

LABOR **ACTIVISM** **GLOBALIZATION**

6 Years After the Rana Plaza Collapse, Are Garment Workers Any Safer?

Despite major advancements in accountability, workers across the Global South are still struggling to gain real power in the workplace.

By Michelle Chen

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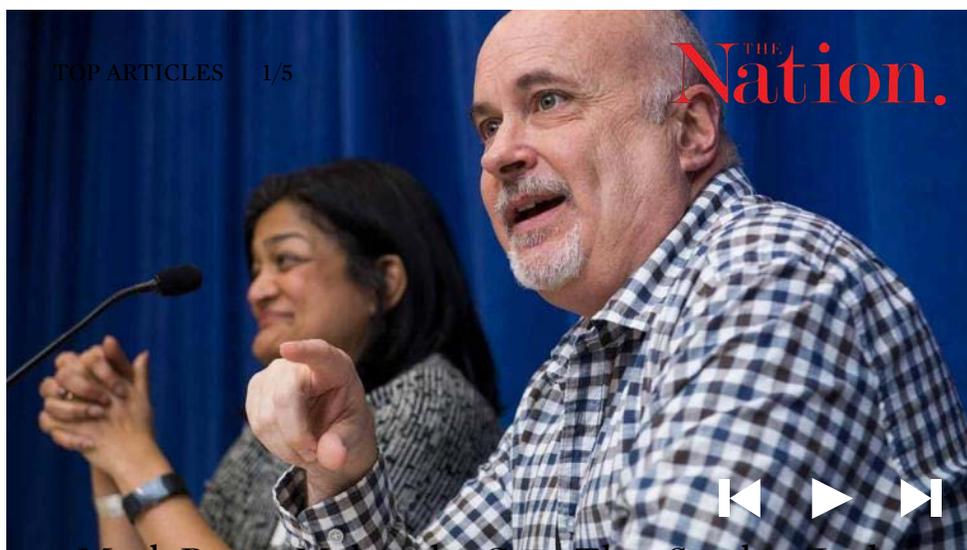
Protesters hold up photographs of their missing relatives, who worked at Rana Plaza, outside of Dhaka on April 29, 2013. (Reuters / Andrew Biraj)

Six years ago, the glamour of the global fashion industry was shattered in the collapse of Rana Plaza. The garment factory building, on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh, fell apart on April 24, 2013, killing at least 1,132 people and injuring a further 2,500 or more. The public shock and outrage around the world seemed to force a long overdue reckoning in the global garment manufacturing industry—and almost immediately, workers, labor advocates and consumers began demanding serious changes to the culture of impunity and abuse that had for decades fueled the world’s most famous fashion brands.

But six years on, how much has really changed? A wave of organizing, consumer pressure, and legal action followed in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster, yet many workers are still being subjected to dehumanizing treatment, poverty wages, and gender-based violence at work. So are garment workers any safer or more empowered in their workplaces? Taking a closer look at three keystone international labor agreements for workers in Indonesia, Honduras, and Bangladesh, shows the promises and pitfalls of the ongoing efforts to build real corporate accountability into global garment supply chains.

MAKING WORKPLACES SAFER

Since Rana Plaza, Bangladesh's garment sector has in some ways led the world in establishing labor protections in supply chains and creating model legal frameworks for reining in the industry's worst abuses. Within a month of the disaster, garment workers, labor rights groups, and local and international unions hammered out an unprecedented multilateral agreement for workplace safety, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, or the Accord. The agreement was groundbreaking, in that it codified a legally binding and comprehensive set of standards for fire and building safeguards, and mandated measures for inspection, remediation, and ongoing monitoring of the workplaces that make up the base of multinational supply chains. For the first time, the more than 200 multinational labels like H&M, Esprit, and American Eagle that signed on to the Accord were formally liable for the safety conditions of their supplier factories.



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The Accord has therefore been a force for real change in Asia's garment industry: Since it went into effect in 2013, a multinational staff, led by Bangladeshi and European advocates and engineers, has renovated hundreds of factories and fixed tens of thousands of workplace hazards, from faulty wiring to inadequate emergency exits.

The safety measures seem to be yielding results. Even prior to Rana Plaza, the industry was notorious for "death trap" factories, with more than 500 reported deaths from garment factory fires and building collapses from 2005 to 2012. But as hazards have been mitigated and overall building safety has improved, major factory accidents (involving more than five fatalities or 10 injuries) have dropped from about 17 in 2013 to between two and five annually, as of 2017, according to the Solidarity Center and NYU researchers. In the entire Bangladesh textile sector, about 20 workers died in 2017. Labor activist Kalpona Akter, who began organizing in the sector as a child worker, told *The Nation* she sees the drop in severe accidents as the Accord's signature achievement: "[After] experiencing these hundreds and thousands of workers dying in the factory collapses...it's a phenomenal change, and it should get recognition, and it should be continued."

The Accord has also given garment workers significant legal leverage in their workplaces, by creating a set of safety rules and channels for representation through localized worker-led safety committees. According to International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) and the Bangladesh Accord's records, the Accord staff has conducted 5,274 training sessions, covering 408 factories, and resolved about 330 complaints through the accord's complaint mechanism. While many had to do with safety issues that workers had flagged, others involved disputes over forced overtime, denial of maternity benefits, and gender-based violence. The Solidarity Center, an international worker rights organization, has helped administer trainings with the aim of encouraging grassroots organizing, using safety advocacy as a channel toward worker empowerment.

But these gains are under attack: In recent months, the government and factory owners have led a crackdown on workers—an estimated 11,600 workers have ended up fired or forced to resign, arrested, or jailed for participating in a wave of strikes in December and January. The protests began as a backlash against wage changes that went into effect in late 2018, as the workers' demand for living wages sparked wildcat strikes in Dhaka, Ashulia, Narayanganj, Savar, and Gazipur districts, according to Human Rights Watch. But police then viciously suppressed the strikes using “water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets,” according to witnesses.

The Accord itself is also undergoing a change in control, as the international body that has administered it for the past several years cedes control of its implementation to a public agency in Bangladesh.

In mid-May, international labor groups inked a deal with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), hashing out the details of this transfer: According to one of the labor federations backing the Accord, IndustriALL, the new arrangement ensures the agency's independence, and provides local unions with a significant oversight role. IndustriALL General Secretary Valter Sanchez stated in an announcement of the agreement: "Local and global trade unions will continue to work hard to guarantee that Bangladeshi garment workers have the highest level of worker safety training and access to an independent grievance mechanism."

But labor advocates are also concerned about the new control structure: BGMEA will still be given a leading role in co-managing the remediation process through the Accord, and some labor groups remain concerned that the Accord's independence could be compromised through the involvement of the manufacturers' association. The Maquila Solidarity Network, for example, notes that the employers will have a

representative unit in the Accord's office, raising fears that they would "try to use this unit to exert undue influence on the Accord's independent functioning."

This new phase of the Accord might then underscore the limitations inherent in its joint management structure. For all its innovation, the Accord remains hampered by chronic impediments to organizing that face in Bangladesh's labor movement, most notably a business-friendly political class.

Workers today are therefore often stuck with unions without rights. Though nearly 230 new unions registered with the government from mid-2013 through 2014, the government's rejection of registrations rose in the following months. And beyond official obstruction aimed at blocking unions directly, factory owners are still undermining organizing efforts through suppressing protests and retaliatory firings. Not surprisingly, wages remain abysmally low. The Clean Clothes Campaign recently reported that over the past five years, no major brand had actually fulfilled its own pledge to pay factory workers living wages. In addition, physical, verbal, and sexual harassment remain an endemic problem for the mostly female workforce.

"Union formation is not free here," said Kalpona Akter. "It is in our [law] books, it is in our constitution, that we have the right to organize and collective bargaining rights. The [International Labour Organization]

Convention has been ratified by the country, but the factory owners are so reluctant toward the unions.... Whenever they join with unions, they will face threats, they get fired...and sometimes even forced to leave their community. And the same happens when workers raise their voices against the poverty wages they've been getting.”



In front of the Rana Plaza site, Abdur Rahman holds a photo of his wife, Cahyna Akhter, who was killed in the factory collapse. Photo taken August 2013. (*Andrew Biraj / Reuters*)

Although the Accord might provide an avenue for union organizing, it covers just over a third of the country's 4,600 garment factories. More fundamentally, as a workplace safety program, the Accord does not focus on promoting unionization or collective bargaining. The 2018 extension of the Accord—lasting until 2021—has stronger labor-focused provisions, such as protecting the right to refuse dangerous work. But the massive crackdowns on strikers earlier this year was

a brutal setback. Mousumi Akter, union publicity secretary for Bangladesh Independent Garments Union Federation, said that before the December crackdowns, “we were actually in a good position, we thought. But after this incident, we could say that we have actually moved backward five years because of the unrest.” Some members, she fears, “are actually losing their trust in us,” because the attacks on unions seemed to show their powerlessness.

Meanwhile, labor organizers are looking beyond safety for long-term advancements for workers. Kalpona Akter hopes the battle for truly fair working conditions could be galvanized by another wave of consumer activism akin to the global public outrage triggered by Rana Plaza. “The brands only move when some of the consequences happen, and that consequence has to be reflected in their profit spreadsheet,” she said. “So when consumers get angry, that really costs their image. And they really care about that.”

THE RIGHT TO A UNION IN INDONESIA AND HONDURAS

While the Bangladesh Accord has focused on creating safer workplaces, Indonesia’s garment workers have been incrementally securing union rights in their factories. Over the past decade, unions and local NGOs have worked with several large footwear brands to implement the Freedom of Association Protocol guaranteeing the right to organize. Covering an industry of about 1.4 million workers, the agreement

was launched in 2011, sparked by a fair-welabor protest campaign that coincided with the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and like the Bangladesh Accord, it operates as a binding contract for multinational brands like Puma and Nike.

But as with the Bangladesh Accord, employers have been reluctant to comply. Mimmy Kowel, an organizer who has worked with Oxfam and Indonesian unions, says a key challenge is that many employers fall outside the Accord's scope because they are subcontractors of the main factories that are official suppliers of the signatory brands. And even when workers engage in a collective-bargaining process, their influence is limited because their factory is dominated by a management-friendly union. "You have to understand our government," Kowel said. "They need the investment. So usually they favor the investor rather than labor rights." With the government so focused on attracting foreign capital, she added, local independent unions "usually are very pessimistic that the government will be in their favor. Again, money talks."

The struggles of Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers reveal the supply chain's weak links in enforcing global labor standards through private agreements. But in Honduras, workers have over the past decade carved out a stronghold for labor rights in brand-name clothing factories, starting with Fruit of the Loom. In 2009, following a massive campaign led by United

Students Against Sweatshops, Fruit of the Loom agreed to the so-called Washington Agreement, a program that created a formal collective-bargaining structure and independent oversight body with community representatives. Ten years on, despite the widespread poverty and political instability in Honduras, the local union CGT has helped secure collective-bargaining agreements at 18 garment factories, covering several multinational brands.

ILRF notes that one distinctive feature of the agreement is that Fruit of the Loom owns its factories, and thus serves as the direct employer: In contrast to the Bangladesh and Indonesia agreements, the union contract covers the whole Fruit of the Loom workforce in Honduras, providing consistency and transparency, which helps ensure that the workers and consumers can hold corporations accountable at every stage of production.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Today, watchdog groups are pushing the Transparency Pledge, a voluntary compact for brands to ensure public disclosure of suppliers across their supply chain. The goal is to provide full accounting of suppliers to help inform reform efforts, like establishing uniform wage standards. Yet participation remains voluntary and piecemeal. And even if data does become available, Christie Miedema of the Clean Clothes Campaign said, “just data, especially if they are not readily searchable,

don't solve anything." Companies have to undertake "constant proactive due diligence towards its supply chain," and workers and the public must remain vigilant in challenging brands that flout their legal obligations.

For labor, any legally binding agreement for workers helps, whether it focuses on basic safety, or directly encourages union organizing. "We got to push forward on all these initiatives," said Garrett Brown, an occupational health specialist and coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network, who has collaborated with Bangladesh inspection staff. But he acknowledged that no agreement can fully overturn a labor regime built on global inequity: "Frankly, I think that the problem is that there are so many poor people in the world who can be exploited by these brands...that there's just no end, in the short term, for [finding] places that can actually be exploited."

For Kalpona Akter, the struggle against what she calls the "sick competition" among multinationals to find the "cheapest" workers to make their clothes, begins with fair pay. "We need a living wage...not just for all Bangladesh workers," she said. "It should be for all brands, and for all producing countries." There is no clear single path toward fair global labor standards for the fashion industry, but all garment workers share the same demand: "There is no doubt that we need these jobs, but it is high time to say that we want these jobs with dignity."

Michelle Chen Michelle Chen is a contributing writer for *The Nation*.

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