

Wage Wars: Exploited Bangladeshi Workers Reach a Boiling Point

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Workers in Bangladesh have been perishing in tragic, preventable factory accidents for years. Now, in mass uprisings that portend both more violent labor struggles on the horizon and a new dawn for a nascent labor movement, the workers are starting to strike at the factories themselves.

[Tens of thousands of workers took to the streets earlier this week](#), turning some of their anger at the factories by hurling broken bricks at the authorities. [About 300 factories were shuttered](#) “to contain the violence,” according to Al Jazeera, and police cracked down on protesters with “tear gas and rubber bullets.” In lashing out at the physical workplaces, the workers were responding to symbols of a power structure that has [done far greater violence to them](#): Just this spring, more than 1,100 people died in the collapse of the Rana Plaza industrial complex, and before that, scores of lives were claimed in a blaze at the Tazreen garment factory.

While the Rana disaster was a catalyst for the uprising, the workers’ primary demand appeared to be for higher wages.

After similar protests broke out a few years ago, the government was compelled to [increase the minimum wage, roughly doubling it in 2010 to about \\$38 per month](#). Now workers are seeking to raise the monthly minimum wage to \$100. That might be a large jump percentage-wise, but the big ask is a testament to the unconscionably low income levels of Bangladeshi garment workers compared to other garment-exporting countries. According to [a recent study](#) cited in a [Bloomberg News report](#), “The annual total [compensation] for a Bangladesh worker amounted to \$1,478, compared with \$4,577 in neighboring India.”

The new unrest reflects the frustration that has mounted in the wake of the industrial tragedies. International labor advocates have been working for months with Bangladeshi activists to push for [compensation for thousands of survivors and family members](#) of those affected by the recent factory disasters. With the garment sector serving as a main engine of development in one of the region’s poorest countries, the Rana collapse wiped out a livelihood that allowed thousands to barely scrape by. Al Jazeera recently [reported](#) that many of the affected workers were women breadwinners:

Musammat Bulbuli lives in Bogra, about five hours north of the capital. She lost her 22-year-old daughter, Molita, in the Rana Plaza disaster. “I don’t know what to do now,” she said. “My daughter left behind two girls, aged five and two. She ran her household and took care of her family because her husband could only land odd jobs.”

Advocates want long-term compensatory payments from the employers and brands who were supplied by the factories. Based on the model used for previous Bangladesh factory disasters, the global union [IndustriALL](#) estimates that fair [compensation](#) would total \$74,571,101 for all workers and families affected by Rana Plaza and \$6,442,000 for those affected by Tazreen. The compensation fund would be linked to a [major fire and safety accord](#) based on unprecedented legally binding safety standards, which [87 apparel brands have joined so far](#).

Despite protests led by workers and solidarity campaigns by labor advocates around the globe, however, the multinational brands that drive Bangladesh's thriving garment industry are characteristically reluctant to address demands either for higher wages or fair compensation for aggrieved workers and their families. Victims' families and survivors have yet to see any large-scale compensation, though one brand, the UK-based Primark, [has agreed](#) to provide some preliminary payments to victims.

IndustriALL is leading [talks on compensation in Geneva](#) with several major "stakeholder" brands, through a process facilitated by the [International Labour Organisation](#). The demonstrations have added a climate of urgency to the discussions, although [only nine out of 29 companies invited](#) to the talks actually showed up. While workers rallied this week, the union issued a statement that emphasized the need for both swift and fair compensation and long-term preventive safety measures: "There is a consensus among all sections of Bangladeshi society that wages are low and work place safety is negligible, wages need to be enhanced and there must be improvement in workplace safety." Speaking with Working in These Times from Geneva, IndustriALL Assistant General Secretary Monika Kemperle said that the safety accord was designed to complement the indigenous labor movement by enabling international labor advocates to "work directly in Bangladesh, work directly with the workers, directly with the management, directly with the government."

But IndustriALL officials [announced](#) that little progress had been made in the last round of compensation fund talks earlier this month. "No such agreement was reached at this meeting, although the brands present committed to continuing discussions on this issue," said a press release.

The campaign for sustainable wages complements the push for a safer workplace; while higher pay alone is not the endgame, workers need to gain economic security in order to build real social power. Liana Foxvog, director of organizing and communications with the [International Labor Rights Forum](#), tells *In These Times*: "Wages in Bangladesh haven't kept up with inflation, which is one reason that the low clothing prices are so attractive to U.S. and European companies. But meanwhile workers can hardly pay rent or even put sufficient nutritious food on the table for their families."

And considering the income differential at opposite ends of the supply chain, a long-overdue raise for the world's poorest workers shouldn't be a deal-breaker. "They are sewing for the largest apparel brands and retailers in the world who can easily afford to pay more," Foxvog adds.

Foxvog says it's hard to tell whether the effort to force corporations to compensate victims will be bolstered by the latest grassroots protests for economic justice. It's possible, she says, that "the show of worker power will be a reminder to corporations of the extent to which workers will mobilize to demand change."

Then again, the companies that have signed onto the safety accord did so in large part to avoid the negative international publicity that followed the deadly factory disasters. So it may be that global consumer pressure, rather than local labor strife, is the most effective lever to change in the industry. Nonetheless, real labor change can only be sustained if labor unions and civil society are empowered to defend any gains in pay or safety protections.

The rage that now pulses through the streets of Dhaka sends a powerful message to both consumers and corporate CEOs in the countries that profit from the drudgery of Bangladeshi workers. When a factory can turn into a death trap in an instant, they might as well turn the street into their battleground.

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