

# After Rana Plaza: trade union mobilisation quickly blocked

After the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, a window of opportunity opened for the trade unions. But it was quickly closed. And although fire safety standards have been improved and the minimum wage increased, working conditions at the world's second largest textile exporter still remain poor.

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On 24 April 2013 managers at the Rana Plaza textile workshops, in a Dhaka suburb, forced workers to go back into the building, despite the appearance of large cracks in the walls. Moments later the building collapsed, killing 1 135 people and injuring thousands. Six months earlier, at the Tazreen factory, also situated in the suburbs of the Bangladesh capital, workers had been ordered to stay at their posts despite fire alarms going off. One hundred and twenty died. Neither of the two companies had trade unions representing the workers and helping them to resist the demands of management, which proved fatal.

In July 2013 new staff representation rules were adopted in Bangladesh. Prior to that, employers had to give their consent for a trade union to be created. This is no longer the case. The accreditation process has also



been simplified. "In 2011 and 2012 just one trade union was set up in one factory; in 2013 there were 96", celebrated Srinivas B. Reddy, Country Office Director for the International Labour Organization (ILO), one year later. "Workers are no longer afraid of banding together!" was the delighted statement of the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF), one of the main trade unions in the sector.

However, it was more the actions of the ILO and international trade union and NGO groupings that led to the signature of two major agreements on building safety and fire standards: the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, signed by around 180 mainly European multinationals, and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, initiated by the two US giants, GAP and Walmart. These two initiatives have enabled the inspection of



1. Human Rights Watch, "Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most". *Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories*, April 2015, 84 p.

3 500 factories supplying foreign brands. As a result of these inspections, over 600 factories have been closed and the rest must carry out work, in some cases extensive. At the same time, the minimum wage in the sector has been increased from 35 to 60 euros per month, which corresponds to the rent for a room measuring around 10 m<sup>2</sup>.

However, working conditions have not been tackled. It must be said that the "window of trade union opportunity was quickly closed", laments Ben Vanpeperstraete from the global union federation for the service sector, UNI Global Union, who notes "a deterioration between 2014 and 2015; a clear step backwards". In April 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a damning report<sup>1</sup> stating that workers in the textile industry in Bangladesh still "face poor working conditions and anti-union tactics by employers including assaults on union organizers". According to evidence gathered by HRW, workers attempting to form trade unions have been dismissed for these militant activities. The NGO points out that fewer than 10% of the garment workshops in Bangladesh currently have trade union representation.

"Trade unions often face problems registering", adds Amin Amirul, President and co-founder of the NGWF, whose optimism has fallen since 2014. "The Ministry of





Labour, which accredits trade unions, does not always grant accreditation, or does so slowly. While trade unionists suffer threats and even intimidation ..."

"There is one trade union in the factory, but it was set up by our employer", state three young men in the humidity-laden offices of the NGWF, which are crammed with files on various suppliers of major Western brands. "Co-workers who wanted to form another trade union were kicked out." After the closure of their factory, the workers demonstrated. "But the boss called the police and we were beaten and then dispersed." Arifa was the only one to make a statement. Determined in her red sari, she has discovered a new vocation: staff representative. At the age of 19 she was dismissed when she founded a trade union in her company to denounce not only the unpaid overtime and





lack of drinking water in the building, but also the beatings dished out to workers by foremen. "I myself was beaten twice", the young woman calmly explains, who, since losing her job, has spent almost every day helping out at the trade union. This morning she is rushing to go and demonstrate in front of Parliament, as she does every Friday, even though there is only a handful of demonstrators.

Around 30 young women leave the building, with documents under their arms, to join the procession. The trade union is also teaching workers – those who can read, which is a minority – about their rights and how a trade union works. Most of the students are around 20, know their subject and are astonishingly tenacious given the extent of the task facing them. "This is something new!", encourages Amin. "This is progress!"

The list of progress includes the organisation of collective bargaining in around 30 factories, notes Ramesh Roy, President of the United Federation of Garment Workers (UFGW), another organisation in the sector. In addition, workplace health and safety committees have to be set up by suppliers of Western brands that have signed the European Accord. Who will be the members and what will they do? At the moment, nothing is being said. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), which is based in a modern tall tower in the centre of the city, demands that there are no "activists" involved in the discussions, which they understand as "NGO members". As regards the trade unions, it is quite simple: just saying their name causes all the employers met to roll their eyes. "Trade unions mean riots, without a doubt!", they usually retort. ●

