



International Labor Rights Forum Dhaka, Bangladesh Fact-Finding Delegation

**Findings and Recommendations
on the Second Anniversary of the Rana Plaza Disaster**





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Cover photo: On April 26th the ILRF Delegation was invited to tour the Lyric Industry factory. This factory has a union affiliated with the BGIWF union federation, and they recently signed a Collective Bargaining Agreement with the factory. The factory manager and union president were both with us during the tour as we were shown the different stages of garment production. The president of this factory's union was one of the men we heard from the previous day, and while he named issues in the factory like maternity leave not being properly granted and fire safety issues, it does seem like this factory has an appreciation of the union relationship. They are in the process of building a new factory that will hopefully meet some of the safety standards that are currently lacking. Photo by Jessica Maudlin



International Labor Rights Forum Dhaka, Bangladesh Fact-Finding Delegation on the Second Anniversary of the Rana Plaza Disaster Findings and Recommendations

INTERNATIONAL LABOR RIGHTS FORUM (ILRF) & BANGLADESH

The International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), a 29-year-old non-governmental organization that mobilizes and advocates within the United States for internationally-recognized worker rights and labor standards in countries where U.S. corporations or government policies hold significant influence, has a long history of work supporting workers in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the second largest volume exporter of garments in the world. The U.S. is the largest purchaser of Bangladeshi garments, after the EU, but the largest single nation importer. Consequently, U.S. corporations and the U.S. government, which is an extremely large apparel consumer, have a particular responsibility to protect, respect, and improve human rights and labor rights in clothing production in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's garment manufacturing industry, referred to as the Ready Made Garments (RMG) sector, is relatively new. Until the 1970s, most U.S. clothes were produced and made in the United States. Then garment manufacturers shifted production first to Caribbean export platforms, then to Mexico and Central America, and then to Asian producers in search of low-wages, and thus lower total production costs. As wages in many of these countries rose, manufacturers sought countries with even lower wages and abundant supplies of labor.

From 1974 through 2004, garment and textile exports

from developing countries to industrialized ones were regulated under the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), an international agreement that imposed quantitative quotas from each exporting country primarily so that lower cost imports from developing countries only gradually displaced local producers in Europe and North America. The effect was to dramatically expand the number of countries that participated in the world export trade in apparel. When the quotas expired on January 1, 2005, exports from the largest lower-cost developing countries expanded dramatically. China consolidated its position as the number one garment exporting country and Bangladesh became number two. Asian producers displaced Western Hemisphere producers. Between the mid-1970s and the first decade of the 21st century, the U.S. lost one million jobs in clothing and textiles.

The rapid explosion of the garment sector in Bangladesh placed enormous strains on already failing or poorly developed social, economic and political infrastructures. Garment companies sprang up overnight and buildings were quickly "converted" or built to manufacture, but without proper safety protections (e.g. fire doors), suitable electrical installation, or structural integrity. The government agencies charged with building inspections were ill-prepared to address the challenges of policing the rapidly growing number of factories. Similarly, the government agencies charged with protecting workers according to Bangladeshi law (which nominally embodies adequate international standards) were not equipped to police an industry now employing four million workers. When workers seek to organize to improve their working conditions,

ILRF EXPERIENCE IN BANGLADESH

Starting with the Spectrum factory collapse in 2005, ILRF became increasingly involved along with its international allies, including the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), and the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), in efforts to hold brands responsible and secure adequate compensation for injured workers. Since then, ILRF has continued working with grassroots partners that are leaders in worker organizing in Bangladesh to organize its response after every crisis. ILRF developed a close working relationship with the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) and several grassroots unions, including the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), and the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF). In 2010, leaders from BCWS and BGIWF were jailed for a month for their views on the excessively low minimum wage in the sector (US\$23 per month at that time). The charges were never substantiated and finally dropped.

In 2010, a fire at a Hameem Group factory claimed the lives of 29 workers who had been producing for several major U.S. labels. ILRF worked closely with CCC, WRC, MSN, and the then named International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) to negotiate compensation and draft a binding agreement for future prevention efforts. That draft agreement, after many rounds of negotiation and regular consultations with Bangladeshi partners, later provided the core language for the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which was negotiated by IndustriAll Global Union, UNI Global Union, and their Bangladeshi affiliates. It is now signed by 200 global signatory brands.

ILRF is a witness signatory to the Accord and works to ensure partners in Bangladesh are informed and fully engaged in its implementation.

ON APRIL 24, 2013, RANA PLAZA COLLAPSED, KILLING MORE THAN 1,130 WORKERS AND INJURING ABOUT 2,500.

all too often employers fire and harass union members and leaders, and some have hired thugs to beat up union organizers. The government has turned a blind eye to, or sometimes participates in, the abuse of trade unionists.

Although it is widely known that about 10 percent (30) of the Members of the Bangladesh Parliament own garment factories, the delegation was told by one leader of a union federation affiliated with the global union IndustriAll that another 146 members of Parliament included family members who also owned garment factories. If this is even approximately accurate it suggests a decisive governmental bloc that has, in the past and apparently now, set itself against appropriate factory and labor law regulation and is tolerant of lawless abuse of worker rights. As a result, priority has been given to business interests and the maximizing of profits for factory owners. To say that government enforcement of labor and building safety laws in the RMG sector has been lax appears to be both a consequence of this fact and an understatement of the impunity with which the factory owners create a climate of lawless repression in the workplace. Bangladesh has thus been a priority focus where ILRF has advocated for policies to stop the downward pressures on wages and working conditions.

On April 24, 2013, when Rana Plaza collapsed, killing more than 1,130 workers and injuring about 2,500, ILRF sprang into action, together with key allies including the Clean Clothes Campaign, Maquila Solidarity Network, and United Students Against Sweatshops, to pressure companies sourcing from

Bangladesh to join a legally-binding agreement to monitor and improve health and safety conditions and create ways for workers to have greater voice in ensuring safe working conditions in factories. What resulted was the establishment of the “Accord,” which is discussed further below.

ILRF also helped lead the U.S. advocacy community’s work in pushing U.S. retailers to contribute to the Rana Plaza Trust Fund, designed to compensate injured workers and family members of those who died for medical expenses and loss of income. Plans were underway as the second anniversary approached to leaflet outside The Children’s Place stores when the actions were called off (and redirected to JC Penney, Mango, Walmart and Zara stores) due to The Children’s Place’s agreement to make a significant contribution to the Trust Fund. On April 23, The Children’s Place made a second, much larger contribution, bringing its total contribution to \$2.5 million, and becoming the third largest contributing company to the Trust Fund. Although it took an intensive campaign, The Children’s Place changed its position and it also helped get several other companies to make additional contributions totaling \$1.3 million.

ILRF’s delegation to Bangladesh during the second anniversary of the Rana Plaza tragedy was thus part of ILRF’s ongoing research, reporting and advocacy for corporate accountability in the Bangladesh garment industry. Delegation participants – all human rights advocates and civic leaders themselves – helped to advance this purpose.

COMPOSITION AND GOALS OF THE DELEGATION

The delegation was led by ILRF's Executive Director, Judy Gearhart. The meetings and schedules in Dhaka were arranged by Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and a long-time ILRF partner, and Liana Foxvog, who coordinates ILRF's apparel campaign work. Two ILRF Board members, Joe Eldridge, a long-time human rights activist in the Americas, and Kim Bobo, founding director of Interfaith Worker Justice, represented the Board on the delegation. Robert Ross, the author of *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops* and a long-time expert on garment sweatshops, added historical background and industry depth to the delegation. Three members, Emma Cantor, representing the United Methodist Women, and Jessica Maudlin and Bryce Wiebe, representing the Presbyterian Church (USA), brought wisdom and experience on how to engage faith communities in supporting Bangladeshi garment workers.

The goals of the delegation were to:

- **Stand in solidarity with Rana Plaza victims and their family members** on the second anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster.
- **Learn more about how the Rana Plaza Trust Fund was being administered.** Although ILRF had advocated persistently for the large brands to contribute generously to the victims' compensation fund, concerns had begun to emerge about the awards received thus far being insufficient to meet victims' needs.
- **Learn about trade unionists' experience with the implementation of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, and how these programs are improving fire and building safety in factories.**
- **Assist ILRF in building public awareness about ways to support Bangladeshi garment workers.**

Schedule and Meetings

Delegation members were in Dhaka from April 22 to 29, 2015, during which time they participated in two public forums about the garment sector and held in-depth meetings with a broad range of the key players involved in advocating for workers' rights and improved safety. Delegation members participated in the following events or met with the following people:

- Participated in the "National Round Table on Status of Rana Plaza Victims Compensation and Rehabilitation" organized by the Bangladesh Occupational Safety Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE). Approximately 25 Rana Plaza injured workers and surviving family members participated.
- Met with 28 Rana Plaza injured workers and surviving family members at the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity's Savar office.
- Participated in the conference, "Rana Plaza two years on: Towards a safer RMG sector for Bangladesh" organized by the Government of Bangladesh and the International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Participated in a demonstration at the Rana Plaza site on the second anniversary of the disaster. Hundreds of workers and family members were at the site that day.

The demonstration the delegation joined was organized by the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and the Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation.

- Met with Alonzo Suson, Solidarity Center's Bangladesh Country Program Director and with Akm Nasim, Legal Expert for the Solidarity Center.
- Met with 25 garment factory union leaders from multiple union federations.
- Met with Louis Vanegas, Program Manager, Better Work Bangladesh, International Labour Organization.
- Met with Mehedi Hasan of the Worker Rights Consortium.
- Had a factory tour of Lyric Industries, Ltd. and met its General Manager, Badal Paul. This is a unionized factory with good labor-management relations.
- Met with the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat, and her labor attaché Paula Albertson.
- Met with the Accord executive director, Rob Wayss.
- Met with Mohammed Kawsar, senior claims reviewer at Rana Plaza Claims Administration.
- Met with four key leaders of Odhikar, a human rights organization.
- Met with six leaders from PVH, including Jim Chidwick, the Hub Leader for the Indian Sub-Continent, Kumkum Sazia Kutubuddin, Regional Leader, South Asia, and Najeeb Akbar Sayed, Director and Country Manager, Bangladesh.
- Met with Bishop Paul Sarker of the Church of Bangladesh and the Church of Bangladesh's Self Development Program's director Michael Roy. Met with 10 leaders of

Work for a Better Bangladesh Trust.

- Met with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, Assistant Executive Director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS).
- Met with Johan Stellansson, Relations Responsible (Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka) for H&M.

RANA PLAZA – A KILLING, NOT AN ACCIDENT

One of the most moving meetings for all delegation members was the conversation with 28 injured workers and surviving family members. Delegation members had all read about the collapse, but hearing about it from injured workers made the tragedy real.

On April 23, 2013, cracks were discovered in supporting columns of an eight-story building, which was in the process of adding a ninth floor. Although the building was not built for nor equipped for garment factories, five different garment factories operated on six of the floors of the building. The architect who originally designed the building said it was built as an office building, not a manufacturing building. An investigator inspected the building on April 23 and declared it unsafe. All the workers were instructed to leave, which they did. Overnight, the building owner, Mr. Rana, found an engineer who was willing to declare the building safe.

The next morning, workers showed up at 7:30 a.m. for work, but were worried about going inside. They were fearful about the safety of the building. Lots of managers and supervisors were outside telling the



Many of the folks gathered at the site of Rana Plaza to protest the missing compensation funds held photos of their lost loved ones. Many shared stories of how their bodies hadn't been recovered and they were still working through DNA matching processes to identify remains. Photo by Jessica Maudlin

workers to go inside. The workers said some were told they would lose their overtime wages if they didn't work that day. Others were told they would lose the entire month's pay if they did not work. And then, the managers pushed them inside the building.

Around 8:30 a.m., there was a blackout in the building (and the area), a fairly regular occurrence in Bangladesh. Factories have backup generators and so Rana Plaza's backup generators came on. When the generators started up, a few minutes after the blackout, vibrating and shaking the building, it collapsed. At least 1,138 workers were killed and more than 2,500 were injured.

The death toll of this building collapse made it the largest industrial "accident" in history. But as delegation members heard so clearly, this collapse was not an accident. It was a killing. Those in charge disregarded warnings that the building was unsafe and pushed workers to go into it in order to keep up production. Pressure for deadlines and penalties – profits – trumped safety and, ultimately, workers' lives. Most of those killed were young women who provided significant financial support for their parents, siblings, or children.

Throughout the garment sector, 80 percent of the workers are women. Similarly, of those killed, the vast majority were women. These women were sometimes the sole wage earners and often significant supporters of children and parents. The wages were very low, but they were still the difference between bare survival and malnutrition for most of the families. Based on the stories the delegation heard, family members had

not received compensation that would replace the earnings the workers would have provided to their families over the years.

The loss of life, in a situation that could have been prevented, is unparalleled in workplace deaths. The tragedy is compounded when the injured are added to the number. And these were no small injuries. A concrete building collapsed on people. People lost limbs. Most everyone the delegation talked with seemed to have had a head injury. Many had serious back injuries. And, poignantly, as delegation members listened to the workers tell their stories, it was clear that many suffered the emotional injuries that have come to be known as post-traumatic stress. If you are a garment worker and you have lost an arm, how will you work again? If you are a garment worker whose back has been injured so you cannot sit for long periods of time, how will you work again? If you are terrified every time you enter a multi-story building, it will be hard to return to work.

Approximately \$27 million dollars has been raised or pledged for a Trust Fund for injured workers and family members of victims, but to the workers it is terribly unclear what has happened to all that money. The workers the delegation encountered are confused as to what the distribution and assessment process is, why some people are receiving some amounts of money and others getting different amounts. There appears to be little transparency in the process. The amounts of money given to workers who lost an arm or a leg or a family members was often \$1000 or less, at least according to the papers the delegation was shown. For a garment worker who survived on sewing

or perhaps an entire family that depended on that income, getting \$1000 is wholly inadequate when the worker has lost his or her ability to earn a living. Even though the government claims there is rehabilitation and training, none of the workers the delegation met with had gotten any. ActionAid surveyed injured workers and found that 61 percent will require ongoing medical assistance.

According to several sources, workers can call to seek a reassessment or better explanation of their case, yet the claims administration office has a small staff. When the delegation met with a claims administrator, it was told that there is one phone line to take calls from the more than 5,000 claimants. Securing additional, independent reassessments will be important, both to ensure victims' wellbeing and to help coordinate the somewhat fragmented services currently available. What has also become clear since the accident is the reality of permanent damage that has been done mentally as well as physically. Many back injuries have left workers with chronic pain and others report they can no longer work at the pace demanded.

The delegation asked the group of 28 workers who had been injured in Rana Plaza who wanted to return to work in the apparel factories and nearly every one raised his or her hand. But when the delegation asked who was able to return, workers all put their hands down. Then one woman spoke up who said she had no remaining physical injuries, and told us that she had started back to work 19 times in different factories, but each time she only lasted about a week before the emotional and physical demands made it impossible

for her to continue.

Up until the delegation's investigation, the International Labor Rights Forum had focused primarily on advocating more money from apparel brands for the victims' fund. Although the fund clearly still needs more money, the delegation came to understand that the Trust Fund needs more transparency and outreach capacity. The fund must do a better job communicating with injured workers and surviving family members. The Trust Fund was set up to only cover medical expenses and loss of income, yet it is increasingly clear measures are needed to ensure injured workers are getting the long-term healthcare and post-traumatic stress counseling they need.

THE ACCORD AND THE ALLIANCE

After the Tazreen Fashions factory fire on November 24, 2012 conversations had been underway between the major brands sourcing in Bangladesh, local and global unions (principally the confederation now known as IndustriALL) and worker rights advocates, led by the Worker Rights Consortium, the Clean Clothes Campaign (based in Amsterdam), the Maquila Solidarity Network (based in Canada) and the International Labor Rights Forum to create a binding structure for improving building and fire safety and for ensuring that workers have a voice in health and safety.

Although ensuring compliance with building codes and labor laws is usually a government function, even before Rana Plaza, worker advocates believed neither the Bangladesh government nor the brands could



Thousands of injured workers and the families of the deceased gathered at the site of the Rana Plaza collapse on April 24, 2015, along with many labor organizers and activists, all of them protesting the missing compensation funds. Walmart is just one of the US companies that profited from the cheap labor of these workers and yet has failed to take meaningful responsibility. A partial payment of \$1 million was made to the Rana Plaza Trust Fund (via BRAC USA) in 2014, but the company needs to pay the remainder still needed for the Trust Fund and properly compensate Tazreen and Aswad victims as well. Photo by Jessica Maudlin

enforce basic standards or keep workers safe without additional, independent oversight.

The large companies sourcing from Bangladesh, such as H&M, PVH, VF, Walmart, Primark, and GAP, knew they needed to clean up the sector before another disaster struck. Negotiations for what a structure might look like moved slowly until Rana Plaza. The Rana Plaza disaster pushed companies to invest immediately in a way to clean up the sector. Two primary initiatives emerged – the Accord and the Alliance.

The NGOs involved in worker rights and working conditions are convinced the Accord is clearly the stronger and better initiative. The final text of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, simply referred to as the “Accord,” was adopted on May 15, 2013 (although two companies had committed to a very similar agreement text prior to Rana Plaza). According to the Accord’s website, “It is a five year independent, legally binding agreement between global brands and retailers and trade unions designed to build a safe and healthy Bangladeshi Ready Made Garment (RMG) Industry.” the agreement has six key components:

- A five year legally binding agreement between brands and trade unions to ensure a safe working environment in the Bangladeshi RMG industry
- An independent inspection program supported by brands in which workers and trade unions are involved
- Public disclosure of all factories, inspection reports and corrective action plans (CAP)

- A commitment by signatory brands to ensure sufficient funds are available for remediation and to maintain sourcing relationships
- Democratically elected health and safety committees in all factories to identify and act on health and safety risks
- Worker empowerment through an extensive training program, complaints mechanism and right to refuse unsafe work.

The Accord has been signed by 200 apparel companies, two global unions, eight Bangladeshi trade unions and four NGO (non-governmental organization) witnesses, including ILRF. The 19 U.S. brands that have signed the Accord are: Abercrombie & Fitch; American Eagle Outfitters; Antigua Group Inc; E5 USA, Inc.; Fruit of the Loom; J2 Licensing, Inc; Knights Apparel; L.A. T Sportswear Inc; Lakeshirts, Inc.; MV Sport, Inc.; Outerstuff Ltd; New Agenda by Perrin; PVH; Scoop NYC; T Shirt International, Inc.; Top of the World; Topline, Inc.; W Republic; and Zephyr Headwear.

PVH was the first company to join the Accord and one of its leaders serves on the governing board.

Unfortunately, some of the largest U.S. brands that source from Bangladesh refused to join the Accord. Instead they decided to form their own organization without shared governance with labor representatives or mandated ways for workers to be involved in addressing health and safety issues. The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, called the “Alliance,” works with 26 North American apparel companies and retailers, including: Ariela and Associates

International LLC; Canadian Tire Corporation, Limited; Carter's Inc.; The Children's Place Retail Stores Inc.; Costco Wholesale Corporation; Fruit of the Loom, Inc.; Gap Inc.; Giant Tiger; Hudson's Bay Company; IFG Corp.; Intradeco Apparel; J.C. Penney Company Inc.; The Jones Group Inc.; Jordache Enterprises, Inc.; The Just Group; Kohl's Department Stores; L. L. Bean Inc.; M. Hidary & Company Inc.; Macy's; Nordstrom Inc.; Public Clothing Company; Sears Holdings Corporation; Target Corporation; VF Corporation; Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.; and YM Inc.

There is some coordination between the Accord and the Alliance on building inspections (the Alliance, according to the Accord's Director Rob Wayss, has agreed to use the Accord's format for reporting safety inspections), but little coordination on worker empowerment. The Alliance has a worker hotline, a questionable means of worker empowerment according to labor rights groups, while the Accord notifies all trade union federations where they will be conducting inspections and asks them if they have any members or union representatives on the premises who should join the inspection proceedings. The Accord also comes to the defense of workers who suffer retaliation when they organize to address safety issues. Although the Alliance requires Worker Participation Committees in factories, as required by law, the Accord plans to establish worker health and safety committees, which are also protected against retaliation under Bangladeshi law. Trade union leaders and workers whom the delegation met are aware that the Accord includes the right to refuse dangerous work, but did not appear to know that the Alliance had amended its Member Agreement

to also include this right. Trade union leaders also told the delegation that the Accord communicates its inspection and enrollment findings directly and clearly, which is an important assurance for workers, especially after Rana Plaza.

The day after the Nepal earthquake, which caused tremors in Dhaka, the delegation visited the offices of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF) and the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). When the delegation arrived at 11 a.m., it found a large group of workers crowded into the meeting room. When the delegation inquired about union meetings during the work day, the union representative explained that she had argued with the factory manager to convince him that they should not work until their building was inspected because the neighboring building had a crack in it. She and her coworkers had enlisted the support of the BGIWF federation representative to help them secure the agreement and were waiting for the inspectors to show up. The BGIWF representatives quickly looked at the Accord website to see if the factory in question was listed because they felt that would help strengthen their arguments that the workers had the right to refuse dangerous work without reprisals.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Although one cannot visit Dhaka without being bombarded by the noise, smells, chaos and political graft delegation members did their best to stay focused on the purposes of the delegation. Thus, although everyone has plenty to share about Dhaka in

general, the major findings focus particularly on the goals of the delegation. In summary, the delegation found:

1) There is a major transparency gap in the administration of the Rana Plaza Trust Fund.

Surviving workers and family members of the deceased are profoundly confused about why they have received certain amounts of money, how the numbers were calculated and whether or not they will receive more. Perhaps the monies have been given out in fair and rational ways, but workers do not know this because the basis of claims settlements is obscure to them. When the delegation met with a Rana Plaza Claims Administration officer, he was personally gracious, but had clearly been told not to share any specific information. He referred to International Labour Organization Convention 121 as the basis for the decisions, and referred to a spreadsheet with a formula. He said there is a telephone number victims can call to request their case be reassessed, but noted the office is meant to close in June, although it seems impossible that its mission could be finished by then.

When survivors and family members of the deceased showed us final letters about their claims all that was shown was final award amounts of taka. When delegation members pressed the Administrator about the need for better communications with survivors and their continuing problems he abruptly announced, “We’re done here.” He promised to forward follow-up questions to the appropriate people, but no responses to the questions have been provided.

2) Workers and surviving family members are not receiving the long-term help and support they need.

The amounts of money given to injured workers and surviving family members appear to be woefully inadequate, although it is hard to tell without some level of transparency on how the funds are being distributed. What is absolutely clear is that the injured workers are not being given the medical help, job rehabilitation and post-traumatic stress counseling they need to be able to move forward with their lives.

3) The Accord is creating an interesting and potentially replicable model. For decades, companies created Codes of Conduct for their supply chains that covered workers’ rights and health and safety. Yet after twenty years of code monitoring, not a single factory the Accord inspected had fireproof doors, which is actually required by the Bangladesh fire code and something all the fires should have indicated as a priority fix. Trade unions and worker rights groups had raised this concern multiple times, but nothing happened. The Accord now provides unions the platform to engage brands directly to ensure these repairs are made.

When the delegation asked 19 local union representatives and leaders if they had received or seen building safety inspection reports about their factories from the Accord, those who worked at Accord enlisted factories said yes. The others (Alliance factories or neither) had not seen or heard about inspection reports. It is the practice of the Accord to inform union federations when Accord inspectors are going to audit a factory with a union presence. The



Despite injury and loss, many workers in the garment industry still want their jobs. They just to want to be afforded basic human dignity as they work. Photo by Jessica Maudlin

Alliance, as far as the delegation knows, has no such practice.

In places like Bangladesh, with virtually no building and labor code enforcement and weak unions, in order to fulfill their obligations and stated intent to respect workers' rights, global brands need to establish additional structures for monitoring and improving safety and working conditions and help create the space for workers to have a voice in the workplace. The Accord has built a team of both worker advocates and engineers who have accomplished a great deal in a short two-year period by inspecting about 1,200 factories and documenting 55,000 fire, electrical and building safety issues in Corrective Action Plans. The model should be considered for use in other countries where the big brands are buyers but government enforcement is weak and there aren't yet strong unions.

4) The work of the Accord will not be finished in five years and should be extended. Given the need to remediate the fire, electrical and building code violations in the more than 1,500 factories which supply its members (keeping in mind that there are more than three times as many factories in the country) and create functioning, democratically-elected health and safety committees in all of them, it is unlikely that the work of the Accord will be finished three years from now. Its work should be extended.

5) The Alliance is conducting inspections and creating plans for remediating gross safety violations among the factories from which its members source. Unfortunately, because the Alliance staff was unable

to meet with the delegation during the eight-day visit, the delegation can only reflect on what was heard from workers. From workers and the organizers that delegation members met, the Alliance seems to not (effectively) communicate its findings to workers or to involve unions in its operations and governance. The Alliance's focus is more streamlined than that of the Accord, prioritizing technical repairs over worker and union engagement in the process. This approach, however, misses an opportunity to validate the importance of worker voices in a context where they are still largely disregarded and organizers are actively being persecuted.

6) Repression against unions is widespread. Workers who try to organize unions are fired, blacklisted, harassed and sometimes beaten by thugs. Several union leaders have spent time in jail on falsified charges, solely for their union and worker rights advocacy. One organizer, Aminul Islam, was tortured and murdered in 2012. The government is doing little to protect unions and at times appears to support garment manufacturers' attacks against union leaders. Recent pressure brought to bear by the US and EU has resulted in some openings and the organizing and registration of a few hundred unions. Very few of those unions, however, have been able to exercise their right to bargain collectively and several of their leaders have been brutally beaten. When the delegation met with 19 leaders from newly formed union locals, nearly all named harassment of organizers as their top concern at work. Based on the findings, the delegation recommends the following:



Delegation Recommendations

1) Alliance Companies, like Walmart, VF and Gap, should merge into the Accord. Rather than continuing to create a separate, alternate program that purports to collaborate with the Accord, the Alliance members should seek means to intensify their cooperation with and ultimately merge into the larger program. Influential customers—for example Universities with enforceable contracts and Codes of Conduct regulating their logo licensing – can help encourage brands to join this initiative.

2) The U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh should encourage the Bangladesh government to:

- **Provide transparency around the money collected and distributed by the Prime Minister’s fund for Rana Plaza victims, and to distribute the remainder to the survivors and families.**
- **Ensure adequate supports for injured workers, including for pain and suffering.**
- **Enforce existing law to end violence and repression against trade unionists exercising rights established in Bangladesh law.**

The U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh is an experienced diplomat. She understands the challenges facing workers in Bangladesh. Her office should continue to stand firm for workers and those hurt in the Rana Plaza disaster.

3) The U.S. government should continue and expand its work in Bangladesh to strengthen worker rights. U.S. government agencies should increase their funding for activities to train and support trade unions, worker centers, and other grassroots organizations in Bangladesh that are advancing workers’ rights and empowering and educating

women garment workers. The U.S. government should also call on U.S. companies to make significant contributions to the Rana Plaza Trust Fund.

Currently, USAID has given a \$2.6 million grant to provide training and support for trade unions in Bangladesh. This is a minor fraction of total aid to Bangladesh. This kind of grant should be expanded in future years.

4) The ILO should ensure greater transparency for the Rana Plaza Trust Fund. Even though the Bangladeshi government is handling much of the administration of the fund, the ILO acts as a neutral convener, oversees it and thus could ensure better transparency and help secure sufficient resources. Given that the fund has still not received all the donations needed from apparel brands, the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee should keep the office open beyond the planned closure date of June 2015. ILO leaders and the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee may not be aware that their communications to workers have not been adequate.

5) Social justice advocates, including the ILRF, should continue to educate Americans about where and how their clothes are made. The U.S. public and the supporter constituencies of the ILRF and allied groups need to know about the problems workers face in the Bangladesh garment sector. From urging companies like JC Penney, Mango, Walmart and Zara to complete the \$2.7 million gap in the Rana Plaza Trust Fund, to calling on companies like VF to sign the Accord, to advocating for sweatshop-free government purchasing policies in their communities and the federal government, there are many ways that citizens and consumers in the U.S. can get involved. Delegation members are pledged to this task.