

Workers on the Edge in Bangladesh. Covid Lockdown Undermines Garment Industry

The global COVID-19 response is shaking garment supply chains and changing how Canadian unions do solidarity with Bangladeshi workers.

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“COVID-19 will be a catastrophe for Bangladeshi garment workers.”

I am speaking with Kalpona Akter, president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF). It is March 19. Governments around the world have ordered the temporary closure of retail outlets and other businesses, putting millions of people out of work. The shutdown in the West put immediate pressure on global supply chains, in particular for sectors like clothing.

“The international brands that source from garment factories in Bangladesh have already started cancelling their orders for clothes. Consequently, Bangladeshi workers are in very bad shape presently. They are not only afraid of getting infected by COVID-19, but also fear that thousands of them will be laid off and so have no money to put food on the table for their families,” says Akter.

“These are workers who were poor and vulnerable to begin with before the spread of the virus as they were being denied a living wage that would allow them to buy basic necessities.”

While several countries including Canada have announced aid packages for wage earners who lose their jobs due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Bangladesh government had, by mid-April, taken no such step. According to Akter, “it is unlikely that it will do so in the future.”

Bangladesh is the second biggest exporter of garments in the world after China, and with 4.1 million workers in the sector it is the country’s leading export earner. Over 75% of these workers are women. According to Akter, the garment sector pays poverty wages and is notorious for the suppression of labour rights and the presence of high levels of gender-based violence. In the past, Bangladeshi garment manufacturers have also been notorious for dangerously unsafe factories.

On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory in the capital city of Dhaka collapsed, killing 1,134 workers and injuring 2,500. It was one of the deadliest industrial accidents the world had ever witnessed. International and domestic public outrage and pressure on international brands from Bangladeshi and other unions, including in Canada, resulted in major improvements in factory safety, but the other significant problems remain unaddressed.

Since 2013, the Canadian labour movement has been working with the Bangladesh Centre for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS), which is closely linked to the Akter's federation, to press governments, employers and international brands to work together to improve working conditions for Bangladeshi garment sector workers. The Canadian unions involved include the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), United Steelworkers (USW), Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

These unions give the BCWS funding for core operations and for providing training and support for women leaders in factories. Doug Olthuis, executive director of the USW Humanity Fund, explains that through their financial help, support in Bangladesh and support in Canada, "We've raised our political voice with the governments of both Bangladesh and Canada to make sure appropriate measures are taken to uphold labour rights, especially the ability to freely join unions.

"That has had some impact on the Canadian government, which knows that there is a constituency in Canada that is watching what Ottawa does," he continues. "This has been helpful for sure. It is important for Canadian unions to make some noise to motivate the government to act on behalf of Bangladeshi garment workers because otherwise it won't."

Transnational solidarity has also amplified concerns raised by workers in Bangladesh with their country's Ministry of Labour.

"The fact that Canadian unions meet with the ministry means that the Bangladesh government knows that they are being watched and that unions and consumers from around the world are paying attention to what it does," says Olthuis, who joined representatives from CUPE, PSAC, OSSTF and CLC on a delegation to Dhaka in May 2019.

Canadian unions are planning to launch a campaign for a living wage for Bangladeshi garment workers. This is a major concern for Akter, who explains that the poverty wages garment workers currently get do not even cover their monthly costs. Workers often have to work 16-hour days to try to make ends meet, which means they have no family life at all. The workers have no savings either, which makes it impossible for them to deal with a crisis such as COVID-19.

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Louise Casselman, the PSAC's Social Justice Fund Officer, also travelled to Dhaka with the union solidarity delegation in May last year. She points out that the cost of clothing has been dropping while other consumer products tend to get more expensive from year to year.

International brands have all adopted a strategy of "fast fashion," in which clothing trends change every two months, rather than seasonally, as a means of boosting sales. To convince consumers back to the rack more frequently, prices must be kept low, explains Casselman, which has meant keeping the wages of garment workers low as well.

"This explains why workers in the apparel industry are facing such substandard wages and working conditions and why their attempts to organize to improve

their living and working conditions face such resistance,” she tells me.

Unionization and labour rights are not just under threat in Bangladesh, according to Akter, but effectively criminalized.

“When workers try to organize, they are fired. This is very common,” she remarks. “There is no freedom of association in Bangladesh.”

In 2016, when workers raised their voices for a higher minimum wage, they were handed criminal charges. Many workers, including one of Akter’s organizers, were thrown in prison for months.

“During the last two years, over 10,000 workers have been fired for making wage increase demands and three dozen criminal charges have been laid against 7,000 workers. But our workers are brave, and in spite of this repression, they never stop raising their voices and never stop fighting.” However, the state crackdowns in 2016 and 2018 have “pushed back our labour movement at least by a few years” Akter says.

If it is especially hard to change the insidious combination of lack of job security and official repression in Bangladesh, Akter explains it is because, “in many cases, our government is our factory owner.” Some legislators in Bangladesh own garment factories. “In a country like that, where the power dynamic is so critical, it is difficult to fight for your rights.”

Olthuis concurs with Akter that “a lot of the lawmakers in the Bangladeshi parliament are actually garment factory owners,” which he says compromises the Bangladesh government on this issue. “We talk about state capture, and in my opinion the government has been quite captured by the garment sector. It’s room to maneuver is limited.”

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There is also enormous gender-based violence and sexual harassment in Bangladeshi factories, says Akter.

“Because of the culture it happens, it begins at the top. It is time for us to break that silence and get these manufacturers to have anti-harassment committees in the factories and also to pressure our government to pass a law against such violence and harassment.”

Akter is in agreement with the Canadian unions’ planned international campaign for providing a living wage to Bangladeshi garment workers. “It is very crucial to have Canadian unions pressure Canadian brands to pay garment workers a living wage. This is not just for the Bangladeshi workers, it’s for the whole supply chain, no matter which country they are sourcing from.

“We really need these jobs,” Akter continues. “But we want jobs with dignity. And at this moment the jobs we have are not dignified. Canadian consumers should know that the workers don’t have a living wage and should support their demands for better wages and raise their voices with the Canadian

brands in this regard.”

But the chaos created by the COVID-19 virus has also thrown international solidarity into uncharted waters. Casselman observes that this moment “sheds new light on the vulnerability of a supply chain that offers no safeguards or protection for a workforce contracted out to local manufacturers whose own profit margin depends on the super-exploitation of labour.”

Garment workers, like many other manufacturing workers, face plant shutdowns “due to the lack of inputs from China and the contraction of demand,” explains Casselman, noting that isolation measures to contain the virus are shuttering demand across Europe and North America. Solidarity work will have to adjust.

“We already know we will need to increase the role of workers, women, Indigenous peoples and [people of African descent] and their access to social, economic and political rights. COVID-19 could wipe out many of the gains made by the social movements over the last generation, unless we are prepared to fight for a model of development based on a new equitable, green economy, based on fundamental human rights.

“It will not be given to us, so we will have to fight for it, and be prepared to accompany those on the frontlines of social change.”

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Asad Ismi covers international affairs for the Monitor.

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