



WORKERS' RIGHTS, WORKERS' LIVES

Report on the 2019 Canadian Labour Delegation to Bangladesh



CONTENTS

1. THE READY-MADE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH	4
.....	
WHAT IS THE BCWS?	6
.....	
AFTER RANA PLAZA—REAL PROGRESS IN WORKER SAFETY	8
.....	
2. THE 2019 CANADIAN DELEGATION TO BANGLADESH	10
.....	
3. THE WORKERS, UNIONISTS, AND ACTIVISTS (STORIES FROM BANGLADESH)	12
.....	
STORY 1: WAGE PROTESTS LEAD TO MASS TERMINATION AND LABOUR RIGHTS CRACKDOWN	13
.....	
STORY 2: UNFAIR DISMISSAL OF WORKERS FOR UNION INVOLVEMENT	16
.....	
STORY 3: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE	17
.....	
STORY 4: THE STRENGTH TO CONTINUE—WOMEN'S ISSUES AND WOMEN'S WORK	18
.....	
4. SUPPORTING WORKER RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH AND STANDING IN SOLIDARITY	20

OVER 6 YEARS AGO,
ON APRIL 24, 2013

ONE OF THE DEADLIEST INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENTS THE WORLD HAS EVER WITNESSED

OCCURED AT THE RANA PLAZA FACTORY IN DHAKA, BANGLADESH

On April 24, 2013, one of the deadliest industrial accidents the world has ever witnessed occurred at the Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The collapse of the factory tower resulted in the death of 1,134 garment workers, and another 2,500 factory workers were injured in the accident. Prior to this tragedy, the Tazreen factory fire in the Dhaka suburb of Ashulia, killed 117 workers and injured 200. These tragedies highlight the dangerous and precarious working conditions of garment factory workers in Bangladesh.

This report represents the work of the Canadian joint-union solidarity delegation's travels to Bangladesh in June of 2019. The goal of the delegation was to continue its work with the Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS) in support of garment workers in Bangladesh. The six-year partnership strives to advocate governments, employers, and international brands work together to improve the working conditions for the over four million garment sector workers in Bangladesh. With representatives from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), United Steelworkers, (USW), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/ FEESO), and the Centre international de solidarité ouvrière (CISO), the delegation represented a cross section of the Canadian labour movement.

Over a six-day period, members of the delegation visited with workers, union activists and leaders, government officials, and industry leaders. Repeatedly during the delegation's visits with workers and labour activists, we heard stories of repression and suffering coupled with an enduring resilience and fight-back mentality.



Background Image: Empty lot in Dhaka—site of the Rana Plaza factory collapse

Memorial outside the Rana Plaza factory site



1

THE READY-MADE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH

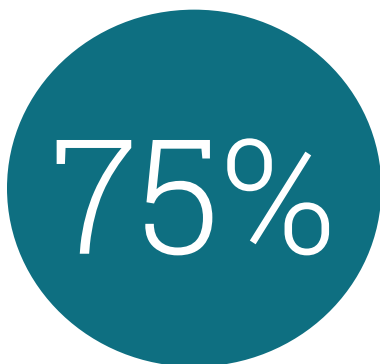
With over 4 million workers employed in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, the industry drives the economy and sets the standard of living for many Bangladesh families. Bangladesh is the world's second largest apparel exporter, with RMG exports of over \$28 billion (USD). RMG industry workers are a vital part of the country's global success as a leader in the sector.

The international outcry following the 2013 tragedy at the Rana Plaza factory, led to an industry-wide effort to improve building and fire safety in Bangladesh's garment sector. The factory safety audits, remediation plans, and monitoring programs pioneered by Bangladesh Accord for Building and Fire Safety (The Accord) successfully pushed the RMG sector to improve factory safety. For the most part, the worst safety risks faced by workers due to structural building defects and negligent lack of fire protection have been eliminated. If current standards can be maintained, the factory buildings themselves are relatively safe. But workers continue to be fearful of unsafe working conditions, and look to the industry, the Bangladesh government, and the trade unions to continue to ensure worker safety.

The tragedies at the Rana Plaza and Tazreen factories are reminders of the precarious and dangerous nature of working in the garment industry. Unsafe buildings are by no means the only health and safety hazards workers face in the RMG sector.

With over 75 per cent of Bangladesh's 4 million workers in the garment industry being women, the industry serves as a defining element of women's lives. The female workers in Bangladesh's garment factories face some of the most severe and challenging working conditions. Paid poverty wages, facing intense (and ever-mounting) production quota pressures in factories, and experiencing regular gender-based violence in the workplace, these women are becoming the voice of change.

The 2019 delegation met with various union leaders and workers during its time in Bangladesh, but made a special point of meeting with female union leaders. The spirit of sisterhood and solidarity is strong among them and they work tirelessly to fight gender discrimination in the country. In the "Stories" section of this report you will find tales of strength and resilience that highlight how the women of Bangladesh's garment industry are transforming the nature of women's work and women's rights.



**OF BANGLADESH'S 4 MILLION WORKERS
IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY ARE WOMEN**



WHAT IS THE BCWS?

The Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS), founded in 2001 by three former garment sector workers, Kalpona Akter, Nazma Sheikh and Babul Akhter, is a grassroots labour rights advocacy organization that works with 90,000 solidarity members across the country. BCWS provides training and support to various unions and labour organizations in Bangladesh as well as providing education, legal advice, and leadership training for labour rights activists.

To be a garment worker in Bangladesh often means making poverty wages. Additionally, workers often face harassment, violence, unsafe working conditions, and labour rights violations. For these workers, the advocacy of the BCWS and the various unions, along with pressure from international organizations and companies has helped bring about improved working conditions. However, the industry and its workers still have a long way to go to ensure system-wide improvements in working conditions. The workers at the BCWS and the labour activists they train make a difference in the lives of Bangladeshi RMG workers. One worker said of her efforts, "I am like a farmer, planting seeds, nurturing, watering" (Sumaiya, BCWS worker).

The Canadian labour movement has recognized the leading role played by BCWS in supporting workers fight for their rights in the RMG sector, and has partnered with BCWS. The joint project funded by a coalition of Canadian unions, including CUPE, PSAC, OSSTF/FEESO, UFCW, and USW, as well as the CLC, provides the BCWS with critical funds it needs to support core operations, and provide training and support for women leaders from the factory floor.

The 2019
Canadian Joint
Labour Delegation
to Bangladesh and
BCWS staff





The 2019 Canadian Joint Labour Delegation to Bangladesh and BCWS staff
Pictured front row seated from left to right: Tracey Germa (OSSTF/FEESO); Akhi;
Doug Olthuis (USW); Ibrahim; Rubi; Sumaiya; Lutfon; Kalpona
Pictured back row standing from left to right: Laboni; Louise Casselman (PSAC); Emily Norgang (CLC); Salma;
Amélie Nguyen (CISO); Zakia; Nipoon, Yaqub; Kouser; Faisal; Marianne Hladun (PSAC)



“ I am like a farmer, planting seeds, nurturing, watering.”
— Sumaiya, BCWS worker

AFTER RANA PLAZA REAL PROGRESS IN WORKER SAFETY



The 2019 Canadian Joint Labour Delegation to Bangladesh with Kalpona Akter (BCWS) and Rob Wayss, Executive Director—The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (centre) at the offices of The Accord in Dhaka

Established after the Rana Plaza disaster, the Bangladesh Accord on Building and Fire Safety spearheaded an industry-wide effort to improve building safety and make workers important actors in their own safety. The Accord is an independent, legally binding agreement between international clothing brands (including Canada's Loblaws Inc. and Bruzer Sportsgear) and trade unions to work towards a safe and healthy garment and textile industry in Bangladesh. The Accord built an organization able to carry out professional, independent factory inspections, identify required factory remediation and safety upgrades, monitor compliance and force changes, as well as train joint labour-management Safety

Committees, and work with all stake-holders to resolve safety complaints in factories. The Accord's remarkable and ground-breaking work set the standard for the parallel efforts of the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which was supported by corporations which refused to sign agreements with trade unions. Following the lead of Walmart and the Gap, several Canadian brands including Canadian Tire, HBC, and Giant Tiger joined the Alliance.

Many Bangladesh factory owners resented the imposition of safety standards on their operations and only grudgingly accepted the improvements in building safety resulting from audits, and the

introduction of real worker participation in safety. In 2018 when it came time to renew The Accord's five year agreement, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) strenuously argued that The Accord was no longer needed. For many workers the prospect of a return to a situation where factory owners hold all the cards was seen as a major crisis. One factory worker told the delegation, "If The Accord leaves, we will lose our safe space to talk. Because of The Accord, we now have a safety committee. If The Accord leaves, we will lose that committee" (Mim, factory worker and General Secretary of her factory union).

In May 2019, just prior to the 2019 delegation visit, The Accord and the BGMEA reached an agreement addressing the impasse over The

Accord's future. Under the agreement the BGMEA will lead in the creation of a new RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) which will absorb The Accord staff and operations and continue the work of The Accord. The 2019 delegation heard serious concerns from workers, labour leaders, and remediation specialists about the RSC. Questions remain about the independence of the RSC and its ability to conduct rigorous safety inspections and maintain monitoring programs, and worker-oriented training and confidential complaints process of The Accord. If the BGMEA is not truly committed to The Accord approach and processes, there is a very real risk that the improvements made in building safety will deteriorate over time, and that workers will not have the space to make gains in other areas of health and safety.



“ If The Accord leaves, we will lose our safe space to talk. Because of The Accord, we now have a safety committee. If The Accord leaves, we will lose that committee.”

– Mim, factory worker
and General Secretary
of her factory union



THE 2019 CANADIAN DELEGATION TO BANGLADESH

MEMBERS OF THE 2019

CANADIAN DELEGATION TO BANGLADESH

CONSISTED OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE
FOLLOWING UNIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY
ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs)



CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS (CLC):

Emily Norgang, Senior Researcher, Social and Economic Policy



CENTRE INTERNATIONAL DE SOLIDARITÉ OUVRIÈRE (CISO):

Amélie Nguyen, Coordonnatrice



ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' FEDERATION (OSSTF/FEESO):

Tracey Germa, Executive Assistant, Communications/Political Action Department



PUBLIC SERVICE ALLIANCE OF CANADA (PSAC):

Marianne Hladun, Regional Executive Vice-President (Prairies),
and Louise Casselman, Social Justice Fund Officer;



UNITED STEELWORKERS (USW):

Doug Olthuis, Department Head, Global Affairs and Workplace Issues



Members of the Canadian Joint Labour Delegation to Bangladesh at the offices of BCWS in Dhaka
Pictured from left to right: Tracey Germa (OSSTF/FEESO); Amélie Nguyen (CISO); Marianne Hladun (PSAC);
Doug Olthuis (USW); Emily Norgang (CLC); Louise Casselman (PSAC)



3

THE WORKERS, UNIONISTS, AND ACTIVISTS

(STORIES FROM BANGLADESH)

STORY 1

WAGE PROTESTS LEAD TO MASS TERMINATION AND LABOUR RIGHTS CRACKDOWN

In 2019, Bangladesh's garment sector was rocked by widespread worker protests, as thousands of workers walked out of factories in protest over the wages. Labour called for an increase to the country's minimum wage to BDT 16,000 (\$248 CAD) a month; however, the Bangladesh government raised it only to BDT 8,000 (\$124 CAD) a month, leaving the workers of Bangladesh still earning poverty wages.

In many instances, the increased wages were not paid to the workers, and legal bonuses, statutory leaves, or compensation were denied to workers. When workers called for their rights to be respected they were quickly fired or locked out of their factory.

This crackdown on workers continued when many Bangladesh factory owners responded to the 2,700 taka (\$40 CAD) per month increase in minimum wages that was announced by intensifying the pressure on workers on the factory floor to work harder and faster. Production quotas are increased on an on-going basis.



**The monthly
minimum wage
for a garment sector
worker in Bangladesh is
8,000 taka (BDT) or
\$124 CAD**

When the 2019 delegation met with Rubana Huq, the president of the BGMEA she seemed genuinely perplexed by the "revolt" of the garment workers. She noted that, "We can't figure out who instigated it, and where it came from." The BGMEA seems convinced that workers themselves would not stage illegal strikes, but that outside forces must have been behind it. The problem for the BGMEA is that they are unable to identify the people or the organizations purportedly behind the organized protests. In fact, the evidence suggests that 2019 wage protests erupted spontaneously, and were not organized or called for by Bangladesh's garment sector trade unions.

Labour leader, Mousumi, was jailed and blacklisted from employment in the garment industry because of her involvement in her union.



Mousumi is a factory-level union leader that was in one of the factories where workers walked out. When meeting with the Canadian delegation, she explained that the spark for the action was that, “The salary of helpers increased, but not the salary of operators.” In her factory (owned by The East West Group), to receive an increase in wages, each individual sewing machine operator was required to be interviewed and pass management’s proficiency test. The news that one of the first women taking the test failed and would therefore receive no wage increase outraged workers, and spread like wild-fire from floor to floor in the factory. The workers collectively decided they needed to do something and the workers exited en masse, shutting down production at the factory.

The factory responded by firing 1,400 workers. “They fired each and every union leader, and their families” says Mousumi. Her story is not unique.

Bangladesh factory owners and the Bangladesh governments harsh and heavy-handed response to the wage protests resulted in widespread mass terminations of thousands of workers, use of local ‘thugs’ to intimidate workers, and unfounded criminal charges against workers and union activists. To make matters worse factory owners are using new technologies and biometric data to punish workers who they believe are union activists by blacklisting them and making sure they can’t find work.

Despite the thugs, terminations, harassment, and blacklisting; courageous factory level workers like Mousumi remain committed to their unions. Mousumi told the 2019 delegation that despite being fired, blacklisted and charged criminally, she will not step back from union work: “We will

“ We will organize because the union is the only place a worker can have a voice... I faced charges because of my work family and I’ll continue to fight for it.”

— Mousumi, blacklisted factory-level union leader

organize because the union is the only place a worker can have a voice...I faced charges because of my work family and I'll continue to fight for it."

This message came to the delegation time and time again. Workers know the value of organized labour and are prepared to fight for workers' rights, no matter the cost.



Members of the 2019 Delegation with union leaders Babul Akhter and Rashadul Alam Raju (centre)



Wages increased by 30 per cent to 40 per cent. Production has to be increased to meet the expenditure. That's why workers are being asked to manufacture more."

— Abdus Salam, an official with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) -

www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/life-of-a-garment-worker-08162019121344.html



Workers are forced to keep up with high production quotas that keep increasing. One hundred pieces an hour is basically impossible for anyone to meet."

— Babul Akhter, President of Bangladesh Garments Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF)

STORY 2

UNFAIR DISMISSAL OF WORKERS FOR UNION INVOLVEMENT

Khairul is one of six workers fired in early June. Why? He and the other colleagues who were fired were told, “You are good workers, but you are union so you have to leave the job.” This is what the company told him. It is a story the Canadian delegation heard again, and again. The dismissal of workers for union activity is a clear violation of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and is illegal under Bangladesh labour laws. But in Bangladesh the law is so routinely flaunted, with no serious repercussions, that when management terminates workers they do not even bother disguising the true reason for the dismissal. In many instances, workers who are summarily dismissed are also refused their rightful severance pay.

Shadekul is a factory worker in the Ashulia area of Bangladesh, just outside the capital city of Dhaka. He told the delegation of repeated threats from his employer because of his union involvement. The threats included warnings that if he continued his union activities he would be fired, and “thugs” would be sent to his home to beat him. He was eventually fired but did not receive any of the government-mandated severance pay. He has now been blacklisted throughout the RMG factories and is unable to find work. These stories are not unique and many more workers face criminal charges based on open-ended accusations of union-based rioting and violence.

The delegation heard repeatedly from the workers that they just want to work, they just want fair wages, they want a safe place to work, and they just want to work without fear of violence.



Garment workers were eager to share their stories with the delegation

STORY 3

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Lima and Sheoli worked in a factory in Ashulia. Seventeen other workers were complaining of ongoing sexual harassment in their factory, including pressure for sex from their bosses and colleagues. When they went to management to complain and ask for help, the production manager opened an investigation but only took the word of the male workers. The workers next went to the manager of the factory to complain about the production manager's one-sided investigation and stood in solidarity, stating they would walk off the job if the production manager's actions were not addressed. When the workers returned the next day they found the factory locked for their shift. Thirty-four more workers, including Lima and Sheoli were then fired for trying to stand up to management when they demanded the women be allowed into the factory.



Lima,
a factory
worker

STORY 4

THE STRENGTH TO CONTINUE— WOMEN’S ISSUES AND WOMEN’S WORK



Women union leaders at the Dhaka offices of the BCWS

Throughout the delegation’s visits with workers and union activists, we were struck by the incredible spirit and resilience of women leaders. These women spoke proudly of their ability to take workers concerns to management, articulate issues, and propose and fight for solutions. They see the power of factory owners, they feel the pressure and repression from management, but they are determined to continue to fight anyway. Mosumi (profiled earlier in this report) said, “Even though I was fired, I will still fight for the union because it is the only place where workers can speak. I’m not letting go that easy, I’ll keep fighting.” Rehama, another female worker and union member whose home the delegation visited said of the work she does for her union, “I am not a trouble maker. I am a problem solver. Management makes the trouble and I solve the problems.”

When the 2019 delegation met with a group of female garment factory workers who are active unionists in their factories, we asked if they felt female workers have a harder time being involved in unions and being leaders than men. The women answered with a resounding “NO!” These are strong women, these are leaders, and they are vigilant in keeping women’s issues at the forefront of labour activism in Bangladesh. They freely identify gender-based violence (GBV) as a significant challenge for women in the RMG sector. Their solidarity and strength comes, in part, from the training provided to the women by the BCWS team. It is a success story.

In a culture where it is a rarity to see women driving cars, buses, trucks, or rickshaws—women leaders in Bangladesh are driving their unions forward. The BCWS has provided driver education. The training and support of BCWS has given them the knowledge and confidence to build their power. These workers are standing up, united in sisterhood to improve conditions for the country’s over 3 million female garment workers.



Union leaders and the Joint Delegation standing in solidarity at the BCWS offices in Dhaka



4

SUPPORTING WORKER RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH AND STANDING IN SOLIDARITY



AS PART OF OUR WORK, IN BANGLADESH

THE DELEGATION MET WITH A NUMBER OF OTHER STAKEHOLDERS IN THE COUNTRY'S GARMENT INDUSTRY, INCLUDING:

Benoît Préfontaine—HIGH COMMISSIONER OF CANADA TO BANGLADESH

Toumo Poutiainen, Country Director—ILO COUNTRY OFFICE FOR BANGLADESH

Rob Wayss, Executive Director—THE ACCORD ON FIRE AND BUILDING SAFETY IN BANGLADESH

Rubana Huq, President—BANGLADESH GARMENT MANUFACTURERS AND EXPORTERS ASSOCIATION

Representatives from the BANGLADESH MINISTRY OF LABOUR

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY HAS MADE THE DIFFERENCE IN BANGLADESH

GARMENT FACTORIES ARE SAFER BECAUSE OF IT. BUT BEYOND FACTORY SAFETY THERE CONTINUE TO BE SERIOUS QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE:

1. Will the structural improvements in building safety be sustained?
2. Will women workers find respect in the workplace, with an end to harassment and gender-based violence?
3. Will garment workers continue to be asked to work faster to satisfy ever increasing production quotas, and pay the mental and physical price of excessive work demands?
4. Will garment workers earn a living wage that allows their families to escape poverty?
5. Will workers be free to join democratic unions, and use that voice to advocate for themselves? If not, who will drive the changes needed in the industry?

FIND OUT MORE

ABOUT THE GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN:

THE BANGLADESH CENTER FOR WORKERS' SOLIDARITY (BCWS)—www.bcwsbd.org

THE CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN (CCC)—www.cleanclothes.org

FINALLY, it is the words of Bangladesh’s garment workers that keep coming back to us in the days, weeks, and months after our delegation’s visit. Their strength and resilience serve as stark reminders to us of the power of labour to create meaningful change for the working class. It is also a reminder that as consumers, we have to be conscious of where our clothes are made and by whom. It is our responsibility to hold governments and the RMG sector accountable for their practices. We have the power.

“

**When you fight
you win, or you
learn something.
You don’t lose.”**

– Sumaiya



Background Image: The capital city of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Front and Back Cover Image: Site of the 2012 Tazreen Factory Fire, Dhaka suburb of Ashulia, Bangladesh



2019 CANADIAN LABOUR DELEGATION



Emily Norgang, CLC
Amélie Nguyen, CISO

Tracey Germa, OSSTF/FEESO
Marianne Hladun, PSAC

Louise Casselman, PSAC
Doug Olthuis, USW