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Bangladesh

# Indignation after fire claims 112 victims

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### **A deadly fire in Bangladesh has led to a revolt of textile workers and a wave of indignation around the world.**

The Tazreen Fashion factory caught fire on November 24, leading to the death of 112 people, prisoners in a building where no safety rules were respected – and after two managers with the company had ordered frightened workers to resume work, saying that it was a simple fire drill exercise. The victims were mostly women making clothes for international groups. About 150 wounded were hospitalized. As in all tragedies of this type, the dilapidated premises had no emergency exits and fire extinguishers that could be used, while flammable materials were piled in every corner. The company should have only had three floors; it had nine - condemning to death without appeal those who worked on the upper floors.

Two days later, thousands of workers began to demonstrate in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, paralyzing the Ashulia industrial zone where the Tazreen Fashion factory was located, demanding better conditions of work and safety. Regularly attacked by the police, the demonstrations are continuing daily.

In 2010, a vast strike movement of had already affected some 700 plants in this industrial zone, on that occasion for an increase in wages. It is known that conditions of super exploitation in production are extreme in Bangladesh, which does not prevent large Western ready-to-wear and distribution chains, such as H & M, Carrefour, Metro, Walmart, Levi Strauss, Tommy Hilfiger, GAP, Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Zara continuing to supply themselves from the country.

Because of the involvement of these transnationals in Bangladeshi garment manufacture, November 24 fire caused a wave of indignation around the world, including in the United States (Walmart is found particularly in the line of fire of the protests). The indignation was even deeper in that the alert had been more than once sounded on insecurity in the Tazreen Fashion factory and the drama was perfectly predictable: the number of employees in the Bangladeshi clothing sector who have died in fires since 2006 is estimated at some 700!

If production is a high risk area in Bangladesh, it is because of ever increasing pressure from outsourcers for just in time production, with night work, exhaustion of workers, prohibition of trade unions, and total disrespect of safety rules. With almost 4500 plants and 3.5 million employee registered in textiles, the country is today the second biggest exporter in the world after China.

As a major textile exporter, the whole of South Asia is affected. Last September, more than 300 employees were killed in two fires at a factory in Pakistan and 40 others in Tamil Nadu (India). Employers (accustomed to super exploitation) and (corrupt) Asian governments obviously have their share of responsibility. But the laws of the capitalist world market are directly involved. Indeed, transnational corporations are playing on competition between various countries in the region, driving down wages, working conditions and safety standards. Big ready-to-wear and distribution companies can no longer continue to hide behind a cascade of subcontractors to conceal their roles in these repeated dramas.