

> bulletin 25

TRAGEDY IN BANGLADESH

A string of factory disasters highlights the appalling cost of cutting corners with health and safety



Bangladeshi workers demand justice and better health and safety conditions

A spate of incidents has cost dozens of lives and hundreds of injuries in the space of a month at garment and textile factories in Bangladesh, making clear that sector-wide structural measures are urgently needed to improve health and safety conditions.

The four most recent incidents - 3 fires and one factory collapse - occurred less than a year after a major disaster at the Spectrum factory, which collapsed in April last year killing 63 workers, injuring over 70 more and leaving hundreds unemployed. Sadly, the lesson of Spectrum (see

Bulletin 23) - that action is urgently needed to improve conditions for garment workers in Bangladesh - has so far gone unheeded, costing yet more workers their lives.

These disasters could have easily been avoided had regulations been in place and implemented by factory owners. Faulty electrics, unsound structures, weak planning regulation and poor implementation of planning guidelines all contributed to the disasters; the high number of deaths could have been avoided if there had been adequate, unlocked fire exits. >Page 2

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TRAGEDY IN BANGLADESH FOUR DISASTERS

The fact that most workers are denied the right to organise or to have channels through which they can express their concerns about safety issues without fear of reprisals meant that warning signs were not picked up or acted upon.

"Exits blocked with boxes, locked gates, or just one narrow staircase for thousands of workers - in case of fire this means certain death for the young women and men at the Bangladesh factories where clothes for European shops are made," noted Amirul Haque Amin of the National Garment Workers Federation in Bangladesh, adding that faulty wiring and unsound structures are also problems common in garment production units in Bangladesh. "We will keep pushing until this situation is improved."

Since 1990, 350 workers have been killed and 2500 injured in garment factory fires in Bangladesh. There is a clear need for a long-term, wide-scale programme to address health and safety in the garment/textile sectors. The failure to implement safety measures in these sectors in Bangladesh has made the death and injury of workers become alarmingly routine: in 2000 53 workers died at Choudury Knitwear, 24 died in 2001 at Maico Sweater, nine died in 2004 at the Misco Supermarket building, and in 2005 23 died at Shan Knitting and 64 at Spectrum.

Time for companies to take responsibility

Many of our high street companies source from Bangladesh. While no UK company was involved in the recent disasters, this may be more down to luck than anything companies have so far done. We have written to a number of companies asking them what action they are taking to ensure adequate health and safety conditions exist in

their Bangladesh supplier factories. This should include ensuring that:

- > The owner has received all necessary building permits, and that the building is structurally sound and has not been constructed in a high-risk area.
- > The plant and machinery are safe, emergency exits are unlocked and unobstructed, and there is adequate access to exit routes so that emergency equipment can be brought quickly to the site.
- > Workers receive adequate health and safety training and have secure channels to raise concerns on health and safety issues with management, yourselves and the Bangladesh government.

At a more general level, companies sourcing from Bangladesh should be working closely with trade unions and labour NGOs on the ground to improve the implementation of their codes of conduct and the monitoring of their supply chain. They should enable their suppliers to meet the standards outlined in their codes.

Companies should also consider joining a credible multi-stakeholder initiative to verify implementation of their code of conduct and work with other stakeholders to ensure that key issues are taken up at the sectoral level. These issues include raising the minimum wage, improving respect for freedom of association, and contacting local authorities and industry leaders regarding a comprehensive health and safety review.

Once again workers have had to pay the price for the failure of the clothing industry to address the serious health and safety problems in their workplaces. It is time that those companies supplying our high streets take immediate action to ensure similar tragedies don't occur in the future.

February 23: Fire at KTS Textile Industries, Chittagong: 61 dead (including 12, 13, and 14-year-old girls), approximately 100 injured.

Workers estimate that at the time of the fire, caused by an electrical short circuit, some 400-500 people were working in the building at the time. Locked exits prevented workers from escaping from this facility; at least one local media source reported that it was possible the main gate was intentionally locked at the time of the fire to prevent theft from the factory. Sources report that there was no fire safety equipment at the factory, nor had there ever been a fire drill.

February 25: Phoenix Building collapses, Dhaka, 22 dead, 50 injured

The five-story building in the Tejgaon industrial area collapsed following unauthorised renovations to convert the upper stories of the building into a 500-bed private hospital. According to the local media the top two floors of the building were constructed without any approval from the planning authority.

February 25: Imam Group, Chittagong, 57 injured

A transformer explosion caused workers to rush for the exits, dozens were injured when they were unable to get out the narrow exists at this facility housing Moon Fashion Limited, Imam Fashion, Moon Textile, Leading Fashion and Bimon Inda garment factories. Clients reportedly include US retail giant Kmart and US-based Folsom Corporation.

March 6: Sayem Fashions, Gazipur, 3 dead, approximately 50 injured

A fire triggered by an electrical short circuit at the building housing Sayem Fashions, SK Sweater and Radiance Sweater 35 kilometers from Dhaka lead to a stampede when workers attempting to exit the premises were blocked by boxes. Workers' organizations report that other workers' rights violations at the facility included long working hours and seven-day work weeks.

Compiled from various local media and workers' rights organizations, please note that numbers of dead and injured are subject to adjustment as more information becomes available.

TAKE
ACTION

Use the model letter enclosed, or take action online at www.labourbehindthelabel.org/bangladesh.

Ask companies to take urgent steps to ensure their supplier factories comply with adequate health and safety standards. Addresses for companies are included in the letter. Responses and updates will be posted on our website and in our next bulletin.

MR GREEN FAILS TO FIND CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Arcadia finally make contact; things get worse for Fortune Garment workers

LBL's Christmas campaign targeted Philip Green, the owner of the Arcadia Group of high street fashion stores and Bhs, asking him to take action to ensure a better deal for workers producing for his companies. A day of action on December 10th included actions as far afield as London, Brighton, Norwich, Bristol, Sheffield, Northampton, Birmingham and Leicester.

Green took the unusual step of personally approaching activists outside his flagship Topshop store at Oxford Circus, London, to ask them to stop their legal protest. In response to LBL's campaign, he told the Guardian newspaper: "We have contracts with all the factories who make our clothes and do our best to ensure that the workers are treated fairly. If factories do not comply then we don't do business with them." Similar assurances were given to Labour Behind the Label when Mr Green finally spoke to us, after several years of us attempting to contact him.

For workers at the Fortune Garment Factory in Cambodia, which was a focus of the Greench campaign, these words must seem fairly hollow. Attempts to form a union in order to improve conditions at the factory - highlighted as one of the worst in Cambodia by an International Labour Organization (ILO) report - were met with threats, dismissals and legal action. By December 2005, 19 union leaders and 120 union activists had been sacked and at least 11 were facing charges in the civil and criminal courts. In February 2006 yet another union activist was sacked as the situation at the factory deteriorated further. Workers are now planning strike action.

While some of the retailers involved have been working to try and resolve problems at the factory, Arcadia has



Father Christmas pays a visit to Topshop's flagship London store

consistently refused to take any steps to support these workers or to improve their conditions. Despite having been sent proof that Arcadia brands are sourcing from Fortune, they have denied any relationship with the factory and failed to enter into any constructive dialogue with LBL, the union or even the other buyers.

In April, the Observer newspaper sent a reporter to Fortune to investigate the workers' claims. He found low wages, cramped conditions and poor health and safety procedures. Workers interviewed claimed any attempt to improve their conditions resulted in repression. Green responded that he had "found no issues which give cause for concern"!

LBL is calling on Arcadia and Bhs to prove their commitment to their own code of conduct by entering into dialog with local stakeholders, other buyers and ourselves.

> TAKE ACTION

Write to Mr Green at Arcadia Group, Colgrave House, 70 Berners Street, London, W1T 3NL and ask him to contact the Fortune factory and demand that they:

- > Reinstate all the dismissed workers back to their original positions and seniority and support the overturning of the judgement against Mr Sok Vy.
- > Pay compensation to the dismissed workers for the loss of pay and distress caused by their dismissal
- > Establish a framework for dialogue with the C.CAWDU union, including the provision of proper facilities and access to enable the union to properly represent its members

Or take an e-action online:
www.labourbehindthelabel.org/greench

FASHION GOES ETHICAL?

'Ethical' fashion is the new black, if media reports and company advertising so far this year are to be believed. So how to navigate the bewildering array of 'ethical' purchasing options?

The bottom line is that there is still no independent label that can offer a cast-iron guarantee of "sweat-free" working conditions. Major high street retailers have greater resources, so they can and should be held to a higher standard of proof. It's also important to ask what steps these major retailers are taking to improve working conditions in the supply chains for all their normal lines. All that said, even small companies need to justify the use of words like 'ethical' and 'fair'.

We recommend that for all these products you first look at what genuine independent evidence they offer, and second consider the company as a whole, not any small forays it has made into ethical fashion, and decide for yourself whether its commitment is

genuine. There are a few things you can look out for to help you decide:

> Are they working within a recognised and credible framework? This might be the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) or International Federation of Alternative Traders (IFAT). Note that neither of these are certification bodies, but membership is still a positive step. For cotton production, there is also the Fairtrade Mark (but see below).

> Are their workers in a union or co-operative? If not, can they demonstrate that identifiable and positive measures are being taken to safeguard and facilitate workers' rights to organise into a free trade union and

defend their rights through collective bargaining. This should include training for both management and workers.

> Can they demonstrate credible, independent verification of working conditions? Just saying things are good is no guarantee. And beware when large companies say their factories are audited - all audits are not the same, and they should involve local trade unions and NGOs.

> Are they prepared to publicly disclose the names and locations of the factories or workshops producing their goods, and the results of audits conducted there? Gap, Nike and others have done it, so if they won't, you should wonder why...

Ethical options: the cut out and keep guide

Fairtrade cotton

What? An independent guarantee that cotton production meets Fairtrade criteria.

Who? M&S, La Redoute, and Sainsbury's, as well as a bunch of smaller alternative producers. Three of these, Gossypium, Hug and People Tree, had a brief concession in TopShop's flagship store.

LBL comment: While obviously a positive step for cotton farmers, the Fairtrade Mark has its limitations. First, it doesn't offer a guarantee of workers' rights in the supply chain after the initial cotton production, and we know that factories producing for all of the high street retailers involved have been implicated in serious workers' rights abuses in recent years. Second, it applies to only a small number of product lines in each of the high street stores involved.

out what concrete steps companies are taking as well.

Product RED

What? The fundraising brand launched by U2's Bono at the World Economic Forum earlier this year in Davos. Some of the profits are donated to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Who? GAP and Nike Converse are the clothing and footwear brands involved.

LBL Comment: RED does not guarantee that products are produced ethically, nor does it make any claims to do this. For sure, any initiative supporting the fight against AIDS in Africa is welcome, but a more sustainable approach would be to ensure to ensure working conditions and pay are acceptable. GAP have decided to manufacture their T-shirt in Lesotho, a welcome step as Lesotho's garment industry loses ground to China and India.

Ethical Trade

What? The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) brings together companies, trades unions and labour rights groups, to work on ways to address working conditions.

Who? Members include many high street companies and a few global brands, from M&S to Asda to GAP.

Comment: ETI members have made positive commitments to work towards the implementation of a rigorous code of conduct, and to work cooperatively with ETI member organizations, an important step given that many of the garment sector's problems need addressing on an industry-wide level. What the ETI doesn't do is offer any guarantee of working conditions, so it's important to find

'Fair' or 'alternative' traders

What? In contrast to the high street stores, these smaller companies use alternative supply chains, often adhering to guidelines set out by the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT).

Who? Many smaller companies, such as People Tree, Hug, Gossypium, and Bishopston Trading.

LBL comment: These are mission-driven companies who apply the development-orientated principles of fair trade throughout their supply chains. This is laudable work, although there is more that most of these companies could do to demonstrate to consumers how this commitment is implemented.

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

WHO WE ARE



LBL is a campaign that supports garment workers' efforts worldwide to improve their working conditions. We educate consumers, lobby companies and government, raise awareness, and encourage international

solidarity with workers. Our members include trade unions and their local branches, consumer organisations, campaign groups, and charities. We are the UK platform of the international Clean Clothes Campaign.

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MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

Central America Womens' Network,
 Community union,
 Ethical Consumer,
 GMB regions: Buxton, Lancs & London,
 HomeWorkers Worldwide,
 National Group on Homeworking,
 Oxfam,

Public and Commercial Services Union,
 Tearfund,
 TGWU regions: Midlands, North West and Scotland,
 Unison branches: BCWVO, Cearphilly, Pembrokeshire and Derwen NHS Trust, North Somerset Council, Rhondda

Cynon Taff, South Gloucestershire and SW/UWE,
 Unison regions: East Midlands, Northern Ireland and East Midlands,
 War On Want,
 Women Working Worldwide.

GET INTO FESTIVALS FOR FREE

Fancy raising money for LBL and getting into festivals free? We're looking for people to work the Workers' Beer Company tents at a number of festivals over the summer. You get free entrance, plus secure camping, food and drink, and we get paid for each hour you work. Phone us or email sam@labourbehindthelabel.org for more information.

WEBSITE REVAMP

Over the last few months things have been changing on the LBL website. As well as a brand new look, the website contains loads more new information including up to date news, online urgent actions, background info and guides to getting active. Look us up online:

www.labourbehindthelabel.org

JOIN US

You can join our supporters' list to receive this bulletin for free. Or by becoming an LBL member, you can also support us financially. The minimum amounts are set out on the right.

To join by standing order: It's easy by filling in the form below.

To join by cheque: Just fill in your name, email and postal address.

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Your Bank Sort Code:	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> - <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> - <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
Your Account No:	<input type="text"/>
Please pay	The Co-operative Bank plc, PO Box 250 Skelmersdale WN8 6WT
For the account of	Labour Behind the Label Ltd.
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MEXICAN LABOUR RIGHTS ACTIVIST THREATENED WITH DEATH

International campaign calls for protection from persecution by textile bosses

Martin Barrios, a human rights activist working with the Human and Labour Rights Commission of the Tehuacan Valley in Mexico's State of Puebla has finally been granted some protection for him, his family and his colleagues following several threats on his life. In January 2006 Martin was wrongly imprisoned while defending 163 maquila workers who had participated in a legal strike. Martin was released two weeks later, as a result of the international outcry at his arrest.

In February, after appearing on stage with Zapatista leader subcomandante Marcos (now known as Delegado Zero), Martin received two death threats, which

claimed that a local maquila owner had taken out a contract to kill him. A second campaign was launched calling for the state authorities to provide protection from Martin and his family, to take steps to ensure the future safety of human rights defenders working in Puebla and to ensure justice for the dismissed workers.

As part of the campaign a joint letter signed by Levi's, Gap, American Eagle, Phillips-Van Heusen, Polo Ralph Lauren and Warnaco was sent to the Governor of the State of Puebla calling on his government to ensure the safety of Martin, his family and other members of the Commission. The letter drew

significant media attention and put pressure on the state authorities.

Federal authorities agreed to provide staff of the Commission with mobile phones and a security camera to be installed in the entryway to Martin's house. It was also agreed that the Federal police would have a "continuous" presence outside their houses and would accompany them if they were to leave the Tehuacan area. According to the Commission however, in reality, the federal police presence has been very limited.

We'll keep you updated with further news and calls for action.

RIGHT CORPORATE WRONGS

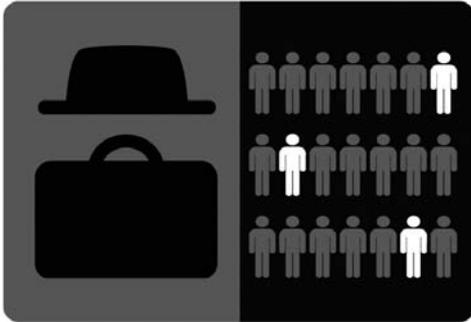
Support calls for company law reform to protect workers worldwide

The British Parliament is currently considering a Company Law Reform Bill making this a crucial time to formulate legislation that will hold UK companies legally responsible for their actions overseas.

Under the Company Law Reform Bill currently proposed by the UK government, UK companies will continue to answer only to their shareholders and only with regard to profits. No legal incentive nor requirement exists to ensure that ethical practices are upheld in companies' multi-national endeavors.

CORE (the Corporate Responsibility Coalition), of which LBL is a member, is pushing for legislation under which those affected by the actions of UK companies overseas would be protected by UK law and be able to seek justice from companies within the UK if they cannot obtain it in their home countries. Under existing legislation, justice and compensation are promised to the

shareholders of a company but not to the workers, communities or the environment that the company affects.



> TAKE ACTION

Send the enclosed postcard to your MP asking him or her to support the EDM 679. If you have time you could also write to the Minister for Industry, urging him to amend the Company Law Reform Bill. You can also meet with your MP to lobby them - the flyer explains more about what to do and how.

SUPERMARKETS FACE COMPETITION COMMISSION PROBE

Campaign groups lobby for a wider investigation

LBL wrote to the Office of Fair Trading, which is considering the terms of the investigation, to urge the OFT not to limit its scope to groceries.

Supermarkets are increasing players in the garment sector, where their impact is being felt in falling wholesale prices and the collapse of high street competitors in the "value" end of the sector. Crucially, clothing and other non-food items are expanding parts of an increasingly holistic "one-stop" offer, identified by the OFT as likely to lead to a reduction in choice for consumers.

Asda and Marks & Spencer make up a quarter of the clothing retail sector, which they compete to lead with shares of around 12% each by volume. Add Tesco, and these three supermarkets command almost one-third of clothing retailing.