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Brand Take Responsibility to Build and Maintain Safe Factories:

Remember the Victims on the 7th Anniversary of the Rana Plaza Tragedy & Commit to Change the Global Garment Industry

April 24, 2020 marks seven years since the tragic Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh that killed 1134 workers and injured 2500 or more, in one of the deadliest industrial disasters in modern history. In this time of COVID-19 pandemic, when the world is re-thinking globalisation, Rana Plaza is an important marker that holds many lessons for us.

The Rana Plaza tragedy brought to light the obscene conditions in which workers are forced to produce garments for globally renowned brands, nearly 30 of whom had sourced from various factories within the complex. The disaster was preventable as workers had raised concerns about the structural integrity of the building, but were forced to work or risk losing their jobs. This enormous human tragedy triggered public outrage and resulted in the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh which is a legally binding agreement that involved brands, retailers and unions to enforce fire and safety standards in garment factories. The Accord mandated factory inspections with reports on findings and remediation made publicly available, so as to ensure transparency and make brands accountable for the safety conditions in supplier factories. Non-compliance by suppliers risked termination of business contracts. The Accord further developed mechanisms through which workers can confidentially communicate their grievances about occupational health and safety standards. Thus, the Accord ensured the right to refuse dangerous work - a step forward in ensuring the right to decent work.

Workers are Human Beings & Not Disposable Bodies

The “structural failures” foregrounded by the Rana Plaza tragedy are embedded in the broader “structural inequalities” of global production systems that are at the root of this disaster. Rana Plaza punctuates a long list of egregious tragedies in the garment or fast fashion industry, which is emblematic of the extreme inequalities driving contemporary global production systems. That the incident is strikingly similar to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City 100 year ago in 1911 killing 145 workers, and to Nandan Denim Factory Fire in Gujarat in present-day 2020 that killed 7 workers reveals much about the systemic tendencies. Factory fire and deaths continue in garment industry and has become endemic because workers are not treated as human beings, but disposable bodies. The fast fashion industry, driven by brands and retailers, refrain from investing in safe factories and working conditions as it increases the production cost, unless compelled by law regulation and strict enforcement. Workers’ lives are put at risk to sustain increasing profits for fashion brands.

The global garment industry is marked by cut-throat price competition, squeezing of wages at poverty levels, targeting and violations of predominantly women workers and criminal negligence of national and international standards - a consequence of brands failing to pay the true cost for humane global supply

chains for their goods. Brands offload costs of their global supply chains to supplier firms while at the same time demanding cheap products and the ultimate burden falls on the workers, who are forced to work in conditions that neglect basic occupational and safety conditions.

Expand the Accord Framework to All Garment Production Countries

This global production system never invested adequately in building safe factories to regulate and safeguard workers' life and health. It is supported by the broader neo-liberal regime that has coerced developing countries to defund social infrastructure that disproportionately affects the working poor. Unionisation is systematically thwarted leaving workers with no institutional mechanism to demand their basic rights; although, history has taught us repeatedly the necessity of unions in a terrain marked by power asymmetries between global capital and labour.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated this crisis, where garment workers working under inhuman and poverty-level conditions have no room for adjustments and are immediately plunged into desperate illnesses, starvation and homelessness. Garment producing countries, having lost their social safety net under global neo-liberalism and coercive structural adjustment programs, do not have adequate public health and social infrastructure. In a system that ignores social determinants of health, access to healthcare depends on purchasing power, thus generating new forms of inequalities.

In these dire circumstances, it is imperative that the brands that appropriate billions in profits are made accountable for safe working conditions as well as the well-being of workers. Now is not the time for a system that disregards the lives of millions of workers while at the same time privatising profit and socialising loss. The Bangladesh Accord holds lessons for the labour movement in this regard as it made lead firms enter enforceable legally binding agreements that publicly challenged corporate intransigence. The advances made by the Accord must be pushed further in ensuring better working conditions throughout supply chains, payment of living wages and fostering unionization so as to uphold the interests of the working class.
