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[Government, industry crackdown in Bangladesh threatens health & safety improvements; clothing brands petitioned to respond](#)



Posted by [garrettbrown](#) on January 26, 2017

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Mass firings by garment factories and a wave of government arrests of union leaders and worker rights advocates threatens the gains made in improving workplace health and safety for the 4 million, mainly women, garment workers in Bangladesh. A shadow of fear and intimidation has fallen over the nation's 3,500 export garment factories, undermining the ongoing process to establish factory health and safety committees that have genuine, active participation by workers.

International clothing brands have tremendous influence in Bangladesh because of the \$26 billion in apparel exports they ordered from the country in 2016. The clothing brands are now [being petitioned](#) to use that influence with their supplier factories to rehire the fired workers, and with the government to release two dozen union leaders being held in prison without bail.

Starting on December 11, 2016, a wave of strikes began in Ashulia, an industrial suburb of Dhaka. The strike wave eventually involved 59 factories and thousands of garment workers. The workers were demanding an increase of the country's minimum wage of 5,300 Taka (or \$67) a month, to 15,000 (\$191) Taka a month. About half of the garment workers receive no more than the minimum wage. They are only able to support themselves and their families by working many hours of overtime, not all of which is paid or paid in accordance with labor law.

The minimum wage was last raised in 2013, following mass protests in the wake of the Rana Plaza building collapse. The cost of living, however, has increased substantially since then. Minimum wages have been doubled in Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia over the same period. Researchers indicate that even the 15,000 Taka monthly minimum is [still below what is calculated](#) as a “living wage” for Bangladesh.

In the aftermath of the strikes, more than 2,000 garment workers have been fired. Some factories have also filed criminal charges against the fired workers. Many of the workers are fearful that their names will now appear on a blacklist which will prevent them from ever being hired again in the apparel industry. In Bangladesh, the Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry generates 80% of the country’s export income.

At the same time, the Bangladesh government has arrested at least 24 union leaders and worker advocates, several of whom were not involved in the Ashulia strikes at all. All those detained are being held without bail. Two of the leaders have reportedly [been beaten in prison](#) and one threatened with death in a “crossfire” incident.

Another 50 union leaders, workers’ center staff, and factory-level labor rights activists have been forced into hiding to avoid government detention under the “Special Powers Act” or under warrants issued for their activities in earlier strikes and other non-violent protests. The [International Labor Rights Fund](#) in Washington, DC. has released photos and brief biographies of [nine arrested union leaders](#), many with young children at home.

The [AFL-CIO Solidarity Center](#) in Dhaka released a report this month entitled an [“Escalation in the campaign to silence garment workers.”](#) It appears that the government and factory owners feel emboldened to go after worker leaders as several years have passed since the [Rana Plaza disaster](#) and the world’s attention has turned to other issues.

The mass firings and prison detention of worker leaders threaten the fragile gains in workplace health and safety in the garment industry. Under three international OHS programs established following the Rana Plaza collapse, approximately 3,500 apparel factories producing for export have been inspected. Mandatory corrective action plans have been developed for eliminating fire, electrical and building structural safety hazards under programs of the [Bangladesh Accord](#), [Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety](#), and [International Labor Organization](#). But, the mass firings and prison detention of worker leaders threaten these important gains.

Worker leaders are instrumental to ensuring that the hazard corrections are actually made and sustained over time. They are also essential to seeing that the legally-required factory-level, worker and management health and safety (H&S) committees are established, receive the necessary training, and function to implement effective, ongoing OHS programs on site.

Unfortunately, hundreds of inspected supplier factories are already way behind schedule in coming into compliance with their corrective action plans, in large measure because the brands have failed to meet their responsibility to facilitate or guarantee financing for hazard corrections. Nonetheless, the brands continue to source from these unsafe factories.

With the chaos and insecurity caused by mass firings, detention of worker leaders, and intimidation by police and factory managers, the OHS programs in garment factories are threatened to be completely derailed. It will not be possible to complete the hazard corrections or establish effective H&S committees without meaningful worker participation. That will not happen if workers in garment factories are fearful, intimidated and threatened.

The [Clean Clothes Campaign](#) coordinated joint letters from two dozen labor and human rights organizations [in December 2016](#) and [January 2017](#) to the major brands sourcing from Bangladesh. The letters insisted that these immensely wealthy corporations use their influence with factory owners and government officials to reverse course on the mass firings, indefinite detentions and blacklisting of workers who are concerned about working conditions.

In response, the leadership of the Accord with 200+ brands [wrote to the Bangladesh government](#), as did [20 international brands](#) in January 2017. But the Clean Clothes Campaign and others have [demanded greater efforts](#) to restore the workers’ basic rights, and to complete the promises made after the Rana Plaza collapse to protect worker safety.

Labor rights organizations [have already detailed](#) how the brands have allowed safety hazards identified more than two years ago to remain uncorrected, while sourcing from low-wage factories in Bangladesh continues to increase.

The centrality of the clothing brands’ purchasing policies for improving conditions in Bangladesh was highlighted in a [January 22nd New York Times article](#).

Siddiqur Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, a trade association that represents factory owners, said factories, too, had come under pressure: Costs have risen 17.5 percent annually for the last two years, he said, even as global clothing prices have decreased.

Mr. Rahman added that while global retail brands had called on Bangladeshi factories to improve safety standards and wages, they had resisted paying higher prices to help compensate for the increased costs.

Brands and retailers typically [keep 60% of the retail cost](#) of garments while paying supplier factories [less](#) per unit every year. In 2015, [according to Women’s Wear Daily](#), Gap had gross profits on sales of \$6.3 billion or a profit rate of 38%; Nike had profits of \$12.4 billion or 44% of sales; VF Corp. had profits of \$6 billion or 49% of sales; and PVH Corp. had profits of \$4.3 billion or 52.5% of sales.

The companies whose supplier factories have not only fired workers but also filed criminal charges against their workers include Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle Outfitters, Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfger (PHV Corp.), Gap, H&M, North Face (VF Corp.), and Zara (Inditex Corp.).

These clothing companies and retailers, among others, are the ones targeted in the [current petition drive](#). As Scott Nova of the [Worker Rights Consortium](#) told the *Times*, At a certain point in time you have to wonder just how much [safety hazards, firings, arrests] the brands and retailers

will tolerate. They can tell the factories to drop the charges.”

Garrett Brown is a certified industrial hygienist who worked for Cal/OSHA for 20 years as a field Compliance Safety and Health Officer and then served as Special Assistant to the Chief of the Division before retiring in 2014. Brown has visited Bangladesh five times since 2014 and helped establish the “OHS Initiative for Workers and Community” in Dhaka. He has also been the volunteer Coordinator of the Maquiladora Health & Safety Support Network since 1993 and has coordinated projects in Central America, China, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Mexico and Vietnam.

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Keywords: [AFL-CIO Solidarity Center](#), [Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety](#), [and International Labor Organization](#), [Bangladesh Accord](#), [Clean Clothes Campaign](#), [garment workers](#), [International Labor Rights Fund](#)

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1. [#1](#) Jose A. Martinez 
January 29, 2017

Garrett, thanks for keeping us informed. The current situation in Bangladesh is inadmissible.

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