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COMMENT

# After the Rana Plaza Disaster in Bangladesh: What we can do for the living

Tuesday 21 May 2013, by [BOYER Sandy](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2013).

**Sandy Boyer explains why corporate codes of conduct won't protect workers in low-wage manufacturing centers—and what they need to protect themselves.**

*"Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!"*  
— Mother Jones

NOW THAT the death toll among garment workers in the building collapse in Bangladesh has reached more than 1,100, it's time to begin protecting the living from future "accidents" and from the grinding poverty of starvation wages. Already, as this article was being written, at least two workers were killed in a roof collapse at a sneaker factory in Cambodia.

When multinational corporations get caught in a truly horrific public relations disaster like the death of the workers in Bangladesh, the standard response is to announce that they are signing on to a code of conduct to ensure that it will never happen again.

These codes of conduct usually have two things in common: They're ineffective, and they do little or nothing to empower workers.

Sure enough, within weeks of the disaster in Bangladesh, a group of multinational corporations including Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger and Izod, announced a new code of conduct that they claim will promote building safety through independent factory inspections. They didn't even pretend to provide for living wages, safe working conditions or the right to organize unions.

The reality is that in Bangladesh, as Steven Greenhouse and Jim Yardley wrote in *The New York Times*, "Not only are wages the lowest in the world, but labor unions, which face impediments in organizing, are largely absent in garment factories. Some workers who have tried to organize unions have been dismissed or harassed."

But even this new toothless code was too much for Gap and Wal-Mart, which sold jeans manufactured in the building that collapsed. Gap said it was afraid that U.S. companies could be sued if workers died in a factory fire or building collapse.

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THERE ARE dozens of these codes of conduct. In her book, *Monitoring Sweatshops*, Jill Eshenshade quotes Enriqueta Soto, a garment worker who worked for a Los Angeles company covered by one of these codes:

*"I have worked in the garment industry for 17 years. My experience in the industry has been very difficult. In most of the shops, minimum wage is not guaranteed. Overtime is not paid. Holidays are not paid. There is no paid vacation. We have no medical insurance.*

My experience [is that] where they had a monitoring system, the conditions...were the same. We couldn't complain to the people who were doing the monitoring...When one of my co-workers decided to speak to the manufacturers, when she decided to speak up, they simply decided to punish us, so they removed the work. So 400 of us lost our jobs. They shut down the plant."

The Fair Labor Association (FLA) sponsors the best-known corporate code of conduct. Its code comes with an impeccable corporate pedigree since it was created by multinational garment companies in conjunction with then-President Bill Clinton. The FLA is financed by the same corporations it is supposed to monitor, including Nike, Reebok and Adidas.

As soon as they sign on to the FLA code, companies can sew a label into their clothing certifying that it was made under fair conditions. This is not only good advertising, but there is very little risk they will be caught violating the code. Only 10 percent of a company's factories are inspected every year, and the companies get to choose their own monitors. Since a company knows in advance which factories will be inspected, they have to be extraordinarily stupid or lazy to get caught.

Although the code of conduct includes "recognition of worker rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining" the FLA consistently protects companies against workers:

— The Primo factory in El Salvador, a contractor for FLA member Eddie Bauer, fired and blacklisted union members so no other company would hire them.

— Workers at the Mexican Kukdong factory, which produces shoes for Nike, were beaten by riot police for demanding their rights. Nike called Kukdong a model factory.

— Hundreds of workers at the PT Victoria factory in Indonesia lost their jobs after working several 24-hour shifts to finish orders for Eddie Bauer. The FLA accredited Eddie Bauer's labor standards despite the fact that the workers were owed over \$1 million

— Another FLA subscriber, Gildan Activewear, illegally fired dozens of workers who tried to organize a union. This didn't keep FLA from keeping Gildan on as a full member.

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THE UNITED Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) developed the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) as an alternative to these pro-corporate code of conduct monitors. USAS brings the dynamism of the student movements to the social responsibility campaigns, with sit-ins, public debates and demonstrations, and by bringing actual sweatshop workers to speak on campus.

The WRC requires corporations that make clothing for colleges and universities to abide by a code that includes paying a living wage, protection of women's rights, public disclosure, independent monitoring and—perhaps most important of all—the right to organize unions.

Participating universities only buy garments from manufacturers that adhere to this code. Corporations that violate the code can lose their licensing agreements and, with it, access to the lucrative business of selling clothing emblazoned with a college name and logo.

Unlike the Fair Labor Association, the WRC monitors 30 percent of all the factories covered by its code, and every factory in a country where basic workers' rights are denied. Local labor, human

rights and religious groups, not the companies, decide which factories to inspect. When they interview workers, it is in a location outside the factory chosen by the workers themselves. This guarantees that the employers can't interfere with the monitoring.

The importance of USAS and the WRC go beyond the number of workers covered under their code, who make clothing for the relatively small college market. These groups are proving that corporations can be forced to pay living wages and provide safe working conditions, rather than operate sweatshops. Above all, by insisting on the right to organize unions, they are empowering workers themselves to win the changes they need.

Workers don't need independent monitors to identify the problems in their shops. The garment workers who died in the building collapse in Bangladesh knew the structure was dangerous—they only entered the building after employers threatened to cut their wages. Workers don't need statisticians to compute a living wage—they know the reality every day when they try to feed their families.

All workers need is the power to make positive change. This starts with union recognition and collective bargaining.

International student and union allies can help workers dramatically improve their lives by fighting for labor rights around the world. This is what makes United Students Against Sweatshops and the Workers Rights Consortium the hope of the future.

**Sandy Boyer**

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\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/05/21/what-we-can-do-for-the-living>