

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY 2023

# Making Bangladeshi workers safe for capitalism

What has changed since the Rana Plaza collapse 10 years ago?



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On April 6, 2023, the High Court granted bail to Sohel Rana, the owner of the building whose collapse caused one of the deadliest industrial disasters in history. The news came just over two weeks before the 10th anniversary of that day, reminding us again that history repeats itself, “first as tragedy, second as farce.” The bail was later halted, but the message was clear, further reinforced by the BGMEA’s recent call for an Industrial Police unit in the DMP area and the newly formed wage board announced just days later. None of the labour organisations whose relentless calls for a Tk 25,000 minimum wage finally resulted in a new board were consulted, and the labour representative chosen has a very predictable affiliation.

All of this is par for the course, but it does provide a break from the steady dose of self-congratulatory optimism that buyers, factory owners, and the state have been pouring into the industry’s “image” in recent years. The narrative is simple: against all odds, our ready-made garment (RMG) industry is not only thriving (aiming for \$100 billion exports by 2030), it has also – through the joint efforts of these three parties – made life better and safer for the industry’s workers. Exit Rana Plaza, enter happy workers and “green” factories. All of this begs the question: “safer” how, from what, and to what end?

Undoubtedly, it is the brands/buyers that have benefited the most from this celebratory narrative. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse, these brands, in concert with transnational bodies like the International Labour Organization (ILO), rolled out an

elaborate system of fire and building safety codes. Together, the EU-led Accord and US-led Alliance, along with other transnational agreements, made up a multi-level, multi-party “compliance” and monitoring regime (Rahman, *The Daily Star*, April 21, 2016), which alongside the championing of unionisation has been hailed as ushering a new age of worker safety.

Yet, matters are not that simple, as Dina Siddiqi has repeatedly pointed out. Accord Alliance became one component in a pre-existing, audit-based global monitoring regime, accountable to no one, functioning primarily to shield Western brands from liability (LeBaron et al., 2017), depoliticising the question of workers’ safety and placing the burden on “corrupt” Third World national governments and their “ruthless” industrialists, all while continuing to enable the very same “scandalous” conditions (Siddiqi, *HimalSouthasian*, January 11, 2022). After all, Rana Plaza would not have claimed any lives if the garment workers and only the workers had not been coerced to enter a building that they knew could collapse at any moment. They were killed just as much by production targets as by falling beams.

The most stunning manifestation of this indifference came with the billion-dollar order cancellations we saw during the pandemic. These cancellations also provided our industrialists with an opportunity to use the workers’ plight as a bargaining chip, a concern that disappears whenever it comes to unpaid wages, mandatory overtime, denied

leave, abuse, harassment, and the disciplining of “troublemakers.” We do see it, however, in the celebrations of all that factory owners apparently do for workers, including supporting some of them in higher education. As Taslima Akhter has pointed out, such individual success stories simply distract from the fact that the vast majority of workers are still compelled

is to the Bangladeshi state that our workers should have been able to turn to. Yet, RMG export dependence has meant a total identification of “national interest” with the industry’s profit margin, and it doesn’t help that so much of our political class is directly tied to the industry. No wonder, then, that the right of the “small” factory owner to do business trumps the right

to discipline workers – all of this leaves little room for doubt.

Three years ago, my colleague Seuty Sabur and I wrote about the total abandonment by the state that workers faced during the time of lockdowns (*The Daily Star*, April 4, 2020) – an acute manifestation of a more general phenomenon. The fiction of “national wealth” – made possible

skyrocketing prices) and the limits/temptations of an NGO-ised and ineffective trade unionism (Siddiqi, *The Daily Star*, April 21, 2017). The very structure of supply chain capitalism makes collective action at the site of production toothless, as there is always another factory – and indeed another country – to source from. Under these conditions, factory owners and the state have managed, after years of vehemently opposing unionisation, to transform the registered union into an instrument of labour discipline. Small wonder, then, that garment workers have had the most success through militancy outside of them (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019).

If supply chain capitalism neutralises union action, we may have better luck, as Vijay Prashad (2015) has long argued, with struggles at the sites of living/consumption instead. At the very least, land reform and housing, social welfare, public education and healthcare, utilities, energy and transport, etc are all sites where garment workers’ struggles can become interlinked with those of others, and through which workers’ lives might become a little less precarious, giving them greater bargaining power on the factory floor.

None of this can happen, however, without directly engaging the state. If fast fashion must dominate the “national interest,” then at the very least we must compel the state apparatuses to play a truly mediating role on behalf of “the nation.” Are there alternatives to RMG export dependence? Perhaps, or perhaps not, but it does not seem that anyone in the corridors of power is concerned with even considering the question; we must make them. The state remains the only party in the triumvirate over which ordinary citizens, including garment workers, have even theoretical control. Turning that theoretical control into an actual one can make the difference between mere factory “compliance” and workers actually living full and dignified lives.



**Rana Plaza would not have claimed any lives if RMG workers like Poly Akhter had not been coerced to enter a building that they knew could collapse at any moment.**  
PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

to sacrifice their education, health, and dignity on a daily basis (*The Daily Star Bangla*, January 11, 2023). Record-breaking sales also tend to turn into doom-and-gloom narratives whenever workers come knocking on the factory doors for liveable wages. The difference between individualised charity and decent wages, of course, is that the latter can potentially reduce the precarity that ensures the disposability/exploitability of the worker in the first place. Make workers safer, yes, but not too much.

Trapped between foreign capital and our *comprador* bourgeoisie, it

of workers to have a liveable wage, and that both the law and law enforcement behave as the industry’s private service. The tortuous legal processes that have kept the Rana Plaza collapse, Tazreen fire, and other cases permanently suspended (Mustafa, *Prothom Alo*, April 23, 2023), the total lack of legal compensation for the victims of any of these cases, the legal impediments erected to ensure that only owner- and state-friendly unions get to register and operate (Karmakar, *Prothom Alo*, May 1, 2021), and the ease with which law enforcement and political muscle is leased out to factory owners eager

because of commodity production and the fact that one taka is as good as any other – makes it easy enough to believe that the unprecedented levels of wealth flooding Bangladesh today is *everyone’s* wealth, and we can forget for the moment the gulf between those who command that wealth and those who do not. It is not an accident that the latter are precisely those who are compelled to pour their lives into producing that very prosperity.

What, then, is to be done? Our garment workers face a double bind today, trapped between growing precarity (rural dispossession,

## Time to prioritise social justice



**Gilbert F Houngbo**  
is the director-general of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

**GILBERT F HOUNGBO**

May 1 is widely known as International Labour Day, a day when we celebrate the contribution of workers worldwide. It is a moment for pride, celebration, and hope.

After three years of the Covid-19 crisis, followed by inflation, conflict, and food and fuel supply shocks, we badly need this. But the promises of renewal made during the pandemic, of “building back better,” have so far not been delivered for the great majority of workers worldwide.

Globally, real wages have fallen, poverty is rising, and inequality seems more entrenched than ever.

Enterprises have been hard-hit. Many could not cope with the cumulative effects of recent unexpected events. Small and micro-enterprises were particularly affected, and many have ceased operations.

People feel that the sacrifices they made to get through Covid-19 have not been recognised, let alone rewarded. Their voices are not being heard clearly enough. This, combined with a perceived lack of opportunities, has created a disturbing level of mistrust.

It doesn’t have to be like this. We are still the masters of our fate. But if we are to shape a new, more stable, and equitable world, we must choose a different path – one that prioritises social justice.

I believe this is not only doable, but essential for a sustainable and stable future. So, how do we get there?

First and foremost, our policies and actions must be human-centred, to allow people to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, economic security, and equal opportunity. This approach is not new, it was set out and agreed in the aftermath of World War II, when the ILO’s international membership signed the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia.

This visionary document set out guiding principles for our economic and social systems – that they should not be turned exclusively to hitting specific growth rates or other statistical targets, but to address human needs and aspirations. This means focusing on



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inequality, poverty alleviation, and core social protection. The most effective way to do this is by providing quality jobs so that people can support themselves and build their own futures – “Decent Work for All,” as Sustainable Development Goal 8 terms it.

It means realistically addressing the long-term structural transformations of our time; ensuring that new technology creates and supports employment; proactively facing the challenges of climate change and ensuring we offer the jobs, skills training and transition support necessary for workers and businesses to benefit from the new low-carbon era; and treating demographic changes as a “dividend” rather than a problem, with supporting action on skills, migration and social protection, to create more cohesive and resilient societies.

We also need to reassess and refashion the architecture of our social and economic systems, so that they support this change of course towards social justice, rather

than continuing to channel us into a policy “doom loop” of inequality and instability. We must reinvigorate labour institutions and organisations so that social dialogue is effective and vigorous. We must review laws and regulations affecting the world of work, so that they are relevant and up-to-date and able to protect workers and support sustainable businesses.

To make all this happen, we need to recommit to international cooperation and solidarity. We must enhance our efforts and create greater policy coherence, particularly within the multilateral system, as the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres calls it. This is why we need a Global Coalition for Social Justice. This coalition will create a platform to bring together a broad range of international bodies and stakeholders. It will position social justice as the keystone of the global recovery, so that it is prioritised in national, regional and global policies and actions. In sum, it will ensure that our future is human-centred. We have the chance to reshape the world we live in – economically, socially, and environmentally. Let us take this opportunity and move forward to build the equitable and resilient societies that can underpin lasting peace and social justice.

**রাঙ্গামাটি বিজ্ঞান ও প্রযুক্তি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়**  
বাগড়াবিল, রাঙ্গামাটি-৪৫০০  
ওয়েবসাইট: [rmstu.edu.bd](http://rmstu.edu.bd); ই-মেইল: [contact@rmstu.edu.bd](mailto:contact@rmstu.edu.bd)  
সূত্র নং: রাবিপ্রবি/প্রকিউরমেন্ট/পাবকোমপার/সরঞ্জামাদি/২০২২/২২৯; তারিখ: ৩০/০৪/২০২৩খ্রিঃ

**Invitation for Tender**  
**Rangamati Science and Technology University**

1. Ministry/Division	Ministry of Education.
2. Agency	University Grants Commission of Bangladesh.
3. Procuring entity name	Rangamati Science and Technology University.
4. Procuring entity district	Rangamati.
5. Invitation for	Goods.
<b>KEY INFORMATION</b>	
6. Procurement method	Open Tender Method (OTM).
7. Budget and source of fund	GoB.
<b>PARTICULAR INFORMATION</b>	
8. Tender approval date	রাবিপ্রবি/প্রকিউরমেন্ট/পাবকোমপার/সরঞ্জামাদি/২০২২/২২৯; তারিখ: ৩০/০৪/২০২৩খ্রিঃ
9. Tender Package No.	OTM.
10. Tender publication date	01/05/2023
11. Tender last collection date	15/05/2023 (office hours).
12. Tender closing date and time	16/05/2023; 12:00pm.
13. Tender opening date and time	16/05/2023; 12:30pm.
14. Name & address of the offices	Procurement Department, Administrative Building-2, Rangamati Science and Technology University, Jhagrabil, Rangamati-4500.
Collection of tender document	Procurement Department, Administrative Building-2, Rangamati Science and Technology University, Jhagrabil, Rangamati-4500.
Receiving tender document	Procurement Department, Administrative Building-2, Rangamati Science and Technology University, Jhagrabil, Rangamati-4500.
15. Place of opening tender	Procurement Department, Administrative Building-2, Rangamati Science and Technology University, Jhagrabil, Rangamati-4500.
16. Price of tender document	500.00/- (five hundred Taka only).
<b>INFORMATION FOR TENDERER</b>	
17. Brief eligibility and qualification of tender	a) Updated trade license, b) TIN certificate, c) VAT registration certificate, d) Bank solvency certificate e) The minimum specific experience as Supplier in supply of Research Equipment of at least 02 (two) contract successfully completed within the last 05 (five) years, with a value of at least Tk. 10 lac, f) The amount of the Tender Security shall be Tk. 20,000/- (twenty thousand) Taka in favour of Vice-Chancellor, Rangamati Science and Technology University, Rangamati. and g) Experience in relevant work and other qualifications as mentioned in tender documents/schedule.
18. Brief description of works	“Purchase of Research Equipment for Rangamati Science and Technology University, Rangamati”.
<b>PROCUREMENT ENTITY DETAILS</b>	
19. Name of official inviting tender	Abdul Gafur.
20. Designation of official inviting tender	Assistant Director (P&D).
21. Address of official inviting tender	Rangamati Science and Technology University, Jhagrabil, Rangamati-4500.
22. Contact details of official inviting tender	Phone: 01830161369
23. Special instruction	1. The procuring entity preserves the right to reject all tenders or annul tender proceeding. 2. If it is not possible to open the tender on the schedule date for any unavoidable circumstance, the same will be opened on the next working day at the same time and same venue.

Abdul Gafur  
Assistant Director (P&D)  
Rangamati Science and Technology University  
GD-751