

# **Bangladesh: Never Forget the Rana Plaza Massacre**

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## **Six years after the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse killed over a thousand people, Bangladeshi workers are striking for better wages and safer conditions.**

On April 23, 2013, a local television crew shot footage of cracks in the Rana Plaza factory complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The building was evacuated, but the owner of the building declared it safe and told workers to come back the next day. One Walmart supplier housed in the building, Ether Tex, threatened to withhold a month's wages from any workers who didn't return.

The building collapsed on April 24, and when the rubble was finally cleared, 1,134 people were found dead, with another 2,500 injured. It was the worst industrial disaster in the history of the garment industry.

From the ashes of Rana Plaza emerged the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety. An international compact among nonprofit organizations, Western manufacturers and retailers, local Bangladeshi union federations, and several major global unions, the Accord has monitored fire and building safety in 1,700 factories in Bangladesh over the past six years for signatory brands.

Among the main provisions of the Accord were independent monitoring of factories involving workers and unions, elected health and safety committees in workplaces, a worker complaint mechanism, the right to refuse dangerous work, and public disclosure of factory names, inspections data, and remediation plans.

Prior to the Rana Plaza collapse, garment factories themselves were largely responsible for policing factory conditions with toothless international monitoring schemes providing public relations cover for Western brands.

"Rana Plaza showed the world that self-regulated safety audits in Bangladesh were a farce," said Léonie Guguen of global manufacturing union federation IndustriALL. "It was time for something radically different, and something which had muscle."

The Accord differed from pure whitewash alternatives in that it was legally binding and required brands to maintain their relationships with suppliers while fixes to factories were being made. In other words, Western brands could no longer cut and run at the first sign of trouble or to blame safety conditions purely on local players rather than ponying up for repairs.

## **Results**

The Accord's results have been impressive in terms of workplace safety. It has conducted thirty-thousand inspections and remedied more than 90 percent of violations at one-thousand factories. The fixes affect 2.5 million workers though some of the costliest improvements remain to be done, according to the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), a witness signatory to the Accord.

The Accord brought credibility — and, importantly, the dollars provided by international brands facing a PR disaster — to improving safety conditions in Bangladesh’s garment factories.

Eight Bangladeshi unions were brought to the table, as were IndustriALL and another global union federation, UNI. Crucially, dozens of international brands — mostly European — signed on.

“The Accord has been valuable in that it’s helped to open up some space for workers to organize,” said Monika Hartsel of the Solidarity Center. “It gives them a little cover knowing that the brands that source from the factories they’re organizing may be more responsive.”

Proponents of the Accord point in particular to its worker-complaint mechanism as a way of providing workers a voice. For example, a May 2019 report by the ILRF highlighted a 2017 situation at Ananta Apparels, which had structural damage to the building that led workers to fear an imminent collapse like Rana Plaza. Supervisors, factory ownership, and the BGMEA all cajoled and coerced workers to come back to work, but the workers filed an independent complaint with the Accord with the assistance of the National Garment Workers Federation. The factory was shut down and repaired, and the workers were restored four days pay for work missed.

## **Limitations**

But was it enough?

The Accord did not focus primarily on the right to organize.

Chaumtoli Huq, a professor at the City University of New York School of Law and maker of the 2017 film *Sramik Awaaz* (Worker Voices) on the Bangladeshi garment industry, said that’s a problem: “The workers I interviewed in my documentary were very clear in what they think needs to happen — it wasn’t renew the Accord, it was put a union in my factory.” She argues that the international solidarity movement is not sufficiently listening to those workers.

In 2018, when the Accord’s term was extended past its initial five years, it added protecting the freedom of association as a principle, an important step forward. But by then, health and safety issues and worker power had diverged as subjects to fight for. While the international solidarity network focused on the Accord’s work on fire and building safety, garment workers themselves pushed for higher wages through wildcat strikes in late 2018 and early 2019.

“What’s odd is that you have almost these two parallel movements — you have the Accord piece and you have the wages and unionization piece,” said Huq.

Despite the Accord’s work, wages remain abysmally low in Bangladesh — average wages in Bangladeshi factories are the lowest of any of the world’s biggest garment exporting countries.

“Everyone has a scope to their work: the Accord was thinking of building safety and worker safety after Rana Plaza and Tazreen,” said Nomita Nath, president of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation. “If they had worked on worker freedom to join unions, it would have been good. But what they did is good.”

## **Extension**

After an extended delay involving negotiations between the Accord and the powerful Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the Bangladeshi Supreme Court agreed in May to extend the Accord’s term by 281 days.

Responses to the extension among the Accord's supporters have been mixed. IndustriALL hailed the announcement as progress given that there were doubts whether the Accord would be allowed to continue operating in Bangladesh at all.

But the BGMEA's interpretation of the memorandum of understanding extending the Accord would severely restrict the ability of the Accord to move business away from factories that are unsafe, engage in independent inspections, and establish safety enhancing plans for newly inspected factories.

Babul Akther, president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, told *Reuters*, "This deal is sure to compromise the safety and security of garment workers given there will be no independent decision-making by the Accord."

Akther added that local unions were iced out of negotiations, which were between the Accord and the BGMEA and sanctioned by the government of Bangladesh.

## **Strikes**

Fifty-thousand garment workers went on strike in Bangladesh in December and January to protest the government's minimum wage increase, which fell far short of their demands. At \$95 a month, the new minimum wage is less than a quarter of what a living wage would be in Bangladesh according to the Worker Rights Consortium.

Strikers were met with police violence and mass firings of almost twelve-thousand workers. Trumped-up criminal charges were brought against hundreds of workers.

This repression is not new in Bangladesh's garment sector. Similar mass protests in 2016 led to two-thousand firings and the arrests of a dozen activists, who went to jail. In Bangladesh's garment industry, abuses of workers attempting to organize are common, including harassment, firings, blacklisting, and assaults.

While the country is not as significant a global player as China, Bangladesh's garment industry is second in the world and vital to the country's economy. Bangladeshi garment exports totaled \$31 billion in the year ending June 2018, accounting for 84 percent of the nation's total exports.

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