

BANGLADESH: WHEN REFUSING WORK IS NOT AN OPTION

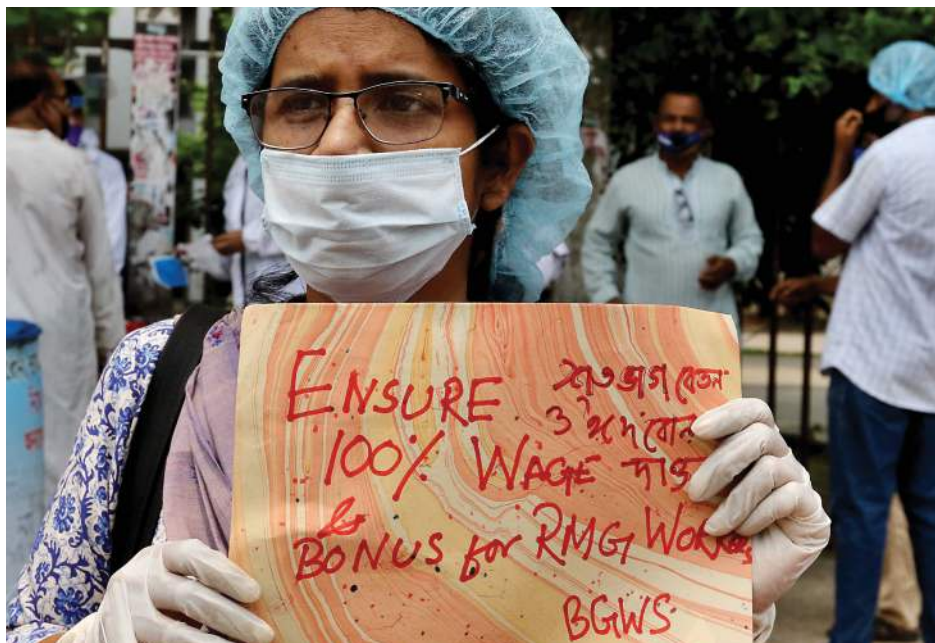


As the world reels from the impacts of COVID-19, workers and communities are affected differently in their local contexts. Over the course of the summer, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF) Updates will report on the experiences of our partner organizations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, as they respond to this evolving crisis. This first update will focus on the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS).

The global garment industry's poor health and safety conditions and poverty wages have been well documented. For years now, organizations such as our long-time partner BCWS have been at the frontline of the struggle for garment workers' rights in Bangladesh.

As suddenly as the novel coronavirus entered the global scene last March, clothing brands that have been sourcing from countries such as Bangladesh had their orders cancelled. Often declining to pay for clothes already completed, this drastic move left millions of workers, the majority of them women, out of work with no financial savings to draw on. In response to this unprecedented pandemic, the Bangladeshi government imposed a nationwide lockdown, leading to massive movement of population as poor workers scrambled to make it back to the informal social safety net of their home villages. Meanwhile, the powerful factory owners' association decided they would pay only 65% of the workers' already extremely low wages for the month of April, resulting in protests across the country as workers demanded to be paid in full.

As early as the end of April, government allowed factories to reopen, provided they follow a strict safety protocol including mandatory hand washing, sanitization of machines, physical distancing, etc. Labour leaders such as BCWS



A garment worker demanding for her salary to be paid in full.

and workers have been denouncing the lack of enforcement of safety requirements. In the words of a garment worker, physical distancing is a privilege in Bangladesh: "They are announcing over the intercom that we have to maintain social distancing. But we work so close to each other... How is that even possible?" As the number of COVID-19 cases continues to mount in the country – many of them linked to the garment industry – workers are scared but simply have no choice; as long as work is available, either they go to work and risk catching the virus or they go hungry.

Facing this impossible dilemma, workers do not feel that either their employers or the government have their back. A worker from Narayanganj, a suburb of the capital Dhaka heavily affected by the pandemic, puts it this way: "Just because we are poor, they can do anything with us and to us. But they don't have to go work."

They are safe in their big buildings which they made with our sweat. We are poor, we need the money, so we keep our mouths shut, and our heads low." This is where BCWS and its allies come into play, defending the rights of the most vulnerable workers and their families.

BCWS is fighting for full wages for laid off and terminated garment workers so that all of them are able to provide food and basic necessities for themselves and their families, and for minimal safety standards to be effectively implemented. In addition to ongoing project funding, last month the SHF contributed \$50,000 to BCWS in emergency relief; an amount matched by other Canadian unions for a total amount of \$110,000. BCWS will use these funds to distribute food baskets to thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers who have been put out of work by the COVID-19 pandemic. As well as financial support to BCWS, the SHF and the USW continue to work with other Canadian organizations to pressure Canadian clothing brands and the Canadian government to protect the women who make our clothes throughout the crisis and to build a sustainable garment industry that will pay its workers living wages.

Physical distancing is a privilege in Bangladesh.

All photos taken by Anisur Rahman.

To learn more about the Steelworkers
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