

Bangladeshi union leader calls for international action to save lives

Bangladeshi union activist Kalpona Akter has survived harassment, psychological torture, imprisonment and the atrocious working conditions that plague her country's garment industry.

With an intense media spotlight on the plight of Bangladesh's four million textile workers, Akter is now leading a campaign to pressure global retailers to sign onto the legally binding *Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh* that will hold them responsible for workers' safety.

On a recent North American tour stop in Vancouver, she talked with the *Guardian's* Brenda Whitehall about her quest for justice.

What do Canadian shoppers need to know about garment workers in Bangladesh?

I know Canadian consumers, when they shop, give their attention to the logos. But just behind the logo, there are human faces, and many hands that touched these clothes. One pair of pants is made by 40 or 50 workers.

I'm here to tell consumers that behind these logos are the human faces, and they are not doing good. They are getting poverty wages. They are working in death-trap factories. They don't have a union voice.

Consumers should be angry. Go to the companies, tell them to pay more so our workers can get a decent wage. Tell them to sign the Accord, which will stop future deaths in the factories. And tell them that workers should have the right to exercise their union rights.

I know when you hear this, it's gonna feel like, 'oh, I should not buy clothes made in Bangladesh.' No. Not buying is not the solution. So please buy the clothes! If you don't buy, that would be a boycott. A boycott would be suicide for these workers. We need the jobs, but we want jobs with dignity.

You are a labour educator and union organizer. Why did you get arrested in 2010?

Being supportive of workers' rights, we have to face many problems from the government and factory owners. It was extreme in 2010 when we were supporting the workers' voice to raise the minimum wage. First, the government cracked down on our organization. They revoked our registration so we would not have any legal entity to operate. But it didn't stop us.

I got arrested along with two co-workers, and we got 11 different criminal charges against us. They said we are the problem and the trouble-makers. We are instigating the unrest across the industrial belt.

They kept me in a place that is dirty, two feet by four feet, for seven days, and interrogated me for 18 hours in a row. I was in prison for a month, psychologically tortured. My colleague Babul Akhter, who got arrested with me, was severely beaten in police custody. Then, we were all released on

bail after a tremendous international campaign. But still, we are facing three of those criminal charges. Don't think that it was the end.

Just last year, one of my colleagues, my friend, one of the senior organizers of my centre – Aminul Islam – was kidnapped and brutally tortured and beaten to death just because he was organizing workers to join a union, just because he was supporting workers' voice to raise the minimum wage, just because he raised his voice when workers were fired illegally from the factory. Nobody has been arrested yet. That can happen to me too. That can happen to my colleagues. That can happen to my brother, who's now a union organizer.

Does international trade union support have an impact on the ground?

It does have a lot of impact because whatever improvements have happened until now have happened because of international pressure. Signing the Accord is from international pressure... The minimum wage rise is from international pressure. Workers raised their voices, but factory owners would not listen to them. Now, they see how much attention Bangladesh is getting because of the bad working conditions, so the factory owners got afraid and raised the minimum wage. Support helps, totally.

Is unionizing garment workers legal in Bangladesh?

Our law says workers can join unions, but it's voluntary. The problem is workers are not free to organize a union at the factory level. They'd love to join with the union. But if they raise their voices, they've been threatened, beaten, fired, falsely charged, and sometimes forced to leave their community because the community leaders are aligned with the factory owners. The factory owners' face and the government's face is one. We have 10 per cent of our parliament members who own a group of garment factories. Our legislator is our factory owner.

In our organization, we have over 80,000 solidarity members who pay their dues. They come often to learn



BRENDA WHITEHALL PHOTO

Kalpona Akter, Executive Director of Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and a former textile worker, urges unions and the public to put pressure on international clothing franchises to sign the *Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh* to help protect workers.

the law and their rights. There are four million garment workers, but only 30,000 to 35,000 are in a registered union. Not even one per cent.

Do Bangladeshi workers have a voice around safety concerns?

We don't have any health and safety systems at the factory. No committee. But the Accord, it has [a provision] that every factory will get an occupational health and safety committee, which will include workers and other stakeholders from the factory. They will meet periodically and will take a look around with building inspectors, tell them how safe or unsafe the factory is, and also what needs to be done.

I think there's nothing to explain – when you hear in the Tazreen factory fire where 112 workers died, and they died because the doors were locked. When you hear the Rana Plaza building collapsed with 5,000 workers and the death toll is 1,134 and that 1,000 of them have lifetime injuries. Since 2005, we lost over 2,000 workers in factory fires and building collapses. Factory fires are nothing new; the first disaster was in 1990. But still, the government and factory owners say, 'this is a wakeup call'. It's not a wakeup call. We are overwhelmed!

I worked in a sweatshop factory for seven years, starting at the age of 12, and I went through all these horrible conditions. I made \$6.50 a month for 450 hours of work. My factory caught fire and I got locked in the production floor along with my co-workers. So, nothing has changed in my working time in terms of wages, union rights and a safe working place.

Almost every factory doesn't have a fire and smoke-safe exit. These days, factory owners have stopped locking the door which is a very basic mini-

mum, but they haven't started doing all the necessary repairs and renovation which is needed. The factory owners haven't taken any responsibility for this. But the Accord will oversee the repair and renovation for each factory which is under the Accord.

You've risked your life to be part of a union. What would you say to Canadian workers about the importance of defending their right to unionize?

You know, when I was a kid, I can remember in my textbooks, there was something about how unity can keep you strong. There was a diagram of four sticks together and then one stick. One stick is given to one person, and he is told to try to break it. He just turned it and it broke within a second. Then he was given two. He broke them again. Then, he is given 10 and he tried a lot, but 10 together, he could not break it.

So, what I learned from that textbook – it was maybe third grade – that if you are united, nobody can break you. Nobody can break you into pieces. When I came to the union, what I learned is 'this is what was in my book!' My message to workers is that if you are with a union, you are strong. When we are strong, we can achieve a lot. We can do wonders. But alone, yourself, you will just lose. If you even [achieve] some benefit, it will be for a short time. It is not for a long time. So, if you really want long-term benefits, join a union.

At press time, about 116 apparel chains had signed the Accord. But many high-profile companies have not, including Walmart, Canadian Tire, Sears Canada, Lululemon, The Gap, and the Hudson's Bay Company.