

# The Daily Star

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## Holocaust in Savar

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The sheer scale of the disaster in Savar makes it the culminating point of the multiple tragedies that have occurred over the quarter-century since Bangladesh rose to prominence in the global apparel industry. The sheer waste of human life, whether by building collapse, fires or explosions, is a damning indictment of a “development” that has brought so much avoidable misery to the innocent, those who ask only for a secure livelihood. It also shows up the indifference to the workers of those responsible for overseeing basic safety and security. It illuminates the single-minded greed of those who ordered people to continue working in a structure already known to be on the point of collapse.

Official responses did little to reassure workers that any serious redress is to be expected from those who have made fortunes out of their labour. The declaration of a day of mourning and the ritual promises by the prime minister that wrongdoers would be brought to justice; talk of compensation, the arrest of the owners of the factories in Rana Plaza on the charge of “causing death by negligence;” commitment of the BGMEA to tighter safety regulations, the penitential declaration by Primark, Mango and other foreign importers make it clear that the workers can hope for little from the approved channels.

Primark’s response was that “the company is shocked and saddened...condolences to all of those involved. Primark has engaged for several years with NGOs and other retailers to review the Bangladeshi industry’s approach to factory standards. Primark will push for this review to include building integrity.” Primark recently announced pre-tax profits for the last half-year up by 23%; it has been sourcing from Bangladesh for years. Who can believe in the urgency of its concerns after such an event?

The response of workers to this scarcely accidental tragedy is also sad. Their understandable rage and anger find expression in the crowds on the streets with

sticks and staves, torching vehicles, vandalising buildings, venting their fury in a wild frenzy. That this appalling event should have sparked off a spontaneous display of violence is itself one of the most frightening comments of all. The image of the police firing tear gas and rubber bullets against the injured and humiliated of Dhaka is a savage emblem of a broken and corrupt system, which turns on those who have been most harmed by it.

The most important issue for workers is this: Since no one is going to protect you, you have to make sure that you set up your own organisations and institutions that will shelter you against economic violence. And this can mean only one thing — representative and honest trade unions, recognised by government and employers, elected freely and voluntarily by the workers themselves.

It is time to do away with company-sponsored unions, bogus welfare-organisations, ineffectual and self-seeking officials, informers and spies, foreign NGOs and ‘Labour rights organisations,’ Western consumer activists and the vast deployment of personnel who have proved so ineffective to prevent more calamities in Dhaka, city of disasters. The government, too, has been only too ready to see saboteurs or “the foreign hand” in any worker militancy. The vast majority of workers were, until a few days ago, simply country people; and they ask only that a living wage be duly paid, and to be treated with dignity and respect — qualities until now absent in those who have benefited so conspicuously from their labour.

Of course it may be difficult for some employers, bureaucrats, managers, who are accustomed to regard workers as a different kind of human being from themselves; but most will understand that harmony between employers and those who create their wealth is the only effective way to ensure effective production and reliable fulfilment of orders.

We hear much of trouble-makers “tarnishing the image” of Bangladesh. Nothing can have done greater injury to the country’s reputation than the spectacle of this jerry-built structure crushing to death of hundreds of working women and men in the interest of the enrichment of others, both inside and beyond Bangladesh.

It is time the days of exploitation drew to an end. This can happen only if the representatives of workers are accorded their proper place in the economy; if they are regarded as partners in the prosperity of Bangladesh, rather than as a necessary evil, or worse, an irritant in the process of heaping up wealth where

this is already highly concentrated, the whole country will benefit.

Bangladesh cries out for radical change, and not only in the garment industry. Transcending the low-level civil strife between the political parties and between the inconclusive debate about whether Bangladeshis are Bengali before they are Muslim, or vice versa, can be accomplished through a dynamic vibrant economy which, as it makes everyone better off, will also enable people to rise above the sterile and fractious legacy of splits, schisms and destructive divisions.

There will have to be an official recognition for unions which the workers will freely set up to negotiate as equals with those who employ them. The garment workers are, after all, in the forefront of the modern sector. They should be pathfinders of a common project for all Bangladesh, showing the way to a more peaceable future, instead of harking back to a semi-feudal dependency on the part of the people and a profound contempt for lesser beings by the rich and powerful.

In place of the politics of confrontation and inequality this shared endeavour would also bring a return of social hope to a country whose people, wronged for centuries, are still to achieve the freedoms which the Liberation War never fully brought.

The workers, too, in order to achieve adequate rewards, social protection and above all, sheer physical safety in the places where they labour, will have to accept the discipline that effective trade unionism demands. If they do so, they will have no further need to show their rage by blockages of highways, firing vehicles, vandalising property and destroying the very instruments of labour that are the sources of their sustenance.

Is this possible? Or will the sense of outrage pass, the incident be relegated to pious memory, and business as usual will resume, until the next time hundreds of workers set out in the early morning for what they imagine is another day's labour, only to discover that they have instead an appointment with avoidable and violent death?

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