Corporate Social Responsibility: What is it good for?

By GARRETT BROWN

It happened again in Bangladesh in December 2010 — a fire in a garment factory killed 29 workers and hundreds were injured as they were suffocated, burned alive, trampled in stairwells, or leapt to their deaths from the 9th and 10th floors — because four of seven exit doors were locked.

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirt Waist fire in New York City that killed 146 in the same fashion, and after more than 15 years of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) programs, women garment workers continue to die by the dozens making clothing for world famous retailers.

The December 2010 fire occurred at a ten-story factory run by the Ha-meem Group — one of Bangladesh’s largest garment manufacturers which produces for a “who’s who” of global garment companies: Abercrombie & Fitch, Kenneth Cole, DKNY, Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, H&M, Iodo, JC Penney, Calvin Klein, Kohl’s, Lee, North Face, OshKosh, Sears, Target, Timberland, Wrangler, and, of course, Wal-Mart.

Between 2006 and 2009, 414 workers died in 213 factory fires in Bangladesh, and more than 5,000 workers were injured. In 2010, besides the 29 dead at Ha-meem Group, 21 workers were killed and more than 50 injured in February at the Garib & Garib Sweater plant — again trapped behind locked exit doors on upper building floors.

Obvious hazards

The causes of these repeated factory fires are known to everyone involved: large quantities of poorly kept flammable materials, damaged and overloaded electrical systems, absent or completely inadequate fire suppression equipment, and non-existent or implemented emergency evacuation plans.

Add to this mix a near-total lack of enforcement by government safety agencies, poverty-stricken workers with few unions desperate for work, and the international brand retailers’ “iron triangle” of lowest possible prices, highest possible quality, and fastest possible delivery, and it is not surprising that killer fires occur all the time.

Factory fires are not the only imminent hazard: in April 2005, 64 workers died and 80 were injured (54 seriously) when the Spectrum Sweater factory building collapsed. The owners, also producing for major U.S. and European brands, had added five stories to the original four-story building — without building permits or proper engineering plans — and then stored heavy machinery on the “new” seventh floor before the building pancaked.

In the first six months of 2010 alone, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation counted 356 garment workers killed and 899 injured from all causes on the job.

$24 per month in wages

Moreover, Bangladesh’s garment workers are among the worst paid workers in the world. Between 2006 and November 2010, garment workers earned US$24 for a month of 10-hour days, five to six days a week. Last November the wage in the country’s “export processing zone” garment plants went up to a whopping US$44 a month — but significant numbers of contract manufacturers have refused to pay the new wage, leading to mass protests and police violence that has killed four workers and injured dozens more.

How in-depth are audits?

Brand retailers claim that they are addressing these problems through their highly touted CSR programs. But reliance on for-profit “third-party auditors” of the corporate codes of conduct (who are anxious to keep their international brand clients happy in the $37 million market) is leading to a race to the bottom for workers’ wages and working conditions.

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Information & resources

- Clean Clothes Campaign (EU): www.cleanclothes.org
- Maquila Solidarity Network (Canada): www.maquilasolidarity.org

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