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Sweatshops: where corporate greed and human misery meet

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

Corporate greed and human misery often meet in the workplace. Nowhere else is that more true than in sweatshops.

Taking advantage of extremely poor workers in the developing world, many wealthy companies from economically developed nations -- like Wal-Mart -- demand employees work at a fast pace for long hours in deplorable conditions with no benefits, all for the sake of corporate profit.

And worse yet, workers often experience serious injury and death.

Thus was the case when the illegally constructed Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh that collapsed April 24, killing more than 1,000 people.

This dilapidated building housed five factories that produced garments for the United States, Canada and Europe.

With hundreds of additional workers still missing, this disaster is the worst in the history of the garment industry, according to Charles Kernaghan, director of the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights (IGLHR).

According to IGLHR, a sweatshop employee named Jannat, who worked for New Wave Style, said she and other workers refused to enter the building after they discovered large cracks in the factory walls. But "managers at the factories threatened us saying they would withhold our [month's] wages if we did not agree to work."

The owner of the Rana Plaza factory building "along with gang members holding sticks were standing in front of the main entrance gate threatening that they would beat us with sticks and break our bones if we didn't work that morning. We were frightened and had no choice but to go in to work," Jannat said.

After working for one hour, the power went off, Jannat said. "As soon as the generator was switched on the building started to vibrate and shake ... there was a huge bang."

The building then collapsed, trapping Jannat. Fortunately, she was rescued. But many others were not so fortunate.

Had strong legislation protecting workers' basic rights been in place in industrialized nations -- especially in the United States -- this tragedy would have been avoided.

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Corporations benefit greatly from intellectual property and copyright laws. It's long overdue that workers laboring in miserable conditions receive the same legal protection.

Let's work together to ensure they get it!

Please email and call your U.S. senators and House representative to urge them to reintroduce and support the Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act, which, according to Kernaghan, would provide transparent corporate disclosure, enabling labor rights organizations to inspect factories producing products for wealthy retailers. The phone number for the Capitol switchboard is 202-224-3121.

If reintroduced and passed by Congress, this bill would also prohibit the import, export or sale of products that violate the International Labor Organization's standards, which prohibit child labor, guarantee workers' rights to safe working conditions and collective bargaining, and protection against forced labor.

Please also consider giving a donation to help Bangladeshi victims and their families.

Lamenting over the Bangladesh factory tragedy, Pope Francis passionately condemned the injustice of their \$50 a month salary, saying, "This was the payment of these people who have died. And this is called 'slave labor.' "

He added, "Not paying a just [wage], not providing work, focusing exclusively on the balance books, on financial statements, only looking at making personal profit. That goes against God!"

Let's build an economic system that does not go against God. Passing the Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act would be a giant step in that direction.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about the principles of Catholic social teaching. His email address is tmag@zoominternet.net.]

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