

# Activists Stage 'Block the Boat' Protest Against Ship Bearing Walmart Goods From Bangladesh

Wednesday 19 December 2012, by [EIDELSON Josh](#) (Date first published: 18 December 2012).

Elizabeth, NJ—About sixty activists gathered early this morning outside the Port of Newark to protest the arrival of a ship they said carried Walmart goods from Bangladesh. Hoisting cardboard tombstones spelling out Walmart's name, and garments emblazoned with the names of workers who died in the New York City Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the crowd declared the retail giant culpable for the deaths of 112 workers in a similar fire last month in Bangladesh. Chants included, "One, two three four, don't let that boat come ashore! Five, six, seven, eight, don't touch that shit, don't move that freight!"

"The supply chain needs to change..." Alliance for a Greater New York (ALIGN) organizer Martiza Silva-Farrell told the crowd. "This is a start."

Activists said they originally gathered closer to the dock in hopes of more directly confronting the incoming ship and convincing some dock workers to refuse to unload its goods, but agreed—after police threatened arrests—to move to a space along a nearby highway. While some had expected that the action, promoted as "Block the Boat," would include civil disobedience, it ended around 9 am without arrests.

Photos published by *The Nation* last month revealed the presence of Walmart-branded apparel at the Tazreen Factory where the deadly fire took place [1]. Walmart has maintained that it had terminated its relationship with Tazreen prior to the fire, that its goods were being produced there because of a rogue supplier which disregarded the retailer's instructions, and that it promotes fire safety. Reports by Bloomberg and *The New York Times* [2] this month revealed that multiple Walmart suppliers were active in the factory as recently as this year, and that Walmart rejected a 2011 proposal under which retailers would have contributed to covering the costs of safety improvements in Bangladesh factories. Walmart did not respond to a request for comment Monday night.

Some of this morning's activists were locals, including Cynthia Mellon, who's involved in efforts to keep a Walmart store out of Newark. "That kind of store has no place inside of an old city that's trying to revitalize itself," said Mellon, an organizer with the local Ironbound Community Corporation. Many came from New York City on buses sponsored by the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition. A handful drove up from Maryland, including Leon Swain, who said he made the trip because "you don't want a boat to come here to bring such tragedy."

"There are sweatshop issues in [Walmart's] retail stores and its warehouses here in the US," said Northeastern University junior Claire Lewis, "as well as quite clearly in its factories overseas." Lewis is a member of the national coordinating committee of United Students Against Sweatshops.

Many workers at the Port of Newark are members of Local 1233 of the International Longshoremen Association, whose union contract expires in under a month. "We're out here also to support them and get some solidarity," said Strike Debt activist Sean McAlpin. "If they could block that ship, it

might show the shipping owners also how much power they have.” While the activists said their efforts to convince ILA members to refuse to unload the cargo were aborted when the police forced them to relocate, one of the activists passed along a supportive message she said she’d received from an ILA member.

Reached by phone, ILA Local 1233 Secretary-Treasurer Buddy Smith told *The Nation* he was not aware of the demonstration. “This is the first I’m hearing about it,” said Smith. A representative of the ILA international union said that officials were in contract negotiations and would not be able to comment until later in the day.

At the close of the rally, activists gathered to read a series of statements of support from labor groups, including the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and the Retail Action Project. In an address to the crowd, Carol Gay, the president of the New Jersey Industrial Union Council, called Walmart “corrupt,” “rotten for workers,” and “not good neighbors.” A staffer from the labor federation Change to Win read a statement from Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter, two leaders of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. “By acting in solidarity with our workers across the world,” the statement said, “you are not only demonstrating that we share a common struggle, but also helping to ensure that the nearly 120 Bangladeshi workers who were needlessly killed are not forgotten.”

Sundrop Carter, a member of the Occupy Wall Street working group 99 Pickets, said that the more workers’ strikes and Walmart’s scandals “are kept in the public light, the more change is going to happen. There’s just so much momentum.”

This morning’s action came the same day as the publication of a *New York Times* investigation sharing new details of Walmart’s international bribery scandal, and a new report [3] from the International Labor Rights Federation calling for Walmart and other major apparel companies to act to avert future fires in South Asia by paying for safety improvements, sharing information about safety hazards and respecting workers’ organizing rights. The ILRF report opens with an interview with Lovely, a former garment worker who suffered serious injuries in a 2006 factory fire in Bangladesh. “My family still work in the factory...” Lovely, who was 11 years old at the time of the fire, told ILRF. “For all those who are working in the factory, on behalf of them, I want to say, please keep the factory a safe place to work. I don’t want to see anyone else like me.”

## **Josh Eidelson**

*Read George Zornick’s investigation on how Walmart has made the gun used in the Sandy Brook shooting the most popular assault weapon in America.* Available on ESSF (article 27334)à, [How Walmart Helped Make Newtown Shooter’s AR-15 the Most Popular Assault Weapon in America](#)

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## **P.S.**

\* December 18, 2012 - 11:11 AM ET:  
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/171823/activists-stage-block-boat-protest-against-ship-bearing-walmart-goods-bangladesh?rel=emailNation#>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.thenation.com/blog/171451/photos-show-walmart-apparel-site-deadly-factory-fire-bangladesh>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 27299), [From “The Nation”: Documents Undermine Walmart Account on Deadly Bangladesh Fire](#).

[3] [http://laborrights.org/sites/default/files/publications-and-resources/Deadly\\_Secrets.pdf](http://laborrights.org/sites/default/files/publications-and-resources/Deadly_Secrets.pdf)