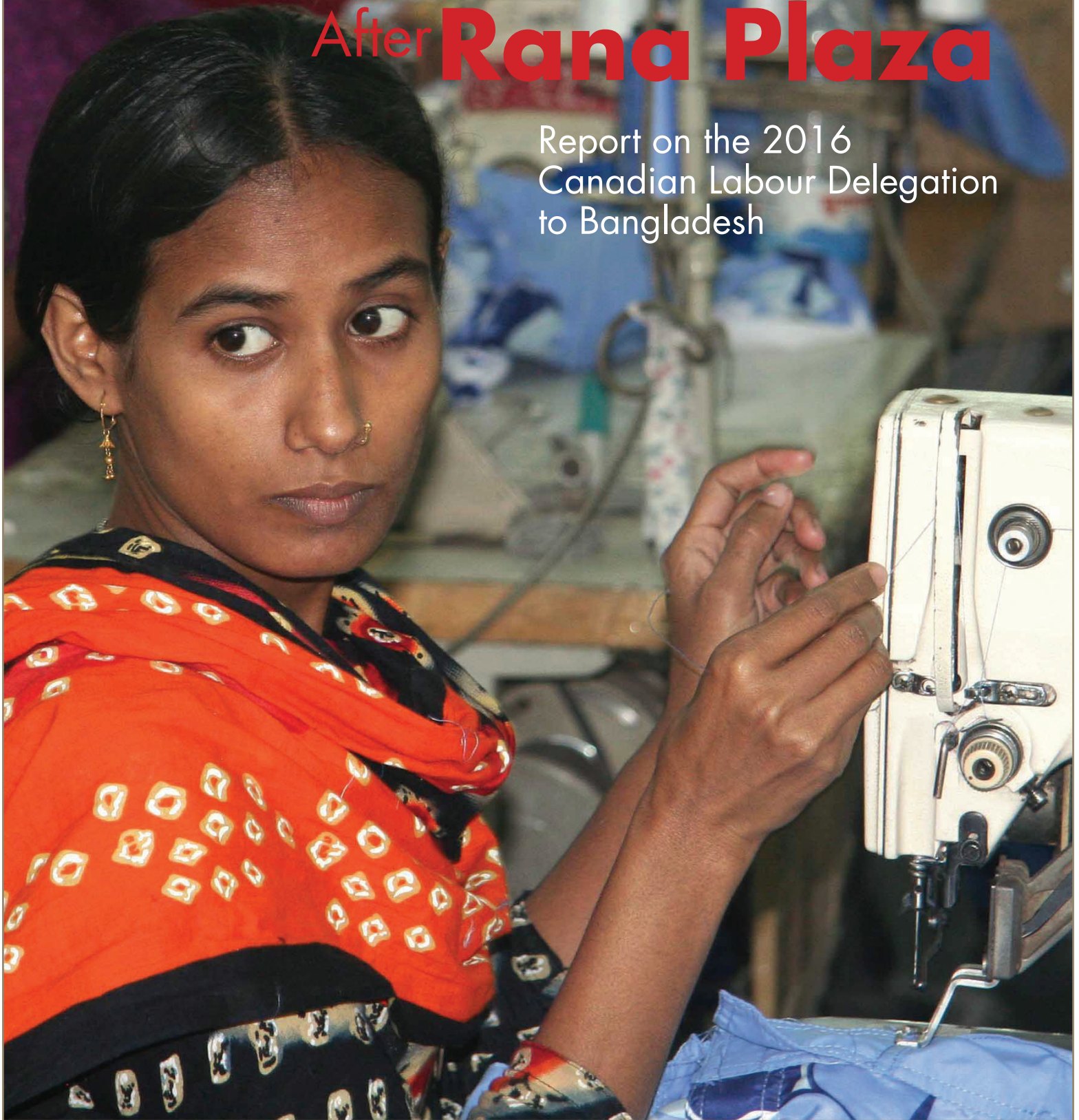


# Workers' Rights and Safety

## After **Rana Plaza**

Report on the 2016  
Canadian Labour Delegation  
to Bangladesh





Cover Photo: Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity



Photo: International Labor Rights Forum



February 6, 2016 – Almost three years after Rana Plaza, the Canadian delegation could still find Joe Fresh labels in the rubble of the collapsed building, a grim reminder of the direct connection between Canadian consumers and unsafe work.

## Workers' Rights and Safety After Rana Plaza

Report on the 2016 Canadian Labour Delegation to Bangladesh

*On* April 24, 2013, 30 years of unsafe conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry culminated in the horrific collapse of the Rana Plaza factory. In one of the world's deadliest industrial accidents, 1,134 garment workers were killed and another 2,500 injured workers were rescued from the building alive. Worker protest and the global outcry resulted in commitments to overhaul health and safety conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry and pursue an industry growth strategy based on safe work and decent working conditions.

In February a delegation of 11 Canadian trade union leaders and activists visited Bangladesh to learn first hand what progress has been made in the garment industry on safety and to understand the current state of the struggle of garment workers for their rights.

The delegation saw much progress in building inspections but learned that owners and brands urgently need to actually implement building repairs and safety improvements. Respect for worker rights and a living wage remain very serious problems.

## Tazreen Fashion Fire – Trapped With No Exit



The Tazreen Fashion building in the outskirts of Dhaka stands vacant.

Five months before the Rana Plaza collapse, on November 24, 2012, a fire raged through the Tazreen Fashion factory killing over 100 workers and injuring another 200.

The fire broke out on the main floor of the building, trapping many of the 2,500 workers on the floors above who had no access to proper fire escape

routes as some exit doors were locked.

The Canadian delegation met with a group of 20 survivors of the Tazreen fire. The survivors shared stories of the day of the fire and their ongoing struggle for compensation. Unlike Rana Plaza, Tazreen victims and their families have not yet received adequate compensation.

*“That day they told us to work late because of a shipment deadline. At 7 p.m. there was a fire alarm, but officials told us ‘there is no fire, it is maintenance.’”*

*“The collapsible gate was locked.”*

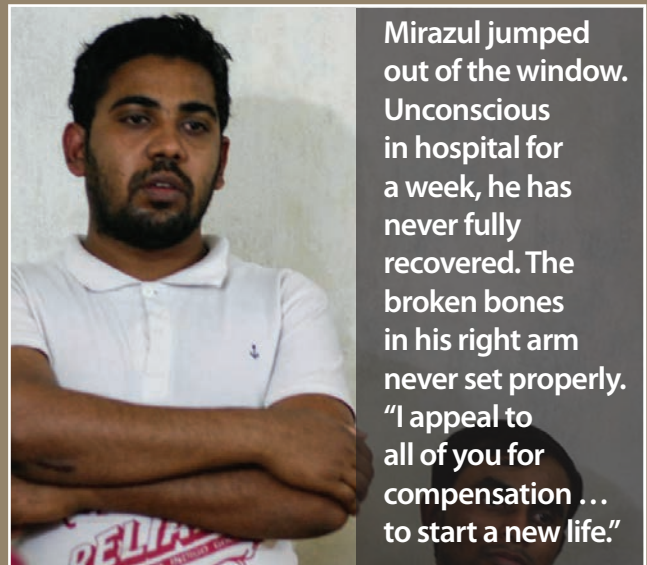
*“I jumped from third floor window ... My fellow worker died on a rod, but somehow I lived.”*

*“I jumped – even if I die, I die outside the building so my family gets the body.”*

*“If I don’t get compensation, how will I live?”*



Mahfuza, a sewing machine operator with five years experience, survived the Tazreen fire. “Floor manager assured us fire alarm was maintenance,” she says. “We tried to escape fire, stairways closed.”



Mirazul jumped out of the window. Unconscious in hospital for a week, he has never fully recovered. The broken bones in his right arm never set properly. “I appeal to all of you for compensation ... to start a new life.”

Photos: Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity

# Rana Plaza

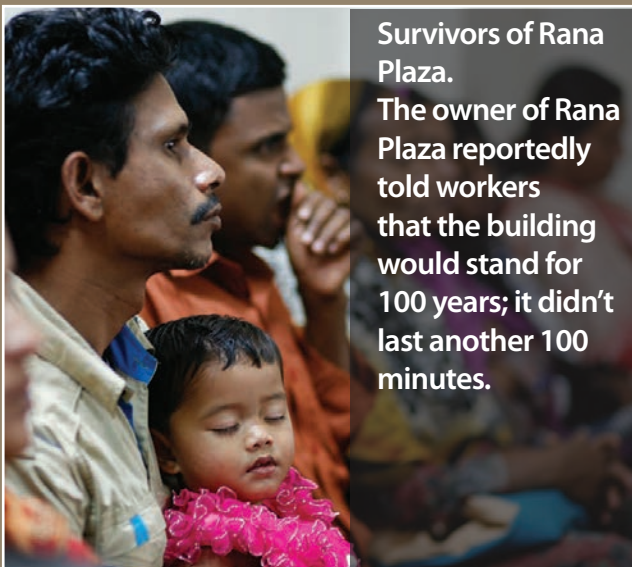
A group of about 20 workers and family of Rana Plaza survivors met with the Canadian delegation

to share their horrific experiences of the building collapse and their lives since.



**Badsha Mia worked on the second floor of the Rana Plaza building in quality control.**

**“On April 23 we saw a crack in the pillar. The engineers said ‘you should not work,’ and we did not return after lunch ... On April 24 all the workers were talking about the crack. Management said ‘we have a shipment deadline, if you do not work, we cannot pay you’ (for the month) ... The engineers assured us building is alright. At 8 a.m. we start to work. At 10 a.m. we were very worried, plaster was falling out, it felt shaky. Management told us to keep working. Suddenly the building collapsed. I was trapped in darkness.”**



**Survivors of Rana Plaza. The owner of Rana Plaza reportedly told workers that the building would stand for 100 years; it didn't last another 100 minutes.**



**Bulbuli, a sewing machine operator, was trapped for three days in the rubble of the building before she was rescued. She lost her mother who was working with her.**

Photos: Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity

# World Wide-Campaign led to Compensation and Commitments to Change

The shock of Rana Plaza and the enormity of the disaster and injustice catapulted the Bangladesh garment industry into the global media spotlight. For the Bangladeshi independent unions, global human rights activists and the international labour movement, it was a watershed moment. After Rana Plaza, campaigns for improvements in worker rights and working conditions, which once seemed impossible, gathered force and generated real opportunities for change.

## Rana Plaza Trust Fund

Activists all over the world pressured the clothing brands to provide medical care and compensation to victims of the Rana Plaza disaster.

Two years of global pressure worked. In 2015, reluctant brands committed to the final payments needed to fund the \$30-million Rana Plaza Trust Fund administered by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Even though compensating the 5,000 victims and their families is the responsibility of the industry, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund made a modest \$20,000 solidarity contribution to the fund.

## Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety

In May 2013, a group of European, American and Canadian labour rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Clean Clothes Campaign, Worker Rights Consortium, International Labour Rights Forum and the Maquila Solidarity Network) and the global union federations IndustriAll and UNI Global Union, working together with Bangladesh unions, won the commitment of major international clothing brands to improve safety in their factories and respect worker rights. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety is a five-year, legally binding agreement between the brands and trade unions that sets out a comprehensive plan for inspection and remediation of Bangladesh factories producing for the brands and an extensive fire and building-safety training program.

The accord, signed by over 200 international brands, has had an enormous impact. To its credit, Canadian-based Loblaw was the only major Canadian brand to sign the accord. Most North American retailers, led by Walmart, refused



Garment workers demonstrate for compensation on April 24, 2014, the one-year anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse.

Photo: F Chowdhury



Photo: D. DiMaria

**Alecia McLeod, Woman of Steel, (USW Local 7913) and Tim Troung (USW Local 5220) advocating at the Children's Place store in Edmonton in April, 2015.**

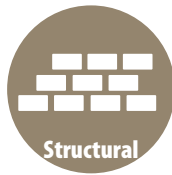
to sign a binding agreement with trade unions and refused to participate in an organization that gives workers real voice. In response to the accord, the North American brands formed their own organization – the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. Public pressure has forced the alliance to imitate the accord. At the same time, the Bangladesh government and the garment industry recognized that in order to recover a positive public image for Bangladesh garment exports and forestall potential trade actions, they too needed to address conditions in the industry. As a result,

the Bangladesh government adopted a National Plan of Action and committed to a Sustainability Compact for Continuous Improvement in Labour Rights and Factory Safety with the support of several European countries, the ILO and the U.S. In order to promote the compact and further engaged in the issues, the Government of Canada formally joined the compact in January 2016. The compact is significant in part because it clearly commits not only to factory safety but labour standards and worker rights.



## Post Rana Plaza – Safety Inspections and Remediation in the Bangladesh Garment Industry (as of January 31, 2016)

Workers employed in Bangladesh Garment Industry	<b>4 million</b>
Female workers	<b>80%</b>
Number of factories (including sub-contractors)	<b>&gt; 5,000</b>
Number of export-oriented factories targeted for inspection	<b>+/- 3,500</b>
Factory inspections since 2013 into building structural integrity, fire and electrical safety	



*As of the end of January, almost all factories in the export sector have been inspected.*

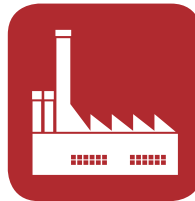
Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety

**1,390 inspections**



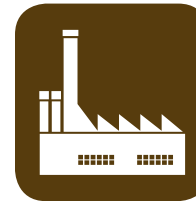
Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety

**857 inspections**



National Initiative supported by ILO

**1,549 inspections**



### **Inspections generated a public report with Corrective Action Plans**

Factories closed as a result of inspections **37**

*While there has been tremendous progress on inspections, the repairs required to make sure buildings are safe are seriously lagging.*

### **In the Accord-Inspected Factories:**

Number of factories completing entire list of required improvements	<b>2</b>
Number of findings verified and reported as completed	<b>+/- 45%</b>
Factories behind schedule in remediation plans	<b>75%</b>

Since the alliance has a less vigorous process, we can expect the remediation in alliance factories to be as delayed or further delayed.



# Bangladesh Garment Industry Does Not Provide Living Wage

The dramatic growth of the Bangladesh export-oriented garment industry over the last several decades has generated a huge demand for cheap labour in the garment factories. Many of the four million garment workers were drawn from the poor rural areas of Bangladesh. For many poor women, the garment industry has provided jobs and incomes that are better than anything available in the rural areas. Although the development of the garment industry has been a way out of extreme poverty, changes must be made in the working conditions in the industry to ensure equitable and sustainable growth into the future.

Days of work to earn monthly wage	<b>6 days per week, 4 days off per month</b>
Latest increase in minimum wages for garment sector	<b>2013 (after worker protests, work stoppages and worker demands for 8,000 taka per month minimum)</b>
Minimum wage for entry-level job	<b>5,300 taka per month \$90 Canadian per month About \$3.50 per day</b>
Minimum wage for experienced operator	<b>6,800 taka per month \$115 Canadian per month About \$4.80 per day</b>

According to Asia Floor Wage Alliance, legal minimum wage accounts for **only 19% of living wage** that would provide for basic needs of a worker and family.

"Many workers told us they cannot afford basic necessities. Rehana Uddin ... tells us that she has to make one sack of rice last for two months and never eats fish or meat." *Our Voices, Our Safety, ILRF report, December 2015*

Many factory owners responded to the increase in minimum wages in 2013 by speeding up production and **increasing workplace pressure on workers to produce faster**. Some reports say production quotas were increased by 60%.

Canada imported \$1.4 billion worth of garments from Bangladesh in 2015. Bangladesh is the second-largest importer into Canada of garments (after China) and accounts for roughly 10% of Canadian imports. All of those imports entered Canada duty free under the General Preferential Tariff granted to developing countries. No labour rights conditions are attached to the granting of the GPT.

# Independent Unions Fighting for Worker Rights

On February 5 the Canadian delegation met with a group of 30 factory level trade union activists and leaders who shared with us their experiences fighting for respect of the provisions of the Bangladesh labour laws, for their rights to form unions and for simple respect from factory owners. A common theme running through all reports was management intimidation and threats and retaliation against union leaders. Many factory union activists report being beaten by management thugs, receiving death threats, threats of factory closure if they unionize and factory-owner claims that the union is intent on destroying the industry. Violations of the ILO conventions on fundamental workers' rights appear commonplace in an attempt to silence independent worker voices.

**"We were not aware of our rights. No union. Now that we know, we demand ... (but) they fire us. Free us to practice my union."  
– Hasina, a factory level union leader**



Photos: Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity

The Canadian delegation was inspired by the daily courage, commitment and resourcefulness of the union activists to fight back and refuse to be silenced.

*"They demand the work of two people, pay for one person."*

*"They show a lot of things in their (brand compliance) audits, but we don't get them."*

*"Management accused us of conspiring against the factory ... they sent thugs to our house."*

*"They fired 22 workers who supported union organizing. The [remaining] 11 workers in the union – now scared we will also be fired. If they do, where will we go?"*

*"If you don't like it, you may go, says the management."*

*"I was suspended a week for demanding my rights ... Union leaders were in jail for 1½ weeks, but because of pressure from the brands were released."*

*"Please tell our government not to pressure us and let us practice our union."*

# Retaliation Against Union Organizing – Workplaces Will Not Be Safe



**Shifa, one of 30 courageous union leaders to meet with the Canadian delegation.**

The Government of Bangladesh and the factory owners, pushed by the ILO and Western governments including Canada, have committed to respecting the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. But the reality is troubling. The January 2016 Evaluation of the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact by the International Trade Union Confederation, UNI Global Union and IndustriAll concludes that “the evidence is clear and compelling – it is still extremely difficult for workers to exercise their fundamental labour rights in Bangladesh.” The report notes that in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) trade unions are banned outright. Outside the EPZs there is a formal right to organization, but bureaucratic processes have built in barriers to registration. Despite the fact that

a union can be registered with the support of 30% of employees, 30% of the applications for union registration have been rejected by the government authority over the last three years.

The political space that opened for activists to gain state recognition of trade unions after Rana Plaza appeared to be closing in 2015.

Rejections of union registrations are particularly high among Bangladesh’s independent trade union federations that truly strive to represent workers. Roughly 100 of the recently registered unions were in small factories that have shut down. In others, union leaders were fired and the union failed. After excluding ‘yellow’ unions (management-controlled unions), the Canadian delegation was told that **only about 40 workplace unions, representing 12,000 to 14,000 workers (in an industry of four million workers), are capable of negotiating with the employer and representing members.**

Beyond the issue of union certification, there are also very large barriers for registered unions to successfully negotiate agreements with employers.

The global union report warns that “the inability of many workers to organize and form unions without retaliation and to bargain collectively ... means that any gains in building and fire safety and other conditions of work will not be sustainable, leading to certain future tragedies.”




Mim, a dedicated union leader at a factory owned by Al-Muslin Group. Management retaliated against union organizing and union action on health and safety with threats, physical attacks and termination. It took nine months of pressure from buyers, urged by the accord, to convince management to reinstate Mim and other union leaders.

## Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity

Together the PSAC, CUPE, the OSSTF and Steelworkers Humanity Fund support a joint project with the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). The objective of the joint project is to provide training and support to workers to understand and exercise their human rights and the rights set out in Bangladesh labour law and provide training and support to organize democratic workplace unions to give voice to workers, improve workplace conditions and pull workers and their families out of poverty.

The Canadian delegation met with 11 of the BCWS staff. We were impressed with the depth of their personal commitment and their engagement with workers at the community and factory level. Grassroots involvement and participation of shop floor workers is extremely important and the delegation was very pleased to see that in the BCWS programs. We also learned that BCWS, under



**Kalpona Akter,  
Executive  
Director of the  
Bangladesh  
Centre for  
Worker  
Solidarity,  
a tireless  
advocate for  
worker rights.**

the leadership of Kalpona Akter, has played a key role in advocating and organizing for victims of the Tazreen Fashion Fire and Rana Plaza, and continues to be a leading advocate for workers' rights.



Photo: Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity

## Union Participants in the 2016 Bangladesh Delegation

Melanie McConnell (far right), USW Local 7619, with union leaders of Luman factory. "Union activists face challenges I find untenable: being harassed verbally, having their workloads increased, being beaten, fired, having their families threatened, being incarcerated on false charges, even being killed in some extreme cases. Our support for groups like BCWS is essential in providing education and resources, like legal representation, for workers who still have very little power in their workplaces."



Colleen Burke (left), President of USW Local 1998. "We need to keep up international pressure now that the spotlight is no longer on Rana Plaza. Factory owners pay less than minimum wage and avoid paying maternity benefits and they hide this with fake paperwork. Active unions in the workplace can expose and fight these practices. I am so proud that the Humanity Fund supports the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity. They are doing amazing work, educating workers. One organizer said 'even if I am killed for what I do, I know I've been working for the good of humanity.'"

### Who is Responsible? The Power of the Clothing Brands

"First and foremost apparel brands and retailers should recognize their own role in creating the commercial conditions under which factories cannot feasibly comply with labour and safety regulations. This includes flexible supplier agreements, where apparel brands require their supplier factories to produce 'on demand' according to deadlines and prices set by the brands, and which foster the time and price pressures that leave little room for the respectful process of safety that workers demand. Apparel brands and retailers ... must pay prices that reflect the full cost of production, including the cost of ... safety ... and the cost of living wages."

Excerpt from the recommendations of *Our Voices, Our Safety: Bangladesh Garment Workers Speak Out*, an excellent report of the International Labour Right Forum (ILRF) working with the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (December 2015). [www.laborrights.org](http://www.laborrights.org)

## Summary of Findings of 2016 Delegation

The main observations of the Canadian delegation that visited Bangladesh in early February 2016 are:

- ✔ International attention and the engagement of governments of various countries, including Canada and the ILO, combined with pressure from the international clothing brands, has created positive momentum for improvements in the Bangladesh garment industry.
- ✔ The inspection of 3,500 garment factories for structural integrity and fire and electrical safety in a little over 2½ years is a remarkable achievement. In this process the accord has led the way.
- ✔ Repair of factories to make them safe for workers is proceeding at a slow pace, with much work remaining to be completed.
- ✔ Sustaining the momentum for change in working conditions and building a sustainable industry into the future will only be possible based on full respect for worker rights.
- ✔ Bangladesh garment workers face daily workplace pressure to work harder and faster, are harassed and are poorly paid.
- ✔ Workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively are under attack every day. Factory management regularly retaliates against workers exercising their rights. Whereas the Bangladesh government has invested heavily in the modernization of the inspections system, less attention has been paid to sections of the labour ministry that regulate and enforce labour law.
- ✔ Democratic and independent trade unions and their NGO allies are working hard to represent workers at the factory level and to take advantage of opportunities that have opened up after Rana Plaza, but they need ongoing international solidarity and resources.



**At the site of the Tazreen Fashions Building, Kalpona Akter points out where workers jumped to escape the 2012 fire, for members of the Canadian delegation.**

# Supporting Worker Rights in Bangladesh

The Canadian delegation returned home from Bangladesh convinced of the importance of ongoing solidarity actions in support of Bangladesh garment workers. Among the issues that the Canadian labour movement can take up include:

- 1.** Actions that continue to make visible the struggle of Bangladesh garment workers among the Canadian public. For example, public events commemorating April 24 (Rana Plaza) and November 24 (Tazreen Fashion fire).
- 2.** Engagement with Canadian retail brands. Brands can be asked to disclose their factory suppliers in Bangladesh and publicly report on how their suppliers are implementing remediation issues uncovered during factory inspections and how they are supporting worker rights.
- 3.** Engagement with Canadian governments, employers, educational institutions and sport teams/associations on their procurement policies. Many Canadian universities have affiliated with the Worker Rights Consortium. These universities can be asked to discuss with their licensees how suppliers are implementing remediation and how they are supporting worker rights.
- 4.** Supporting campaigns for a Living Wage in Bangladesh and other garment-producing countries.
- 5.** The 2013 Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh is nearing the end of its five-year term. Progress that has been made cannot be lost. In the coming year, and following the lead of Bangladesh workers, it will likely be necessary to engage the Canadian government and Canadian brands in support of an extension of the accord.



The Canadian 2016 delegation to Bangladesh standing with workplace activists in front of a flag presented by the previous delegation led by Matthew Kellway in 2014.



## 2016 Canadian Labour Delegation

Archana Rampure, CUPE

Bob Kingston, PSAC

Colleen Burke, USW

Darlene McIvor, Unifor

Doug Olthuis, USW / Steelworkers Humanity Fund

Jocelyne Dubois, CLC

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Sharon Hubley, CUPE

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