

Testimony before The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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The Solidarity Center wants to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for this opportunity to talk about the state of labor rights in Bangladesh today. I've been involved with workers' rights in Bangladesh for the past fifteen years, and the Solidarity Center has long been engaged with all stakeholders – workers, employers, and the government – to improve labor rights in the country. If we look back over the past twenty years, we can see that there has been some incremental progress over that time. An important example would be the reduction of child labor in the Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector. However, according to Bangladesh's own Bureau of Statistics, there are at least seven million child laborers in the country, including in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, domestic service, and hotels and restaurants. In two Solidarity Center reports issued in 2008 and 2012, child labor and other labor rights abuses persist in the shrimp and seafood industry. In the bigger picture, long-standing, persistent, and broad labor rights abuses continue across many industries, and in some cases, have accelerated in the past three years. This is true even with the return of civilian government.

For example, over the past three years hundreds of garment workers have been injured, and some killed, in clashes with police while demonstrating or on strike for labor rights, most often higher wages. Several prominent labor activists have been arrested and taken to trial on trumped-up charges associated with these demonstrations.

Why do these strikes take place? The immediate reason is the objective conditions under which Bangladeshi workers in all sectors toil are among the lowest (in terms of wages) and most dangerous (in terms of safety and health) in all of Asia.

But the broader and more pervasive context for these strikes and violence is workers' lack of basic freedom of association to organize their own unions. Trade unions in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector have been refused legitimate registration, suppressed, their leaders fired, and in some cases destroyed by management with the government's acquiescence. Because their attempts to organize have been thwarted, workers have few or no channels or mechanisms to voice their grievances and negotiate with management to improve their rights and working conditions. As recently as last week U.S. Ambassador Dan Mozena was quoted in the Dhaka press as saying, "US companies want to buy products from Bangladesh but they are very concerned about the labour issues, safety at [the] workplace and freedom of association in Bangladesh." This represents a fundamental failing of the Government of Bangladesh to enforce its own labor laws and its commitments as a member of the International Labor Organization.

The most notorious of the recent examples of violence against labor activists came with the murder in early April of Aminul Islam, an organizer for the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF). Aminul trained, recruited and organized workers in the RMG sector and the export processing zones (EPZs). Due to his activities, Aminul was threatened by gangsters working for garment factory owners, was continuously under police surveillance, and was detained and beaten by the National Security Intelligence in June 2010. False criminal charges were filed against Aminul along with his colleagues in BGIWF and the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) for supposedly causing unrest during the minimum wage campaign by garment workers during the summer of 2010.

The investigation of Aminul's case by the Bangladesh authorities continues, but observers both in Bangladesh and internationally are very concerned that no credible, transparent and accountable investigation will actually take place.

What all these events demonstrate, and the Aminul case in particular, is that the broader application of freedom of association in Bangladesh is actively and daily destroyed by employers and willfully abetted by the Government of Bangladesh.

While the AFL-CIO in its GSP submissions has acknowledged some progress in the past in the EPZs, and originally in the shrimp sector, unfortunately the picture today is one of wholesale backsliding in both the EPZs and the shrimp sector. Neither employers nor the government has taken any real action and there has been absolutely no progress in the largest sector, ready-made garments. Continuing worker protest and violence against demonstrators up to today amply demonstrates this.

What can and should happen presently to improve the labor rights picture in Bangladesh?

First, pressure and advocacy from both Bangladeshi and international labor and human rights organizations must continue across a broad range to press for real freedom of association in Bangladesh.

Secondly, the Bangladesh business community must recognize that its actions to repress workers have consequences, not only in terms of impoverishing its own workforce, but also injuring the industry's reputation in the eyes of other governments and the Western brands upon which they depend for business. The brands have a key role to play in this regard.

Third, the Bangladesh government should continue to be held to task to live up to its international ILO commitments, and if it does not do so, should face more punitive actions by the ILO's Governing Body.

Fourth, the AFL-CIO's GSP petition (which I ask to be submitted for the record) provides a litany of those issues that the Government of Bangladesh and employers need to address, and the U.S. Trade Representative should keep the pressure on for the Government of

Bangladesh to seriously address and remedy those issues, otherwise such trade benefits that Bangladesh otherwise currently enjoys, should be terminated.

The Bangladesh government has choices about development policy and how to best bring its people out of poverty. The strikes, violence, and continuing worker dissatisfaction with the status quo demonstrate that the low-wage, low-rights model is not its best option—and U.S. government, ILO, and NGO pressure can help the government to change course and support its workers as they attempt to better their own lives.

Thank you.