



3 May 2013

Bangladesh: We mourn – and we organise

On 24 April 2013, the collapse of a shoddily-built factory took the lives of over 500 garment workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Public Services International General Secretary Rosa Pavanelli says, “As we mourn with the families of the workers who lost their lives in this tragedy – we also confirm our commitment to advance through international solidarity the struggle of textile workers for justice in their working conditions.

“It is unconscionable that – more than 100 years after the fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City on March 25, 1911 that caused the death of 146 women garment workers - more garment workers than ever are labouring as virtual slaves and losing their lives in unsafe factories.”

That industrial accident prompted the growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which fought for the working conditions of sweatshop workers, and achieved legislation requiring improved factory safety standards.

On 11 September 2012, 289 garment workers were killed in a horrific fire in Karachi, Pakistan. In November 2012, scores more workers were killed in a garment factory fire in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Workplace safety is a fundamental right of all workers, as spelled out in the International Labour Organization's Convention 155 on Occupational Safety and the Health Convention of 1981. Only 60 countries have ratified Convention 155; neither Bangladesh nor Pakistan is among them. But, as member states of the ILO, both Bangladesh and Pakistan are fully accountable for meeting its provisions.

Pavanelli says, “The brutal economic forces of globalization and the race to profit from cheap clothing for export markets are destroying human lives. We stand with garment workers in their continuing struggle against exploitation.

“We call on the Asian Development Bank, meeting now in Delhi, to address the issue of health and safety for workers in the garment sector, as well as in all other sectors, as a fundamental factor for sustainable and fair development and economic growth. Investments in social security policies and effective labour inspection services must be applied.

“We call on the governments of Bangladesh and other countries to enforce safe work environments. We call on the multinational enterprises that constantly seek the cheapest workforce to stop the exploitation of workers and to respect international labour standards.

“We call on governments to apply social clauses to protect workers' rights in trade agreements, and to suspend agreements with countries that do not respect workers' rights.

“Our trade unions join with citizens to hold these governments and employers accountable. We call on governments and consumers everywhere who benefit from cheap clothing imports to insist on decent working conditions and to eliminate corruption at every step in the supply chain.”

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