

ARTICLE #1: The Bangladesh Factory Collapse, The Global Cheap Labor Economy, Wages at a Dollar a Day

Source: globalresearch.org

More than 300 people are dead, mainly garment workers, and many more are injured following the collapse of the eight-storey Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh this week. The tragedy is one of the world's worst industrial disasters, but it will not be the last, as global corporations constantly drive for greater profits through the exploitation of sweatshop labour.

The Rana Plaza complex was typical of the multi-level buildings that have been thrown up by the massive expansion of Bangladesh's clothing industry—now second only to China—with scant regard for the country's limited safety and building codes. It housed five garment factories, employing thousands of workers, as well as a maze of shops. The owner, a local politician connected to the ruling Awami League, only had permission to erect a five-storey building, but was not stopped from adding three more floors.

As with previous disasters, the Bangladeshi government, business groups and global clothing corporations that profit from the country's cheap labour quickly swung into operation to limit the political and economic fallout.

The prime minister blamed the building owner for the collapse, declaring that he would be punished. At the same time, Hasina made clear that nothing would be done to prevent similar catastrophes. She acknowledged that 90 percent of the country's buildings were not constructed to meet the official building code, but brushed the issue aside, declaring: "Shall we have to demolish all the buildings right now?"

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) cancelled the membership of the companies operating in Rana Plaza and called for those responsible for the collapse to be prosecuted. Like the government, however, employer groups know only too well that unsafe conditions are rampant throughout the industry.

Last November, 112 workers died in the country's worst factory fire, at Tazreen garments in the Ashulia industrial zone. Supervisors ordered employees back to work after the fire alarm sounded, leaving workers trapped in the upper floors. Some 700 workers have been killed in factory fires in Bangladesh since 2005. Garment factory collapses in 2005 and 2010 claimed another 79 lives.

The overriding concern of the government and employers is to ensure that the country's thousands of garment factories, which account for 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports, continue operation as usual. They are acutely aware that any improvement in wages (on average \$US37 a month), or to the appalling conditions confronting millions of garment workers, could undermine the country's competitiveness.

Labels for the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, the Spanish chain El Corte Ingles and PC Penney have been found in the rubble. Web sites for the factories in the building indicate that they also supplied Germany's Kik, Belgium's C&A, Benetton UK, Spain's Mango, Canada's Trimark and Premark in Ireland, to name a few. These companies' expressions of "shock" at the disaster are particularly cynical. All these corporations know very well the sweatshop conditions that are required to produce garments at the prices they demand. They operate through a complex system of middlemen and subcontractors to distance themselves from the actual production processes. Many have a system of factory audits, not to improve safety and conditions, but to provide a face-saving façade to protect their corporate images and brand names.

The health, well-being and lives of workers are constantly sacrificed to the relentless drive for profit, not only in the sweatshops of Asia, Africa and Latin America, but in the advanced capitalist countries. Just last week, a fertiliser plant in Texas exploded, killing 14 people and injuring another 200. In April 2011, 11 workers died in an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in Gulf of Mexico that resulted in the largest environmental disaster in US history.

These tragedies are crimes that are ultimately rooted in the profit system itself. Globalised production, which has the potential to provide everyone on the planet with a decent standard of living, is leading under capitalism to enormous profits for the wealthy few and the deepening immiseration of working people around the world.

ARTICLE #2: Cheap clothes have helped fuel social revolution in Bangladesh

Source: theglobeandmail.com

Yes, Bangladesh's garment industry is ridden with appalling labour practices. The fire at the Tazreen Fashion factory in November that left charred piles of young women's bodies heaped at the fire exits – which were locked – reminded us of that. I've visited factories that were so dimly lit the workers stitched Gap-bound shorts hunched over, squinting at the seams. I've seen factories where the windows were sealed and the industrial fumes were strangulating. The workers, mostly women, sewing clothes for H&M and Nautica and all the other stores in the West make a few dollars a day, working 12-hour days. But our cheap clothes have helped fuel a social and economic revolution in Bangladesh, and Bangladeshis do not want that to end.

Pressure from buyers works. Clients have pushed factories in Dhaka – and in Kampala and Maseru and other places where I've reported on the garment industry – to improve labour and safety standards. Not great – they wouldn't meet Canadian standards. But they're safer, and factory owners are constantly forced to reexamine. Companies such as Nike and the Gap, high-profile brands that have been targets of movements like the Clean Clothes Campaign, have been forced to take an active interest in how their clothes are produced, and the factories that make them are correspondingly better than the ones that sew for brands that do not audit.

Is that better than boycotting the "Made in Bangladesh" label? In Dhaka not long ago, I spent the day in a slum called Korail, where I met many young women who work in the factories. Mini Akhtan makes \$65 a month working 72 hours a week, sewing shorts and pyjamas bound for malls in Canada and the United States. She hates the fact that her mother is raising her five-year-old son, whom she sees only on Friday afternoons.

But Ms. Akhtan and her friends gave off a palpable sense that their life is different than it was five years ago – and a certainty that it will be quite different five years from now than it is today. Will they be rich? No. But maybe their kids will be at the private school. They will have saved enough from working at the garment factory to move back to the village and start a small shop. Or to buy a plane ticket to Bahrain to spend a few hard years doing construction work – and come back with savings to really shake things up. Ms. Akhtan is the first person in her family ever to have a formal job; her son, she said with total confidence, will be an engineer.

And that's another thing about the garment factories. They account for 75 per cent of Bangladesh's exports. And Bangladesh is making massive inroads against poverty. It started from the nadir, so it still has low literacy, poor health indicators, high corruption. But maternal mortality has been cut in half in a decade. Ninety-five per cent of kids get their vaccinations.

On every development indicator, Bangladesh is trouncing India – even though India's economy is growing twice as fast – and a big part of the reason is that women are driving Bangladesh's growth. The garment factories have a mostly female work force (out of the sexist conviction that they are more biddable and better with fine handiwork like sewing.) Women with jobs and income get a bigger voice in their family decisions; their children go to school, get vaccinated. In India's boom, almost no women have joined the work force – and you do not see as much social progress as you do across the border.

Bangladesh's garment zone can seem like a hellhole, and no one who shops at Joe Fresh would want Mini Akhtan's job for five minutes. But you can call Joe Fresh today and demand that they audit their producers for safety and for working conditions. You can demand to know what their producers' relations are with Bangladesh's struggling labour unions. You can tell Joe Fresh that if they are going after your business, they need to have a direct relationship with a supplier – not outsource to a third party so they get plausible deniability. Demand to see those safety audits, every quarter, posted on their website, right beside the sale on \$6 shorts.

And get involved with Clean Clothes or a similar campaign working to shed light on that consumer chain. You don't have to go naked. You can do more for Mini Akhtan and her family by buying "Made in Bangladesh," and finding out how much the worker who made your shorts was paid.