

Modern Day Slave Trade: America's Offshore Industrial Sweat Shops

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The vast majority of garments sold in US retail stores are made overseas. US and European fashion designers establish relations with suppliers based on profit, regardless of where the product is made or the working conditions.

The world's little-regulated free trade agreements, competition between fashion designers and the craving of Western consumers for low-cost products traditionally drive the fast-growing outsourcing of textile manufacturing to countries that lack protection for workers and where unions do not exist.

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in the Savar district of Bangladesh's capital last April, killing more than 1,100 workers, highlighted the plight of exploited garment labourers in Asia.

According to official investigation, the upper four floors of the building were erected without proper permits. Just one day earlier, inspectors ordered the evacuation of the building after uncovering serious structural cracks. However, the victims – half of whom were women and their nursing children – were threatened with having one month's salary (about \$50) deducted if they didn't report to work the next day.

About six months earlier, 112 workers were killed in another garment factory in Bangladesh. Two weeks after April's garment factory tragedy, another eight people lost their lives when fire swept through a large clothing factory in Dhaka.

Following the latest incident, human rights organisations initiated a campaign urging Western fashion designers and outlet stores to sign the Fire and Building Safety Accord in Bangladesh. The accord calls for an end to abysmal, unsafe factory conditions and requires a commitment from major Western retailers to invest in renovations and repairs necessary to make buildings safe.

The accord's preamble calls for establishing a fire and building safety programme where “no worker needs to fear fires, building collapses, or other accidents that could be prevented with reasonable health and safety measures”.

The pact's five-year commitment requires participating retailers to carry out independent safety inspections of factories and contribute up to \$500,000 per year towards safety improvements.

Wistfully, some 14 major American and eight UK fashion retailers refused to endorse the

Bangladesh readymade garment agreement. This included three of the largest buyers: Wal-Mart and GAP of the US and Asda of the UK.

It is disgraceful that major American and UK fashion retailers refuse – albeit under superficial pretexts – to sign the 25-point plan ensuring a safe work environment, especially when the cost to these large retailers comes to less than 0.1 per cent of their annual profits.

Labour organisations, trade unions and human rights groups in the EU and North America should bring the fight home and lobby unscrupulous retailers not just to sign the safety plan, but take it a step further and force these sweatshops to abide by internationally accepted labour standards with an eight-hour day – putting an end to modern slavery.

A growing body of evidence has established a clear correlation between long working hours and the risk of occupational injuries.

A US study of over 100,000 job records and over 5,000 workplace injuries for the period 1987 to 2000, carried out by the Centre for Health Policy and Research at the University of Massachusetts, concluded that long working hours “precipitate workplace accidents”.

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