

After Bangladesh, labor unions can save lives

By Lance Compa, May 26, 2013

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The factory collapse in Bangladesh that killed more than 1,100 workers should be a pivot point for the global apparel industry, moving consumers to demand more accountability from brand-name companies that subcontract production to supply-chain factories around the world. Sadly, the history of workplace tragedies in so many of these factories suggests that after consumers in rich countries express horror and call for reforms, the demands for better worker protections die down and the marketplace for cheap apparel abides. But this cycle can finally be broken if demands for change start to focus on workers' right to form trade unions.

In the wake of labor abuses and workplace tragedies exposed in the 1990s, many apparel brands created in-house social compliance functions and joined "multi-stakeholder groups" with detailed monitoring and certification programs. But the one-day visits and checklist-style monitoring routine in such efforts have not worked.

This is where workers' organizing comes in. Social compliance monitors might visit once a year. Government inspectors might come once in 10 years from understaffed and underfunded labor ministries common to most developing countries. But a real trade union can provide the vigilance and voice that workers need for sustained decency at their place of employment, including a workplace that is not a death trap.

In Bangladesh and many other countries, the challenge is getting real unions. Factory managers routinely fire and blacklist workers thought to be union sympathizers. And sometimes worse: In April 2012, apparel union organizer Aminul Islam was found tortured and killed after meeting with workers near a garment manufacturing center outside Dhaka. The crime remains unsolved.

In China and Vietnam, the official labor movement is a branch of government. Unions exist, but the plant personnel director is often the union president, and the unions' role is to boost production, not to defend workers. Widespread phony unions in Mexico insulate factory owners against the few authentic unions that manage to survive. In many countries, owners often shut down newly organized factories to warn workers away from unions.

Despite these challenges, apparel unions have a toehold in Central America and in other regions and countries, including Bangladesh. But a toehold is not enough to shift the balance of power. Without effective unions, trying to tackle fire safety, living wages, child labor and other problems is a Sisyphean job.

To change the balance of power, consumer pressure, government policies, international labor solidarity, new management policies and other support mechanisms must focus on workers' organizing and bargaining rights.

One model is taking shape in Honduras. In 2009, responding to U.S. student protests of the closure of newly organized plant, allegedly for anti-union reasons, Fruit of the Loom's top management committed to honoring workers' organizing rights. The Kentucky-based company reopened the factory where the union dispute arose, rehired all employees, recognized the union and entered into good-faith bargaining. Now the renamed "New Day" facility has a collective bargaining agreement with higher wages, better conditions, and a strong health and safety committee. Workers have maintained high productivity levels, and the company has added employees.

Fruit of the Loom management told workers in other Honduran factories that they too have a right to organize and that the company will respect their choices. An innovative nonprofit oversight committee coordinated by the nonprofit Global Works Foundation — which asked me to join as ombudsman — is helping nurture positive labor relations in plants. The committee, whose members are chosen by management and the union, provides training programs on freedom of association and collective bargaining. It also helps mediate workplace grievances.

Since the oversight committee established its program, workers have formed genuine unions with the General Confederation of Labour — known as CGT — in other Fruit of the Loom factories with almost 5,000 employees overall. It is the world's first sustained, companywide independent union organizing in the apparel manufacturing sector.

A stereotype holds that young workers desperate for jobs at any salary will never turn to unions. Some also peddle the "sweatshops are good" argument, saying that they are better than any alternative and that unions would only make factories uncompetitive. But workers belie such typecasting. In China and Vietnam, shop-floor leaders organize strikes and other actions by going around clueless official unions. Given a fair chance, independent unions in Mexico supplant "protection unions" previously chosen by management. The CGT's success in Fruit of the Loom plants has led to a coordinating group of unions throughout Central America aiming to persuade more firms to respect their organizing rights.

Another stereotype — in many cases all too accurate — has apparel factory owners and managers demonizing unions and taking unbridled reprisals when workers try to organize. The Fruit of the Loom-CGT model in Honduras sends a strong signal to apparel brands and factory owners that companies and real unions can not just coexist but thrive in a globally competitive environment. More important, in light of the recent tragedies in Bangladesh, real unions defending employees inside the workplace can save lives.