

Protect the women who make our clothes: Canada's unions and civil society organizations call for action

Seven years after the tragic Rana Plaza building collapse, Bangladesh garment sector workers now confront even more risk and vulnerability in the fight against COVID-19.

Canada's unions and civil society organizations are calling for immediate relief for workers and protection of rights in global supply chains.

The coalition says that concerns for workers cannot stop at Canada's borders and the millions of women and men who make clothes in other countries cannot be abandoned. In particular, efforts to address and rectify dangerous working conditions following the Rana Plaza disaster must not be undone now in the midst of this global crisis.

On April 24, 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500.

The tragedy put a spotlight on substandard working conditions and low wages in the industry. In response to public outrage at the disaster, more than 200 global brands and retailers signed a legally binding agreement with Bangladesh and Global unions that achieved important improvements in workplace safety.

The current pandemic has created new threats to the lives and livelihoods of garment workers.

Brands and companies have cancelled orders down their supply chains leaving factories unable to pay workers' wages, even for work already completed. This is leaving millions of people without income and job security. Women are particularly hard hit by this crisis.

Eighty per cent of Bangladesh's four million garment workers are women. These workers have received poverty wages for years, barely making ends meet and have no financial savings to draw on. Without work, without income, with little access to health care and without any social safety net, they can easily slip into abject poverty and struggle to feed themselves and their families.

In response to the crisis, the Bangladesh government instituted a nationwide public holiday for an extended period. Millions of workers have returned to their villages with empty pockets, unable to collect unpaid wages or severance pay from closed factories. Government relief packages are being channeled through factories, but are proving difficult for workers to access. Some factories have remained open where workers continue to work in cramped conditions, without personal protections.

Canadian unions and civil society organizations stand in solidarity with Bangladesh garment sector workers and with garment sector workers in all countries, and urgently recommend the following:

Payment of orders and wages & worker health and safety

Canadian brands and retailers must honour their obligations to suppliers and workers by paying for orders that are completed or in production. They should ensure the payment of wages or severance to all workers who were employed at the onset of the crisis and ensure that workers who work during the pandemic can follow World Health Organization protection guidelines and reserve the right to refuse unsafe work.

Emergency relief for workers

Governments, including Canada, should support global emergency relief programs for garment sector workers set up with contributions from international financial institutions, donor governments as well as brands and retailers. These programs must maintain workers' employment and wages.

Mandatory Human Rights Due Diligence

The Government of Canada should legislate companies to respect human rights in their operations and supply chains. Such legislation should require companies to conduct due diligence on their human rights and environmental risks, take appropriate steps to prevent and mitigate such risks, and hold companies accountable in the courts if they abuse human rights.

Rebuilding a just economy after the pandemic

The industry as a whole must change the current pricing and business model moving forward. Canadian brands must commit to establish more sustainable and resilient supply chains that respect workers' rights and ensure suppliers pay workers living wages and social benefits.

Endorsed by:

Amnesty International Canada (English-speaking branch)

Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale

Canadian Council for International Co-operation

Canadian Jesuits International

Canadian Labour Congress

Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability

Canadian Union of Public Employees

Centre international de solidarité ouvrière (CISO)

Fairtrade Canada

Inter Pares

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives
Maquila Solidarity Network
MiningWatch Canada
Nobel Women's Initiative
Ontario Catholic No Sweat Network
Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
Oxfam Canada
Public Service Alliance of Canada
Social Justice Connection
The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
The United Church of Canada
United Food and Commercial Workers Canada
United Steelworkers
Workers United Canada Council
World March of Women Coordinating Committee