreds of workers.

That exploitation can only be defeated at the point at which it takes place — in the workplace itself.

### **Strong unions are the key to preventing another Rana Plaza**

The collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh has horrified people all over the world. Everyone wants to see something done about it, to ensure that it never happens again.

But not everyone agrees on what needs to be done. Last week, at the request of the IndustriALL global union federation which represents textile and garment workers around the world, LabourStart launched an online campaign. IndustriALL's text, which came in part from their affiliate unions in Bangladesh, demanded that the Bangladeshi government "take urgent action to guarantee freedom of association and improve building and fire safety and the minimum wage for the more than three million garment workers in Bangladesh."

The campaign pointed out that “Working for a minimum wage of US\$38 per month, less than one percent of garment workers in Bangladesh are represented by a union. The Labour Law leaves workers unable to join a union and fight for safe workplaces, improved working conditions and better wages.”

It put the right to join a union at the centre of the campaign. Tens of thousands of people learned about our campaign due to a promotion on Facebook and thousands of them signed up. But many of them posted comments which typically asked what we, as consumers, could do.

Many people wanted an online campaign to put pressure on those huge Western clothing chains like Primark and Walmart. Others talked about boycotting those shops. Many argued that the problem was cheap clothing — only if we paid more for clothing could people in Bangladesh have a decent life. Some proposed that we only buy fair-traded clothing.

The focus of many of these comments seemed to be entirely on how through our shopping we could make the world a better place. This strikes me as well-intentioned but also patronising — and ultimately ineffective.

A decade ago I worked for an NGO in London that had been asked to do a campaign to promote mine safety around the world. They did a beautiful poster with a slogan that I’ve never forgotten: “The stronger the union, the safer the mine.”

It’s a simple idea, but an enormously powerful one. The workers in Bangladesh need better laws to protect their health and safety at work, they need labour inspectors to enforce those laws, and we in the West can of course help pressure their government and employers.

But, above all, they need the only tool that workers have ever discovered that really does protect them at work: trade unions. Strong trade unions will ensure that health and safety laws are passed and are enforced. Strong unions can compel an employer to reduce risks in the workplace.

I’m very skeptical about the idea that we can shop our way to a better world by “buying ethically”. It certainly feels better to buy a fair-traded product, but in the end, is that all we can do? Just make ourselves into nicer, more caring consumers?

The terrible tragedy at the Rana Plaza should remind us that we are far more than consumers — we are workers, members of a huge and powerful global movement that when united and focussed on a goal can change the world.

Solidarity — not ethical shopping — is what the garment workers of Bangladesh are demanding.

**Eric Lee**

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\* <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2013/05/01/dhaka-factory-tragedy-capitalism-guilty>