

## CAPTURING THE GAINS



### **Forced to die: Bangladesh factory collapse**

**Doug Miller**

In the wake of the worst ever disaster in the global clothing industry, it is time for both government and buyers to face up to the fact that the only answers to Bangladesh's industrial problems are collective ones – in every sense of the word.

As the buyers sourcing from the Rana Plaza complex begin to be disclosed, the arguments have started to appear seeking to absolve western companies from any responsibility for this horrendous disaster. One commentator reflects: 'Sadly, Bangladesh simply cannot afford rich world safety and working standards', arguing that the only way these will be achieved is by boosting the economy to make more goods. Another observer questions the rationale of attempting to make western companies responsible for deficiencies in another country's internal operations, blaming the current consciousness of Bangladesh citizens for not demanding more of their politicians.

Would that the buying practices of western brands and retailers allowed world class working conditions and safety standards in the Ready Made Garment sector. Price pressure and failure to build in a compliance cost in commercial transactions are the same reasons why an expansion of production in the industry will not lead to tangible improvements. We have to ask why managers send their workers back in – as has been the case in both the Rana Plaza and Tazreen disasters – when cracks or smoke appear. Tight lead times and pricing practices, wherein fabric takes precedence over labour, lead to capacity problems and production pressures, which beget worker harassment and excessive overtime.

In the coming days/weeks we will see buyers vehemently deny any connection with the five factories in the Plaza. This should come as no surprise, since the Bangladesh Ready Made Garment sector has long survived on the basis of a subcontracting culture, despite buyer codes of conduct insisting on transparency of production.

In 2005 Bangladesh thought it had experienced its worst factory disaster ever, with the collapse of the Spectrum factory not far from the Rana Plaza in Savar. In this disaster 62 were killed and 80 injured. One of the outcomes for brands and retailers was the inclusion of factory structural surveys in future social audits. Once again, third party factory monitoring has become discredited and more importantly workers voice has gone unheeded

The observer above who was critical of political consciousness in Bangladesh is in a sense right to bemoan the democratic deficit in the country; but the real deficit lies in the factories, where the employers flatly refuse to observe international conventions on freedom of

association and collective bargaining. Western buyers have a role to play here – only two have so far signed up to a Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement, developed by Bangladeshi and global unions and labour rights organizations. It provides for independent inspections of supplier factories, public reporting, training and mandatory repairs and renovations. It includes a central role for workers and unions in both oversight and implementation, including the establishment of worker-led safety committees. It also takes into account the need for supplier contracts, with sufficient financing and adequate pricing, and a binding contract to make these commitments enforceable.

Meanwhile, there is the issue of providing immediate relief to the several thousand workers who are now without a job, and decent compensation to the families of the injured and deceased. Much good work has been done to enhance state provision in this area, but past experience has shown that only a genuine collective effort on the part of the employers, government and buyers, together with the union representing the workers, will bear fruit.

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