

Letters

'Real change' needed to prevent worker deaths

I AGREE WITH Labor Secretary Hilda Solis that "things cannot return to business as usual" after the latest garment factory fire in Bangladesh. ("In the News," January 2013, p. 12.) But if real change is to occur, we must address the underlying reasons why these fires happen time and time again.

Everyone knows exactly the immediate cause of these fires: large quantities of poorly kept flammable materials, damaged or overloaded electrical systems, absent or completely inadequate fire suppression equipment, and non-existent or unimplemented emergency action and evacuation plans.

The root cause of these fires is a supply chain that places priority on the brands' "iron triangle" of the lowest price/the highest quality/the fastest delivery from contractors at the same time that contractors are provided with ever-shrinking, razor-thin profit margins by the brands; while government regulation is made meaningless by corruption and lack of resources, and garment workers are so desperate for work that they cannot refuse any job, no matter how dangerous.

We must address the fact that contractor manufacturers are denied by their client brands the resources needed to upgrade their facilities, pay decent wages and still make an "acceptable" profit – so they take "unacceptable risks" with the lives and livelihoods of their workforce. They are forced to be ruthless and brutal – and they are.

We must address the fact that the endless factory fires are proof positive that "corporate social responsibility" is a fake and fraud – all the codes of conduct, all the "independent" monitors, all the "social audits," and all the CSR consultants and conferences have failed completely in the global garment industry.

We must address the fact that the occupational health and safety profession is being drawn into "certifying" working conditions in global supply chains. The Pakistani garment factory that killed 300 workers had been "certified" as safe, including on OHS issues, by Social Accounting International-trained auditors. Apple supplier Foxconn, whose factories have had aluminum dust explosions immediately after inspections, boasted of "certification" under the OHSMS 18000 scheme.

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Garrett Brown, Coordinator, Maquiladora Health & Safety Support Network

Unhealthy and unsafe conditions in global supply chains for garments, electronics, sports equipment and toys will continue unabated unless two things happen:

1. The near-universal "sweatshop business model" described above must change so that life-safety issues and workers' health and safety actually come first in deeds as well as in damage-control public relations statements.
2. Workers must be incorporated into plant-level health and safety programs and be authorized, trained and empowered to play a meaningful role in identifying and correcting hazards – without reprisals and discrimination by their employers.

Perhaps the only ray of hope in this bleak panorama is the effort by a coalition of Bangladesh unions and international workers' rights organizations to establish an independent, competent fire safety program that would be transparent, involve workers as key actors, and actually inspect and require hazard correction in garment factories.

Four brands are required to initiate the project in Bangladesh. Two have signed on – PVH (Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein and other brands) and the German retailer Tchibo – but two more are needed. The details of this initiative can be found at www.workersrights.org/press/Tazreen.asp.

The independent fire marshal plan won't solve all the problems – but it might keep some workers from being burned alive at work, and that's a start.

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Article on CSA scores resonates

WE ARE A SUBSCRIBER to *Safety+Health* magazine, and the article "An accurate score? Carrier safety rating system methods under debate" (December, p. 60) resonates with us.

AKCA Inc. is involved in road striping and road markings in the Southeast, with the greatest percentage of our work in Florida. To perform various projects and contracts, we have to conform to the state's various requirements for what is called "Maintenance of Traffic." MOT is the prescribed method for doing work on roadways and shoulders of roadways, and similar work, and involves systems of vehicles and signs ranging from the simple to the complex.

In the article, the section on how companies are treated regarding crashes is something we are trying to understand. If you were to look at our CSA scores, you would find all of the categories either safe or below the desired