



Disposable workers: the real price of sweatshop labour

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More than three days after an eight-story building housing five textile factories collapsed in the Savar industrial zone, just outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh, rescue teams were still pulling live workers from the rubble. Tragically, more than 330 workers have been killed and another 1,000 seriously injured. An unknown number are still missing, including children who were in a crèche on the top floor of the complex when it collapsed.

What is even more appalling is that the workers reported structural cracks in the complex the day before and an evacuation order was issued ? and yet the factory owners ignored the cautions and forced 3,000 workers to continue on in unsafe conditions. This is blatant murder.

Instead of locking up the factory owners and throwing away the key, the police have viciously attacked the hundreds of thousands of workers who walked out of their factories on the outskirts of Dhaka and in the southeastern city of Chittagong in solidarity with their dead co-workers, dispersing them with rubber bullets, tear gas and batons.

To date, only two executives of New Wave Apparels, the largest factory in the Rana Plaza complex, have been arrested and charge with causing ?death due to negligence?. The other executives have gone into hiding, including Sohel Rana, the owner of the building and leader of the local Jubo League (the youth wing of the ruling Awami League).

These factories supplied the UK?s Primark as well as Spain's Mango, whilst Matalan and C&A had previous links with the contractors.

This is not the first catastrophe to hit the Bangladeshi garment industry. Just five months ago, more than 100 garment workers died in two factory fires in Dhaka, in what was then described as ?the deadliest in Bangladesh's history?. Witnesses reported that many workers had been unable to escape through blocked exits. In 2010, another Dhaka garment factory fire killed 124 workers, there, too, the exits were locked to prevent theft, leaving them imprisoned in the inferno.

The race to the bottom

More than 3.6 million people, 80% of whom are women, work in the garment industry in Bangladesh, working for just \$38 per month (\$1.27 per day) for working up to 15 hours a day. Under the country?s Labour Law, they have no rights to join a union and fight for safe workplaces, improved working conditions and better wages. Many face sexual harassment and physical violence. This is slave labour.

Bangladesh?s meteoric growth in the readymade garments industry since the 1990s, which now accounts for 80 per cent of the country?s \$24 billion annual exports, has been built on the superexploitation of these workers. The country has become the second largest garment producer, behind China, by giving international investors and their local subsidiaries and suppliers a free hand. Numerous politicians and military figures have personally enriched themselves through the construction and ownership of the garment factories.

Safety regulations are virtually non-existent, and industrial laws are routinely flouted. Bangladesh?s labour ministry reportedly employs just 18 inspectors to monitor conditions in more than 4,000 factories. Labour activists, who have complained about poor safety standards, say they are routinely harassed and sometimes even tortured. One labour

organiser, Aminul Islam, was brutally murdered in April, with Bangladesh's security forces allegedly involved in the crime.

Bangladeshi textile employees are among the lowest-paid of their kind in the world, yet other countries are vying for that position – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Mexico and Jordan, to name just a few. And the results are strikingly similar: on 11 September 2012, 315 workers were killed and more than 250 seriously injured in fires at two textile factories in the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Lahore.

Most people associate sweatshop labour with price-buster chains like Walmart and Primark but, in reality, almost every global brand is involved, including Nike, Gap, Benetton, Monsoon, Adidas, Esprit, Disney and Hugo Boss. You would be hard-pressed to find one that does not outsource its production to factories in special economic zones, free trade zones and export processing zones around the globe, where the only thing 'special' about them is that they are free from any labour or environmental constraints. In these zones, the workers are just as disposable as the clothes they make.

Business and media pundits have tried to blame Western consumers' demand for ever-lower prices for the rise of sweatshop factories. Of course, during an economic crisis, many workers are forced to look for cheaper clothes, but they are not responsible for this global trend.

Even in the boom times, corporations look to extract superprofits off the backs of workers in unregulated zones. This is shown by the massive rise in the number of sweatshop factories in the 1990s and 2000s, made easier by the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) push to open up markets through a number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). But, in recessionary times, like now, large multinational corporations are doing everything they can to squeeze their supply chain even further, which means lower wages, longer hours, worse conditions and no trade unions.

It is telling that in its statement Matalan said that it had not used New Wave since February when it had 'switched production for commercial reasons'. In other words, it did not move because of New Wave's appalling conditions but because it had found another factory somewhere else that will produce the clothes for even less.

Many global brands are trying to protect their reputation by shifting the blame to the subcontractors and their countries' governments. Others are trying to whitewash their brand by hiding behind unenforced 'codes of conduct'. The responsibility lies firmly with these companies, they are the ones squeezing both local factory owners and workers by demanding lower prices. We demand independent inspections of working conditions and buildings, with immediate closures for those that do not comply.

End sweatshop labour

Millions of workers, mostly women, toil in tens of thousands of sweatshops around the world. Anti-sweatshop organisations estimate that 85% of sweatshop workers are young women between the ages of 15-25.

Some commentators have said that the expansion of the massive garment industry has increased the independence and status of women. But it has also vastly increased their exploitation.

Sweatshop labourers generally work 60-80 hours per week, with no extra pay for overtime. They do not have any benefits, such as insurance or sick pay, acceptable working conditions or a living wage to cover the cost of basic needs, such as food, shelter and health care. The sweatshop environment itself is unsafe; workers are harassed, intimidated and made to work in dangerous and unhealthy environments, even while sick. Workers handle toxic chemical paints, solvents, and glues with their bare hands.

Many women are forced to have injections to prevent pregnancy so that companies do not have to pay maternity leave. If a woman becomes pregnant, or refuses to submit to forced birth control, she may be sacked.

In sweatshops, women are often hired over men because they can be paid less and are seen, at first, as more submissive

and malleable. For many, this is their first job in a city and their main aim is to send as much money as possible home to their families in the countryside.

But the very brutality and inequity of their treatment spurs them to resist and revolt and their collective numbers eventually empower them to do this. Their solution to these crying problems is the fight to massively improve their wages and working conditions, not to return to the home and the village.

Many in the west, and in the NGO's, advocate consumer boycotts of the firms like Primark which use sweatshop labour. Certainly, short term boycotts are justified to support demands that these western corporations ensure basic labour rights and health and safety conditions are operating in the factories they buy from.

Persistent offenders should have their brands 'contaminated' by pickets of their prominent megashops with leaflets and graphic propaganda exposing their workers' wage levels and working conditions. However, we should not demand that firms stop buying from Bangladesh factories or that 'buying British' is a way of punishing these big brands. This will only lead to these poorest and most underprivileged workers losing their jobs. In any case, there are sweatshops in the East End of London as well.

To put an end to sweatshop labour will take a global campaign. Action in one country alone merely results in the big corporations seeking suppliers at even lower wages or worse factory conditions.

We need to link up workers in all the main textile producing countries in south and southeast Asia and China, with workers in the main markets for their products. Anti-sweatshop campaigners, trade unions, socialists, feminists, and NGOs have made various attempts do this and have developed charters of rights. Events in Bangladesh show we need to redouble our efforts.

In the UK, trade unions and progressive NGOs should campaign hand-in-hand with garment workers and their trade unions in every country where sweatshops exist to get Primark et al to demand laws and enforcement of working standards. But, ultimately, this is a class and therefore a political question.

Workers in Bangladesh and in other sweated labour countries need a political party of their own that can fight to end the owners' impunity and the corruption that is rife and which links the sweatshop bosses to the ruling political parties and often corrupts trade unions as well.

Class independence is the key, alongside a determination to make the capitalist parasites both local and multinational end their super-exploitation and pay massive compensation for their crimes such as the Rana Plaza factory collapse.

Women workers in clothing and textiles have played crucial roles in unleashing revolutionary movements in the past, it was the women textile workers of Ivanovo in Russia in 1905 who formed the first soviet or workers' council. That is why trade unionists and socialists around the world should not only do all they can to aid the workers of Bangladesh but study and learn from their struggles.

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