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Remarks by Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity

The responsibility of corporations in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza building collapse

My activism in the garment industry is very personal. When I was 12 my father became disabled and could no longer work. My mom had to stay home to take care of my baby sister, so my 10-year old brother and I went to work. I sewed clothing for multinational corporations and made less than 10 dollars a month for 450 hours of work. We were cheated on our overtime wage: it was wage theft. We went on strike and we won. But then some strike organizers were fired. I learned that there are laws that are supposed to protect us and I started organizing my coworkers. Management harassed me all the time, and then fired me. I was only 16.

I went to work for a union and then I co-founded the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, a worker center that educates workers about their rights and conducts research. I became an organizer and never stopped. Not when workers were beaten and tear-gassed for demanding higher wages. Not when the government made it illegal for our organization to operate. Not even when factory owners brought falsified charges against me and put me in jail. Not even when my friend and union organizer Aminul Islam was disappeared, tortured, and murdered with all evidence pointing to the government's security forces.

The garment industry is a major employer in Bangladesh, with over 4 million workers, more than 80 percent of whom are women, mostly from poor, rural backgrounds. They make clothing for export, mostly to the U.S. and European brands and retailers who have flocked to the country to take advantage of rock-bottom wages. The minimum wage is only \$68 a month – and that's *after* the wage hike a month ago. Due to inflation, it's not much more than I used to earn.

Over 1,800 workers have been killed in factory fires and building collapses in our garment industry since 2005, in dozens of incidents. Since the Rana Plaza building collapse last April, there have been more fires – for example in October at Aswad, a Gap and Walmart supplier, where 7 workers were killed. Three years ago, 29 workers were killed in a fire at That's It Sportswear. Emergency exits were locked and other escape routes were cut off by the smoke. The factory made Old Navy clothing for Gap Inc. Soon after the fire, labor groups and unions started negotiating with Gap to put an end to the constantly climbing death toll in the garment industry. To our great dismay, Gap refused to join a program with unions and instead launched a corporate controlled program with Walmart that is accountable to no-one other than the companies themselves. Gap has been highlighting its financing, but that's a program of loans rather than direct financing of factory repairs. Even after my country has experienced the deadliest garment industry disaster the world has ever seen, they're not increasing the prices they pay to factories to include the cost of safety.

The program that we're calling on Gap to join –and which they've so far refused – is one of independent safety inspections with public reports; mandatory repairs and renovations to address all identified hazards; and a central role for workers and unions, including worker-led safety committees, in all factories and access to factories for unions to educate workers on how they can protect their rights and their safety, including their right to refuse dangerous work. The companies in the Accord commit to work with their suppliers to secure financing, maintain orders, and ensure renovations are completed to make factory buildings in Bangladesh safe.

The immediate causes of the incidents in Bangladesh are flammable materials piled in hallways or in illegal bottom floor storage rooms, overloaded electrical systems, or poorly constructed buildings. What has resulted in a high number of injured and dead workers in case after case has been the absent or completely inadequate fire suppression equipment, locked doors and barred windows, and overall poor emergency training and planning. But the problem isn't just with the poorly constructed buildings with weak foundations or the additional stories added illegally after original construction. It's

not just with open stairwells which act as chimneys rather than as escape routes, or the missing fire extinguishers or the lack of emergency lighting. All of those structural issues are of course critical and must be urgently addressed in hundreds if not in over a thousand factories in Bangladesh.

But there's another core part of the problem that must be solved. It's this: time and again when workers speak up with concern about safety risks, they aren't listened to. And in the moment of crisis, when the fire alarm goes off or a building starts to crack, workers' voices not only fall on deaf ears, but they are actively disregarded. Their right to refuse dangerous work is denied. When I say this, I'm thinking of the workers at Tazreen who were ordered to go back to their sewing machines when the fire alarm went off and then when it became really clear that it was a real fire, the exit doors were locked and the floor managers with the keys were nowhere to be found. When I talk about the right to refuse dangerous work, I'm thinking about how the Rana Plaza workers' rights were denied when they said they didn't want to go to work in a building with cracks in the walls but they were told that they must or they would lose their precious pay, and then they were even lied to and told the building had been repaired. This is why we fear that until Gap joins the Accord, and brings other American companies along with it, garment workers will continue to die on the job in my country.

The low wages that keep families in a cycle of poverty, the repression of union rights, and unsafe deathtrap factories where garment workers toil 12 hours a day – these issues are all connected. The solutions need to address ALL of these issues.

Global corporations must stop profiting off this low-road system. Companies can afford to pay more to factories for safety and for decent wages. The Worker Rights Consortium calculated that 10 cents more per t-shirt would pay for the safety repairs that the factories in my country need. My message to the brands is: We don't want you to leave our country. We want jobs, but they must be jobs with dignity.

Change can happen. It IS happening. But there's still a long way to go. Let me briefly share a few advances as well as the continuing challenges.

I'll start with the advances:

- 130 companies have signed onto the Accord. The Accord has a huge undertaking to inspect nearly 2,000 factories and support the formation of real safety committees. It's just getting started and it needs support from Gap and other companies so that it can be as effective as possible in saving lives.
- After three years, my worker center, the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, has our registration status back.
- Finally, this month, all the falsified criminal charges that I was facing since 2010 have been dropped. But some labor leaders continue to face charges.
- The government is processing union registrations again, with 60 new union registrations granted in the past 8 months.
- There's a new wage. It's more. But when you think about inflation and the cost of living, 68 dollars per month really is still a poverty wage.

So what are the challenges?

- Well, speaking of wages, how do we get to a living wage? How do we get to a fair minimum wage with increases tied to inflation? Global companies can't just sit by in the wage debate. They need to say they are willing to pay more to factories, and they need to start paying higher prices for higher wages NOW.
- Most of the workers and families affected by Tazreen and Rana Plaza are still waiting for full and fair compensation. Government, factory owners, and buyers all need to pay their share. Some companies are stepping forward. But every time I speak to the injured workers, my heart breaks. Since companies like Walmart and Children's Place aren't participating yet, workers can't afford hospital bills. Many of them can't work or pay for their children's education. I really don't understand. We're talking about global corporations that make millions or even billions. But none of the US companies whose products were made at Tazreen and Rana have given even a cent to the victims yet. It's absolutely unconscionable. People are dying, living in constant physical and psychological pain and these companies are coming up with the best excuses their money can buy from public relations consultants.

Even though I've been jailed, confined in the smallest space you can imagine and psychologically tortured at the hands of the state, I am still standing up today. My aspiration is putting human rights and labor rights at the center of trade and development and efforts to end poverty. It's listening to the voices of workers rather than silencing them. It's putting workers themselves at the center of decision making that affects them so that together we can build a future with more equality. The way that Gap can listen to workers is by joining the Accord. Thank you all for your attention and for your concern for justice and dignity for garment workers in my country.

Kalpona Akter is the executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), one of Bangladesh's most prominent labor rights advocacy organizations, and is herself a former child garment worker. BCWS is regarded by the international labor rights movement and by multinational apparel companies as among the most effective grassroots labor organizations in the country. Levi Strauss & Co. calls BCWS "a globally respected labor rights organization, which has played a vital role in documenting and working to remedy labor violations in the apparel industry in Bangladesh." Kalpona is an internationally-recognized labor rights advocate and has traveled widely to speak about the deplorable conditions that Bangladeshi garment workers face every day. She has been interviewed extensively by local and international media, particularly following the Tazreen fire and the Rana Plaza building collapse.