



Clean Clothes Campaign



Four years after Rana Plaza: Steps in the right direction but a lot remains to be done

Monday 24 April marks the fourth anniversary of the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh; the deadliest disaster in the garment industry. The workers who died that day paid the ultimate price of the low cost, cut-throat industry that continues to put vast profits ahead of the lives and dignity of the women and men it employs.

As we are approaching this tragic anniversary, our thoughts are with those who died, the families they left behind and with the survivors who continue to suffer the physical and psychological scars of this terrible disaster.

We also use this moment to call on brands, governments and employers to defend the improvements won after Rana Plaza, and to go much further in tackling roots causes of the disaster, including the repression of workers rights and the lack of transparency in the industry.

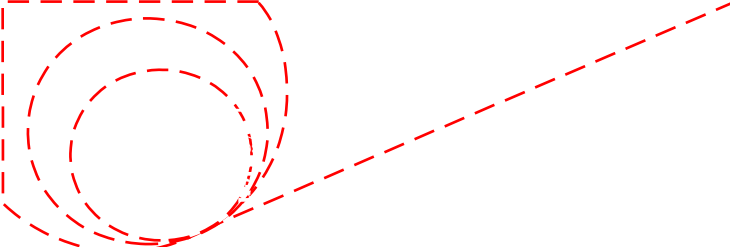
Improving working conditions in the global garment industry



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On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza building came crashing down, killing 1,134 people and injuring thousands. The building housed five garment factories producing for European and North American brands. Although the Rana Plaza collapse was unique in scale, it was only one extreme example in an industry where workplace deaths and injury are commonplace.

Rana Plaza was described by everyone involved as a “wake-up call”. Governments, employers, apparel brands and civil society pledged fundamental change to an industry grown out of control. Some innovative programmes were developed to prevent new disasters and provide remedy to those already affected. These victories now need to be defended and developed, not eroded and reversed. However the promises of fundamental change have so far failed to come true: the systematic problems of cut-throat competition, low pay, union repression, weak labour laws and legal impunity remain.



THE AFTERMATH OF RANA PLAZA: NEW MODELS FOR CHANGE?

Two groundbreaking initiatives came out of the immediate aftermath of Rana Plaza: the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Rana Plaza Arrangement. Both of these were negotiated between international and local trade unions, large apparel brands and civil society organisations, all of whom have been directly involved in the implementation of each agreement. These brand-union agreements have proven effective in delivering on their objectives in a transparent and measurable way – something that twenty years of corporate-led stakeholder initiatives had demonstrably failed to do.

“THE ARRANGEMENT”

The Rana Plaza Arrangement¹ finished its work in late 2015, after a two-year battle to secure the funds. A medical trust to support injured survivors has been established and will continue to provide medical support to those who need it. The Rana Plaza Arrangement set an example of how supply chain remedy for victims of industrial disasters could be achieved; setting a precedent that was replicated for the families of those killed or injured in the fires at Tazreen Fashions in Bangladesh and Ali Enterprises in Pakistan. However, those affected by less headline grabbing disasters continue to be ignored: the families of seven workers killed in the ASWAD fire, just six months after Rana Plaza, have yet to be fully compensated for their losses.

1 For more information see ranaplaza-arrangement.org



“THE ACCORD”

The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety² is a legally binding five-year programme in which signatory brands work towards improving the safety of the factories they source from. It was launched within a month of the Rana Plaza collapse and, following massive international pressure on brands, within six months had over 200 signatories.

The Accord has done remarkable work inspecting and demanding improvements to the over 1,400 factories covered by the agreement. Every one of the factories it inspected was found to have serious safety risks, which had been previously unknown to either their buyers or their workers. For an industry used to an “audit and ignore approach” to workers’ rights issues, establishing a culture of “inspect and remedy” has been a challenge, but the Accord has proven that going beyond auditing and into remedy is possible where the political will (and the ability to enforce that will) is there.

The Accord has also done groundbreaking work in establishing a rights-based complaints mechanism, focused on resolving issues, rather than just logging or analysing them. Workers have used the mechanism to not only raise concerns, but to see those concerns taken seriously and acted upon. Although after some initial delay, workers are now also being trained, alongside their supervisors to recognise and address ongoing hazards in their factories.

Attempting to make the Bangladesh garment industry safe in just five years was always an

ambitious proposition. It is no surprise then that the work of the Accord is by no means done: with just one year to go only around 50 factories have completed the required renovations.

The signatory brands, who are ultimately responsible for renovations, are well behind schedule in ensuring implementation of vital structural, fire and electrical repairs in the majority of their supplier factories. Even if, as is hoped, these renovations are completed by 2018, that does not mean the work will be done. Inspectors are regularly finding new hazards, and it would be all too easy for standards to slip again, once the vigilance, transparency and enforcement provided by the Accord are gone.

As the Accord moved from a set of principles to a living, functioning programme, everyone involved has learned important lessons about what has, and has not, worked. With the horror of Rana Plaza fading into history it would be easy for brands, employers and governments to declare victory, then return to business as usual. What has been achieved in the last four years could easily be lost if the momentum for change is not continued.

The Accord must now be both extended and strengthened to ensure that safety standards are maintained and continue to improve. A proposed extension provides an opportunity to strengthen the Accord, by improving clauses that were insufficient to deliver the needed change, particularly around the financing of repairs, the speed of remediation and the arbitration process. Other clauses that were not originally included could also be added to address the impact of factory closures on workers and strengthen the protection of workers' rights.³

2 For more information see bangladeshaccord.org

3 For an Accord Witness summary of proposed changes: cleanclothes.org/safety/bangladesh-accord-april-2017

BANGLADESH: STILL NOT SAFE TO SPEAK OUT

The workers in the Rana Plaza factories did not have a trade union to represent them. If they had been organized, the workers could have refused to enter a building they knew to be unsafe. The Rana Plaza factories were no exception – in Bangladesh less than 1% of factories have a recognised union. Workers who attempt to organise often face harassment and threats, both inside and outside the factory. This includes losing their jobs and getting blacklisted, arrest and imprisonment and, on occasion, violence and death threats.

The risks workers are forced to take in order to get their voices heard were demonstrated at the start of this year. Following a mass work stoppage in Ashulia, an industrial zone just outside Dhaka in December 2016, thousands of workers were sacked, hundreds were charged with criminal offences and tens were arrested and imprisoned. Union offices were shut down, and trainings and meetings were regularly raided by police. After an international outcry, not least from some of the leading buyers from Bangladesh, an agreement aimed at ending the crackdown was signed in February. However, while those arrested were released from jail and



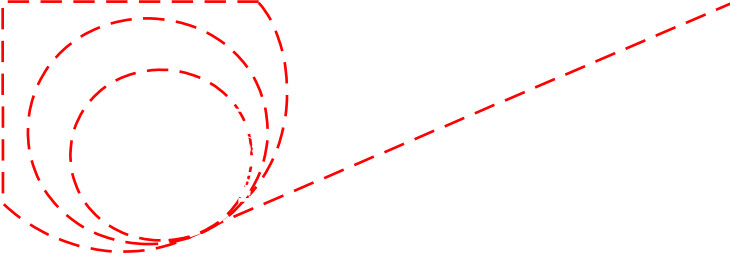
Photo: Getty Images

union offices were finally able to reopen, workers have yet to be reinstated and the criminal charges remain in place, continuing to serve as a warning to others seeking to organise for change.⁴

One of the barriers to addressing this repression is the total absence of a functioning labour law or enforcement system, under which workers can challenge unfair labour practice. In the short term an agreement like the Accord could play a role, by opening up its unique complaints mechanism to wider concerns around unfair labour practice in its listed suppliers. The buyer-employer-union dialogue required for solving disputes under the Accord mechanism could establish a useful example of how industrial relations could move forward and would fill the gap left by weak labour law. Those brands yet to develop an understanding of good industrial relations would experience an effective working model of how to do this, which could then be replicated more widely.

The Accord complaint mechanism could provide a much needed short-term avenue for change. However workers' rights can only be fully protected if Bangladesh's own labour law, union registration systems and access to redress are significantly improved.

⁴ For a recent update see <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/update-bangladesh-foa-april-2017/view>.



Immediately after Rana Plaza, the Bangladesh government committed to make such reforms when it signed a “Sustainability Compact” with the European Union and the ILO. The European Union, which imports almost half of Bangladesh’s garment production, has on numerous occasions linked the implementation of this Compact to the generous trade benefits Bangladesh receives under the “Everything But Arms” trade arrangement.

Nearly four years later, and despite recommendations by the ILO and millions of dollars of financial and technical assistance from the international community, no progress has been made on implementing the commitments made in the Compact. Rather, as the recent crackdown highlighted, the space for workers to exercise their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining is being steadily eroded.

It is now time for the European Union to show the Bangladesh government that it is serious about its commitment to supporting freedom of association in the country. Clean Clothes Campaign, along with the ITUC, IndustriALL and UNI Global, is calling upon the European Commission to begin an official trade investigation into the extent to which the government of Bangladesh is in breach of the international obligations which underpin its free access to the vital European market.⁵

THE NEED FOR SUPPLY CHAIN TRANSPARENCY

The Rana Plaza collapse highlighted another major barrier to change in the garment industry: the lack of transparency that surrounds the operation of its supply chains. Efforts by workers, activists and consumers to hold brands to account for conditions in their production sites are constantly frustrated by this secrecy – the only purpose of which is to hide the reality of garment production behind a glossy CSR façade of glamorous models and happy workers.



As a result of this secrecy, activists and workers are forced to go to great lengths to establish who they are really producing for. The campaign for compensation which followed Rana Plaza was only possible because union activists and journalists went into the rubble only hours after the collapse to search for labels and documents needed to prove the link between companies and the factories. Many of the brands known to have been sourcing at Rana Plaza, including Benetton and Mango, continued to deny a connection until they were confronted with these labels, covered with dust and debris.

⁵ For a full explanation of why a trade investigation is now needed see cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/european-union-and-the-bangladesh-garment-industry-the-case-for-a-trade-investigation

Activists should not have to risk their lives, or expose themselves to the aftermath of a collapse or fire; nor should workers have to risk their jobs to smuggle labels out of factories. If brands simply published their supply chains, then they would not have to.



Photo: Pieter van de Boogert

Clean Clothes Campaign has now joined forces with eight human rights organisations and global unions to launch “Follow the Thread”, the campaign that calls on brands to sign a pledge and commit to greater transparency. The campaign was launched on 20 April, along with a report highlighting why transparency is vital for a sustainable garment industry. Clean Clothes Campaign is asking its supporters to sign a petition to Primark, Armani, Urban Outfitters, Forever 21 and Walmart, demanding that they commit to greater transparency in their supply chains by signing the pledge.⁶

However, we cannot rely on brands to do the right thing; governments must also take action. In North America activists can use import records to quickly detect links between brands and the factories they import from. This proved invaluable in tracking the numerous US brands at Rana Plaza and elsewhere. Clean Clothes Campaign is therefore calling on the European Union to introduce regulation requiring brands and retailers to publicly disclose factory data, which would provide similar access to activists in Europe.

⁶ See cleanclothes.org/transparency