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Bangladesh

Making a killing: Rana Plaza and the global garment industry

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV483 - April 2015 -

Publication date: Friday 24 April 2015

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The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building is the bloodiest disaster in the history of the garment industry. Socialist Alternative's industrial organiser Jerome Small visited the scene, just outside Dhaka in Bangladesh, late last year.

Early November, 2014. It's my first day in Dhaka, and the contrasts with my sometimes sleepy home town of Melbourne keep slapping me in the face.

There's the soldiers on street corners, loafing around with shotguns. There's the half million pedal rickshaw drivers, manoeuvring for space in the crush of cars, bikes and packed, roughly panelbeaten buses that is Dhaka traffic. There's the human energy generated by more than 12 million people, living and working in an area just one-sixth the size of greater Melbourne.

There's plenty that is strange to me. But some things are as clear as day.

"Action! Action! Direct action!"

I'm standing in the street outside the National Press Club, with 500 chanting garment workers – most of them young women. A month ago, they were employed by the Ha-Meem conglomerate, making clothes for the high-profile international brand H&M. For daring to organise a union, they have been sacked and the factory shut down. So we're blocking a street, marching up and down, chanting in protest.

A young man approaches me. "Journalist?", he asks. "No, unionist", I reply. I'm one of a six person delegation organised by Australia Asia Worker Links, a Melbourne-based worker solidarity organisation. For a week, I have the honour of talking with some of the workers who produce the clothes that the world wears. I visit some of the crime scenes – where workers have perished in their hundreds and in their thousands. And I get to talk with some of the staunchest fighters I've ever met.

After today's rally we sit with some of the workers, and I get a rapid education about the garment industry. The first thing I learn is that garment workers don't make garments.

A collar.

A pocket.

A hem.

Labels.

A seam.

Cuffs.

Buttons.

Overlocking.

Modern garment making, like any capitalist industry, breaks a single process such as making a shirt into dozens of different operations, each one performed by a single worker. Again. And again. And again. And again. And again. For every minute of every hour of every long, and often painful, working day.

Garment manufacture is labour intensive. The drive to minimise costs has meant that, throughout the globalised history of the readymade garment industry, women's labour has been most exploited. "Women are cheaper, because women have fewer options", one manufacturer in Bangladesh told researcher Naila Kabeer. Overwhelmingly, women in the industry say that they appreciate the money, the choices and the respect that paid work brings. But the gruelling pace, low wages and the constant fear for their safety are another matter.

"Do you feel pain in your body from your work?", asks one of our delegation. The question is translated into Bangla and there's an immediate murmur of recognition and agreement from the dozen or so women crowded inside the small office. There are similar rushes of agreement when we raise the issue of hot, dusty air leading to breathing problems, and the bosses' common practice of keeping two sets of books. Some garment workers have pain in their arms, some in their back, some in their shoulders. Many have stories of workmates fainting at their machines. Everyone talks of the unrelenting pressure from the manufacturers, who drive the workers to a point of exhaustion and beyond.

In early October, a worker at the Ha-Meem/H&M factory had their overtime pay docked for going to a funeral. Two workers went to the manager's office to complain. They were assaulted, then sacked. When their fellow workers protested, management shut down the entire factory, put a lock on the gate and walked away. Through our translator the workers explain: "The owner of the factory told the police, "If there are any workers here, pour petrol on them and burn them."

The workers are telling us terrible stories, but they are far from cowed. Anyone who has been on a picket or protest with newly-organised workers would find the strength and spirit familiar. "From going to demonstrations when all this pressure came on", one of the women explains, "we learned that there are other factories, just like ours, which have a union, so the workers started organising."

"If you could say anything to the brand owners", I ask, "what would it be?"

One woman replies, other workers nod: "The workers want all that is owed to them for all the work that has been done. And they want the brand owners to tell the factory owners to reopen the factory."

For asking this, of Ha-Meem and H&M, these workers were roughed up and chased off the streets by police a week after we met them.

The industry

The foundations of the garment industry in Bangladesh are sunk deep into a swamp of corruption. This is not a metaphor.

In the week we spend in Dhaka, we several times catch a glimpse of the gleaming office tower that serves as the headquarters of the peak employer body of the garment industry, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). A series of shonky deals allowed the BGMEA to construct its headquarters in the middle of an important waterway in downtown Dhaka. Bangladesh's High Court found that "a scam of abysmal proportions" was involved in these land deals. The highest court in the country ordered that the BGMEA demolish its headquarters within 90 days.

That was four years ago. The BGMEA tower still stands and no one is expecting it to come down. The foundation stone for this illegal building, after all, was laid by current prime minister Sheikh Hasina. Hasina.

Hasina's political party, the Awami League, and the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, are thoroughly integrated with the garment industry bosses. Of the country's 350 members of parliament, around 30 are garment manufacturers. A similar number, I'm told, are in the real estate business – another popular path to riches for a well-connected and ruthless few. According to Transparency International Bangladesh, more than half of the parliament is directly involved in business or manufacturing, with many more having connections via family members.

The garment industry accounts for nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports. For the ruling elite, the exploited labour of the garment industry is a path to further riches. The country's first deepwater port, a colossal coal mine and further "national development" also depend on it.

So it's no surprise that the state intervenes hard to keep the workers in their place. There are regular police, with some formidable weapons (I've seen water cannon before, but I've never heard of one that fires a torrent of scalding hot water, with an indelible dye so that workers can be tracked down after the protest). There are industrial police, stationed in the factory areas, with a brief to smash worker protests as they start. And behind the police is the army – especially the Rapid Action Battalion, with a string of extrajudicial killings to its name.

Rana Plaza

Political influence, garment manufacture, and land swindling are three of the most lucrative industries in Bangladesh, and they combine in the person of Sohel Rana. On Wednesday 24 April 2013, he became world famous.

Rana is a local street tough and political fixer from Savar, an industrial suburb just west of Dhaka. He is the local secretary of the youth wing of the Awami League, but his political associates say he really isn't fussy: "Whatever party is in power, he is there", one of his associates told Associated Press.

Rana's dad got in on a shonky deal involving reclaimed swampland. Rana junior had an eight story building constructed on the land despite only having a permit for five floors. He named the building "Rana Plaza" and rented the floors out to garment manufacturers.

Part of the deal included Rana and his thugs making themselves available to intimidate the workforce. It's a tried and tested business model, and the business was good. A couple of dozen global brands, including Benetton and Walmart, sourced goods from the Rana Plaza factories.

On 23 April, cracks opened up in the building. At least one of the columns was cracking and splintering. Workers left and an engineer was called, who declared the building was in imminent danger of collapse.

The next day, many workers gathered outside. Some were told that, if they missed one day's work, they would lose several days' pay. Others were threatened and some were beaten by Rana's gang of toughs. Eventually, thousands were forced into the building.

Shortly after, Rana Plaza collapsed.

Crime scenes

"Come over here Jerome", calls Masum as he heads out across the rubble. "I'll show you where I found the bodies."

Moniruzzaman Masum has been taking our delegation around Dhaka, getting us to our meetings and doing much of the interpreting. Now we're at the Rana Plaza site. I'm staring at half an acre or more of finely smashed rubble. Masum was one of the rescuers here. He's mentioned these bodies before, but I haven't understood the story.

Partly, I've been a bit overwhelmed: a visitor hears a lot of stories about Rana Plaza, before even going near it.

Stories of workers, still trapped in the rubble after days, amputating their own limbs so they can get out.

Stories of activists and journalists filming bodies going into body bags night after night. The authorities attempt to minimise the official death toll by cramming more than one body into a single body bag. So it's important that every dead worker is filmed.

Stories of a phone call from a comrade who was watching the rescue on TV. The comrade suggests that rescuers smash their way into the building from the construction site next door. A team with sledgehammers breaks several holes into the half-collapsed floors. Three or four hundred workers are rescued.

Stories about how there still is no money for compensation, just a tiny amount of cash from charity. One activist explains to us the importance of campaigning for justice as well as compensation. Pushing only for compensation "produces a beggar mentality. And you cannot organise to fight with a beggar mentality".

We meet the president of the Rana Plaza Survivor's Union. He explains that thousands of workers, especially rickshaw drivers, rushed into the building to start the rescue without regard for their own safety. Survivors of the collapse, in his opinion, owe a debt to the entire working class of Bangladesh – a debt they repay by joining strikes, demonstrations, and blockades for other workers.

And we hear stories of the army, who didn't turn up until several days after the collapse. When it did, it was to keep away the people who had been organising the rescue.

I follow Masum across the rubble. He heads to a concrete-lined pit on the edge of the site. It's the septic tank for Rana Plaza. He's pointing into it and explaining that, when he found the bodies, there was a concrete lid on the pit and he'd had to crawl on his belly with a flashlight. He saw three skulls, but maybe there were more.

The president of the Rana Plaza Survivor's Union calls out from twenty metres away. He's pointing at another spot. He found human remains there just a couple of months ago. The police had chased him away and seized the

remains.

It's only now that it sinks in: we're walking around, not just on crushed-up bits of concrete and steel, but on crushed up bits of humans. The site has never been properly cleaned up. When the army declared the recovery effort over, 20 days after the collapse, the official tally was the bodies of 1,127 people. The authorities still go to great lengths to avoid adding many more to this number.

Masum explains that, when he found the bodies, he tried to contact families of the missing. Maybe they could sit on the concrete lid of the tank and call the media, demanding a proper cleanup. But the authorities found out quickly and sealed the site off. They broke open the concrete lid with a jackhammer and seized the remains.

How did Masum know to crawl on his belly with a flashlight to look for bodies in the building's septic tank? I don't get to ask straight away because we're on the road again, heading to another crime scene.

Five months before Rana Plaza, there was Tazreen. (And between Tazreen and Rana Plaza was Smart, and before Tazreen was Eurotex, and That's It, and Garib & Garib, and Sayib, and Imam, and Phoenix, and KTS, and Spectrum, and dozens of other fires, explosions, stampedes and building collapses – a bloody trail of hundreds of dead workers, and thousands of injured, that winds through the garment industry.)

We get to the burnt-out Tazreen building a little before sunset. Chickens roam around. There are vegetable gardens of the people who live around the building. School kids with knapsacks practise their English: "What is your name?" followed by "Thank you." Bangladesh, when not taken over for industry, is a fertile garden – and plenty of people call this part of it home. Some are former workers from the factory, or their relatives. Two years after the fire, they are still waiting near the site in case there is an offer of justice or compensation. They know that, if they go back to the village where they moved from, no one will track them down.

A local woman starts telling the story. Masum translates.

The fatal fire was deliberately lit, the woman says. It started on the first floor and took a while to spread. So there should have been plenty of time for workers to get out. But some of the supervisors told the workers not to worry at the fire alarm. "It was only a test", workers were told. When they finally tried to leave, one stairwell was blocked by flames. Another was locked shut. Bars on most windows meant that workers could not escape. Many ended up on the roof, nine stories up. Some jumped, preferring to leave a corpse their family could bury, rather than a charred mess that no one could identify.

The woman explains that the night before the fire started, a large order was completed for Walmart. The owner, Delwar Hossein, got paid for that. The day after the fire was meant to be pay day, so Delwar Hossein saved on the monthly salary.

Officially, the death toll at Tazreen is 112. But there are many more.

Masum explains that Delwar Hossein owns the Tuba group of companies. Many of the survivors of Tazreen went on to work in various Tuba factories. Some were involved in the desperate, high profile industrial dispute that erupted at Tuba in mid 2014.

During this dispute, some former Tazreen workers quietly told Masum that they had seen bodies being shoved into the building's septic tank after the fire.

After the dispute, Masum looked in Tazreen's septic tank. He saw five skulls.

That's why Masum knew to look in the Rana Plaza septic tank. The find wasn't some random occurrence; it's a regular practice.

We've heard often enough of the "race to the bottom". Each country's population is told that we have to accept lower wages, worse conditions and less regulation in order to compete. The ruling class of Bangladesh sees its advantage as being the bottom of this "race": the place where the world's lowest paid manufacturing workers can be ruthlessly exploited, murdered wholesale, and have their remains literally shovelled into the shit.

That pit where workers' bodies were thrown is the end point of this "race" that no worker can win.

I felt sick. I still feel sick.

The criminals

The biggest criminals are the ones who count the biggest profits with cleanest hands. They are far from Rana Plaza.

Shortly after the collapse, clothes designer Sujeet Sennik was called into a meeting in Walmart Canada's corporate headquarters. He and others were informed that Walmart had used factories in Rana Plaza. Sujeet described the scene to The Fifth Estate, an investigative journalism program: "One thousand people died; no one said a thing. They didn't, they didn't say anything about them, they just talked about their, the loss in terms of units, how are they going to make up their margins?"

A thousand dead, business as usual.

So normal and so obscene.

A long time ago, Bertolt Brecht summed up the ethos of capitalism in one line: "I do not know what man is: I only know his price."

Organising

To organise against this is no small thing. You're up against the laws of motion of capital, against its owners and their thugs and their members of parliament, against their laws, their cops, their army, and the union leaders they buy and sell.

Officially, around 2 percent of 4 million garment workers in Bangladesh are unionised. Everyone agrees that many of these unions are actually formed by bosses to stop their workers from organising.

A stable, legal union with any teeth is almost unheard of in the garment industry. So struggle takes other forms – some barely visible to those not directly involved, some spectacular enough to demand the attention of the whole

world.

We hear stories of workers standing up on behalf of each other, resisting the daily assaults on their humanity. I've heard of the gherao before, a tactic of surrounding (for instance) a harassing or bullying supervisor. In Bangladesh I learn that, many times in a year, garment industry bosses find themselves blockaded in their own house by crowds of workers and supporters, allowed out only to attend negotiations. We meet some worker militants, women organisers, who had lost track of how many factories they had worked in, sometimes getting the sack, but always leaving behind an organising committee.

Sometimes, workers walk out on strike. They might occupy the nearest highway, and call out workers in nearby factories. At least three times in the last ten years, this sort of uprising has shut down large sections of the industry – and the country. Colossal strikes and demonstrations in 2006 won a series of reforms, especially more widespread adherence to legal minimums on pay, hours, maternity leave, a day off per week, medical facilities, and issuing identity cards to workers.

Another uprising occurred in 2008, demanding the enforcement of a wage structure agreed out of the 2006 rebellion. According to the human rights group Odhikar, “What started out to be an isolated dispute between the management and workers of a single garment factory, spread out like wild fire across hundreds of factories. As a result of this massive outburst, nearly 300 factories, including 21 factories in the Savar Export Processing Zone, were damaged or partially damaged. Total loss for the garment industry was around \$70 million.”

An explosion of protest immediately after the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, and a further uprising later in the year, forced the government to grant a 77 percent minimum wage increase. Some recent surveys indicate that Bangladesh workers are no longer the lowest paid manufacturing workforce in the world.

The elite have reacted with fury. On the job, production rates are pushed to extreme levels until bodies break, as bosses compete for the business of the global brands. Many workers remark that their pay rise has been gobbled up by increases in rent and food prices.

Left unions and left wing activists, inspired by long traditions of struggle and resistance in Bengal and Bangladesh, play a crucial role in these struggles. More than once during our visit, garment worker militants explained that the struggles of the garment worker are the front line of the struggle of the entire working class for its liberation.

From Dhaka to Melbourne

The products of the garment worker's labour are everywhere. Knowledge of their conditions of work, and support for their struggles, should be just as widespread – not for the sake of kindness, but out of a sense of solidarity. If the workers at the bottom of the “race to the bottom” win better conditions, that takes a little of the competitive pressure off all of us.

From Dhaka to Melbourne, the workers who produce the wealth are denied control over that wealth, and are used up and spat out as we produce it. Working class communities that supply Melbourne's electricity get poisoned wholesale. Warehouse workers speed-ups up until bodies break. A construction tycoon such as Daniel Grollo admits that his company kills three people by negligence and gets a fine of \$250,000 – while a union that shuts down a dangerous building site gets fined well over \$1 million.

Whether in Dhaka or Melbourne, the real crime, at least in the eyes of the elite, and the law, isn't killing people – its disrupting capitalist production.

A monument to resistance

There's a monument at the site of Rana Plaza: a giant hammer and sickle embedded in a solid concrete block. Half a dozen socialist groups worked to build it, and to rebuild it after the authorities demolished it. The monument serves as a memorial and as a rallying point.

After we walk around the site filled with rubble, labels and human remains, I ask Masum to translate the plaque on the monument. He reads aloud:

"A monument of resistance, the Martyr's Tomb. In the history of the Bangladeshi garment industry, there has never been such a horrifying murder of labourers as occurred in Rana Plaza. On 23 April, the workplace was declared unsafe and to be abandoned. Yet, on 24 April, the building's profiteering landlord and greedy owner forced the workers back into the factory with physical violence and the threat of the sack. When the building ultimately collapsed, ordinary people desperately intervened, saving a few."

As Masum continues reading, a small crowd gathers to hear his impromptu speech: "On 29 April, government authorities forced out rescue volunteers from the Rana Plaza compound, and the army took over the rescue operations.

"In a fashion typical of the government, they claim to have removed 1,100 corpses and 2,308 people were rescued alive. But ordinary people and workers suggest that the death toll is much higher. In protest of the murder of labourers and to show the unity of the workers, we have erected this martyr's tomb."

The government has removed previous monuments, I remark. What if they come again to remove this one?

"Don't worry", Masum smiles. "The foundations are deep."

[Red Flag](#)