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Riots Contra Global Capital: Globalization and the Bangladeshi Workers' Movement

ADAM BENJAMIN*

“Fast fashion” and “globalization,” often mentioned in the same sentence, make their way to the headlines fairly frequently. While the conditions of low-wage garment workers are a subject of criticism for clothing brands, few know of the active workers’ movement in Bangladesh to better them. This movement, often unorganized and violent, takes place against the backdrop of urban growth, rapid industrialization, and factory disaster. Riots and piecemeal wage negotiations often go hand in hand in Bangladesh, as the pressures of the world economy exert themselves on Bangladesh’s fragile and unstable garment industry. This paper examines the history and developments of these garment riots, with an added emphasis on urban growth and economic crisis. While examining the riots as responses to Bangladeshi circumstances, it places these riots in the wider context of neo-liberal globalization and the pauperization of industrial workers across the world. With this at hand, the paper then analyzes various global responses to these working conditions and the infamous Rana Plaza Disaster.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization today is not a contentious prospect but a contentious reality. While humanity has maintained a global reach for millennia, never before has it been unified under a dominant mode of production. Since making its triumph in the 1850s, capitalism has established itself as a penetrative and unavoidable force in the global economy.¹ Unceasing in its growth, capitalism is now the shared condition of the human community. The degree to which different sectors of the human community experience capitalism varies, however, depending on their place in peripheral markets to fully integrated wage-labor economies. Areas now entirely subsumed into the global marketplace embodied an entirely different socioeconomic arrangement thirty years before. This rapid industrialization of parts of the Global South has created a world parallel to the globalized experience in the West, one in which workers frequently perform labor for low wages and produce largely for western countries.

Paradigmatic of this dark side of globalization, Bangladesh frequently emerges at the center of conversations concerning global labor malpractice and abuse. After the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse resulted in 1,134 deaths, becoming one of the largest industrial disasters in history, the general public began to question the ethics of the global fashion industry, a staple of globalization’s triumph.² Though astounding growth rates have catapulted Bangladesh’s place in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector to second in the world only to China, this rapid industrialization has come with the cost of inhumane working conditions, repression, abuse, and periodic disaster, among

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¹Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*, “Chapter 2: Capital” (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

²“The Rana Plaza Accident and Its Aftermath,” International Labor Organization, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang-en/index.htm.

other problems.³ The creation of a mass semi-proletarianized workforce, trapped in abhorrent working conditions, has generated one of the fiercest and most violent workers' movements in the modern era.

While the Bangladeshi RMG workers' movement lacks the explicit verbal anti-globalization message found in Chiapas or Seattle in the late 1990s, it is, in practice, a direct response to the structural issues of *globalized* production. Labor's confrontation with global capital in Bangladesh is mediated by an intricate and layered network of subcontractors and local industrialists. Thus, the sociopolitical and economic message of the RMG workers' movement is to be found in the movement's internal dynamics as a response to globalized production. The goal of this paper is therefore to trace the history of Bangladesh's industrialization and, more specifically, labor's response to it. This analysis includes both the circumstances the labor movement finds itself in (the form) and the means by which labor responds to them (content).

In 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, and to the present day there have been repeated labor revolts involving general strikes, blockades, factory burnings, and riots. In Bangladesh, strikes, *hartals*, and riots respond specifically to poor safety standards, low wages, and poor living conditions, but also more generally to the structural immiseration imposed by the needs of global capital and generated by globalized production. The frequency of these revolts, coupled with repeated industrial disasters, points to a situation that has not improved despite the interventions of global labor and human rights organizations. The labor situation in Bangladesh has remained one of a poorly employed, superfluous, disposable, and marginalized population responding to its conditions through general strikes, riots, and factory burnings. These tactics are means of circumventing structurally imposed limitations, including but not limited to legal measures taken by the state to curtail the labor movement. Industrialists, pressured to keep wages low to stabilize investment incentive and increase profit margins, are consistently forced to informalize production and lengthen the working day. The workers' response to these globalized conditions, including their tactics and outreach, as well as their general living and working conditions, will be at the forefront of this analysis.

Yet while the Bangladeshi labor movement clearly responds to its historically specific circumstances, the riots and strikes seen within the country are also part of a wider and more generalized trend of marginalized and pauperized populations responding to conditions of economic downturn and/or immiseration, often exacerbated by specific situational tensions. Similar conditions can be seen in the US in Ferguson and Baltimore, China, Greece, London, and Vietnam, all of which contain populations essentially superfluous to the industrial economy. The creation of these surplus populations is largely intertwined with the rise of neoliberal globalization, and I will view Bangladesh within this context.

Also common to neoliberal globalization is the movement from the country to the city, which has for a large part given rise to the semi-proletarianized population in Bangladesh. Dhaka and its industrial suburbs have been the destination of this mass migration and the sole terrain of the RMG movement. The connection between the ever-expanding slums and industry are a primary factor in the Bangladeshi situation, as the slums continue to grow and industry pulls from their inhabitants as their primary labor source. State operations to police these slums are critical in their attempts to discipline this expanding, pauperized, and thus obstreperous population. Analysis of industrial transformation must take into account the geographical one.

The state's response to labor unrest in this transformative process will be considered in its attempts to appease workers through concessions and legal reforms, all the while setting

³"Bangladesh Remains 2nd Largest RMG Exporter Accounting 6.5 Percent Market Share," *Textile Today*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.textiletoday.com.bd/bd-remains-2nd-largest-rmg-exporter-accounting-6-5-percent/>.

preventative measures against wildcat strikes and labor revolt. This includes illegalizing certain forms of strikes, institutionalizing labor unions, and creating an “industrial police force” to oversee and curtail potential workers’ unrest. To the Bangladeshi state this is necessary to maintain stable production and investment by ensuring a somewhat complacent working population. These legal structures and developments in state power are subject to a historical genesis alongside forces of production. When Bangladeshi industrialists are primarily working in terms of globalized capitalism, however, they will be held accountable to international standards.

In this vein, the final point of analysis will examine how global labor and human rights organizations have responded to the Bangladeshi situation. The most notable intervention on behalf of these organizations came in the form of the Accord and Alliance, made with fashion companies in the wake of the Rana Plaza collapse. Though they embody globalization’s self-regulatory response to its pitfalls, in the liberal view, they have often come up short in their aspirations. Why, and more importantly, how they have come up short provides pertinent answers to the historical situation in Bangladesh’s globalized RMG sector.

The complexities of the sequential labor revolts can be analyzed by taking into account the nature of globalized production. The historical process of Bangladesh’s industrialization was one under the auspices of global capital, more specifically during its neoliberal period. The industrialization of Bangladesh contains a content unique to its historical situation. As will be seen, the influx of this population to the city as the result of the emergence of the RMG sector can be traced to a specific neoliberal policy, the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), which triggered the seeds of production to germinate. Where European workers in the nineteenth century responded to the changing, internal, dynamics of pre-industrial society, the labor movement in Bangladesh responds to a mechanized and mature mode of production subsuming local production into a global market.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF BANGLADESH AND THE GENESIS OF THE RMG SECTOR

Surrounded entirely by the Bay of Bengal and bordering India and Myanmar, Bangladesh is a young country, even relative to the post-colonial world. Born out of a devastating and repressive war with Pakistan in 1971, what was formerly known as East Pakistan at first took on a socialist planning model and nationalized all industry. In line with the decline of twentieth-century socialist states, however, these policies proved to be unstable and were abandoned in favor of the “New Industrial Policy.” This policy aimed to support private investment and denationalize all industry, including the nucleus of the then-nationalized garment sector, which was returned to its former private ownership.⁴ To bolster this move toward private ownership, the Bangladeshi state moved again to privatize with the “Revised Industrial Policy” in 1986, eventually following it up with more policy to phase out state-owned enterprise in 1991.⁵

Whether the privatization policy was the response to the failure of socialist nationalization schemes or a direct capitulation to the neoliberal era, it nonetheless was integrated into the neoliberal transformation of the global economy. Incentivized toward promoting free trade standards and pursuing policy geared toward slashing bureaucracy, the Bangladeshi RMG sector began to take root amongst its forming national bourgeois. By 1986 the Bangladeshi state had fully embraced Margaret Thatcher’s infamous line, “There Is No Alternative,” or TINA. The

⁴Md. Nurul Momen, “Implementation of Privatization Policy: Lessons from Bangladesh,” *Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal* 12, no. 2 (2007).

⁵Ibid.

state believed financialization and liberalization to be key to achieving independent economic growth contra import substitution. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) pressured Bangladesh to continue privatization, going as far as to enable and help create the Export Processing Zone (EPZ).⁶ Now in the hands of domestic capital, the RMG sector grew to become the backbone of the Bangladeshi industrial economy.

Between Fiscal Years (FY) 1986-1987 and 2006-2007, the number of textile factories grew exponentially from 629 to 4,490, while the total number of exports in millions of US dollars went from 298.7 million to 9.21 billion.⁷ Between FY 1989-1990 around 340,000 people were employed in the RMG sector. By FY 1994-1995 employment grew by 1.2 million, and finally by FY 2009-2010 it reached approximately 3 million people.⁸ By FY 2013-2014 the RMG sector dominated the Bangladeshi economy, consisting of 84 percent of all exports and making up 14.17 percent of the country's total GDP (though this later began to fall, see below).⁹

While privatization schemes led to the growth of private domestic ownership on a mass scale, the RMG sector was aided by free trade agreements meant to integrate underdeveloped countries into the world economy. The most notable of these was the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), which imposed import quotas on developed countries to purchase from their underdeveloped counterparts while curtailing market domination from powerhouses such as China and India.¹⁰ The result of the MFA, which was in effect from 1974-1994, was highly beneficial to Bangladesh's RMG sector. Not only did it allow export by volume to grow in Bangladesh, it also gave impetus to larger producers such as the Republic of Korea (ROK) and China to begin shifting apparel investment toward these underdeveloped countries such as Vietnam, Honduras, and Bangladesh.¹¹ The Bangladeshi RMG sector, almost entirely within the hands of domestic producers, began its contracting system.

The termination of the MFA in 2005 brought about anxiety concerning Bangladesh's future in the RMG sector and as a major exporter. Bangladesh, while now enriched with noteworthy productive capacity, could not be expected to compete with China and India on the global market, let alone the ROK. This initially caused panic and confusion amongst investors and industrialists alike, worrying that the end of the MFA would trigger a large capital flight from Bangladesh. According to a 2003 *Textiles Intelligence* press release, "Ultimately, garment makers in Mexico and Bangladesh will have to adopt strategies appropriate for a world in which winners will be decided on the basis of their international competitiveness – not on the basis of their quota-free access to the major markets."¹²

Yet hopes for Bangladesh outweighed panic in comparison to other prominent garment exporters such as Mexico for two reasons: one being the fact that 95 percent of Bangladeshi factories were under domestic control, preventing the flight of constant capital, and the other

⁶Pragya Khanna, "Making Labour Voices Heard During an Industrial Crisis: Workers' Struggles in the Bangladesh Garment Industry," *Labour, Capital and Society / Travail, Capital Et Société* 44, no. 2 (2011): 108-110.

⁷Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, "Trade Information."

⁸M. E. Khan et al., "Living Wage Report: Dhaka and Satellite Cities; Context: the Garment Industry," Global Living Wage Coalition, 2016, 11-12, https://www.isealalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource/2017-12/Dhaka_Living_Wage_Benchmark_Report.pdf.

⁹Ibrahim Hossain Ovi, "Apparel Sector's Contribution to GDP Growth Going Down for Years," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2019/04/26/apparel-sector-s-contribution-to-gdp-going-down-for-years>.

¹⁰M. S. Alam et al., "The Apparel Industry in the Post-Multifiber Arrangement Environment: A Review," *Review of Development Economics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 454-474.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Garment Industries in Bangladesh and Mexico Face an Uncertain Future," *Textiles Intelligence*, October 15, 2003.

being their consistently low wages, some of the lowest in the world.¹³ The latter became their primary means of holding their precarious position in the marketplace, bringing in swaths of investment and maintaining the rising export rate.

The recently proletarianized workers, torn from their agricultural life and subject to slum dwellings, faced abusive and substandard conditions typical of low wage labor and infamous to Bangladesh. With wages seemingly invariant and conditions unimproved, the workers sought channels of power by which to respond. The typical organs of class power, namely organized labor, had also changed alongside Bangladesh's neoliberal transformation. While playing a significant role in the independence movement, organized trade unions later became integrated into political parties, creating distrust among the workers for their unions and what Pragma Khanna identifies as a superstructural divide between workers and their unions.¹⁴ This created a situation in which workers were "less likely to belong to a labor union than to be involved in informal resistance."¹⁵ The working class was at a tipping point with no hand to guide its outpour.

This complete rearrangement of socioeconomic conditions created tensions unresolvable outside the realm of political and economic struggle. Prior to the industrial transformation, 88 percent of the Bangladeshi population was in subsistence agriculture with an overall literacy rate of only 24 percent.¹⁶ By 2010, Dhaka became the fastest growing city in the world with an industrial landscape describable as "Dickensian."¹⁷ Through neoliberal reforms and capitulation to Structural Adjustment Programs, Bangladesh created a canker sore for neoliberalism's public appearance and an industrial nightmare for much of the population. Workers, now pressed under brutal conditions and without strong and resolute institutional power, began to respond to this strenuous position they found themselves in. Through a variety of circumventions toward structural limitations and informal resistance tactics, Bangladeshi RMG workers would initiate their discordant, violent, and abstruse bargaining game with the RMG sector. In other words, for them TINA would not be an option.

"ON THE STREETS AND DAMAGING FACTORIES": THE BANGLADESHI LABOR BATTLES AND THE CITY OF DHAKA

Unions, as mentioned before, had already played a politically important role in the independence movement. After their politicization, however, the workers had little outlets for their growing discontent. The breaking point of the Bangladeshi working class came in 2006, exhausting the already fragile and tense social landscape and ripping its frail fabric at the seams. A year earlier, in 2005, a deadly collapse of a Savar-based garment factory killed one hundred people.¹⁸ Before that there had been eight factory collapses and fires from 1990-2005, resulting in a total of around 243 deaths. With stagnant, low wages, and poor living conditions, the labor pool of Bangladesh was now a kettle waiting to boil over. This kettle continued to boil over from 2006-2019, each time with rage pointing to a specific problem, yet indicative of a general immiseration.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Khanna, "Making Labor Voices Heard," 111-113.

¹⁵Hasan Ashraf and Rebecca Prentice, "Beyond Factory Safety: Labor Unions, Militant Protest, and the Accelerated Ambitions of Bangladesh's Export Garment Industry," *Dialectical Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2019): 93-107.

¹⁶Samantha Smith, "The Multi-Fibre Arrangement: A Threat of Protectionism," *Trinity College Student Economic Review* (1998), https://www.tcd.ie/Economics/assets/pdf/SER/1998/Samantha_Smith.html.

¹⁷Erik German and Solana Pyne, "Dhaka: Fastest Growing Megacity in the World," *Public Radio International*, September 8, 2010, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-09-08/dhaka-fastest-growing-megacity-world>.

¹⁸Khanna, "Making Labor Voices Heard," 119.

In May of 2006, as Bangladeshi workers ravaged the city and stormed the factories, the *Daily Star* asked one worker of his class's antics to which he responded, succinctly saying, "They do not pay us wages regularly. So we are on the street and damaging factories."¹⁹ That very day a garment worker of the Savar EPZ was killed after factory owners mobilized their sympathetic workers against the insurrectionaries.²⁰ One worker, while vandalizing a factory, complained for lack of two-months' pay.²¹ By the end of the day two RMG units were burned and two hundred damaged. With this protest coming after a week-long shutdown of EPZs, this had been the strongest show of force from Bangladeshi RMG workers yet.

By the end of strike, three hundred factories had been damaged and a number of workers had been killed.²² The strike, spontaneous and without official union guidance, was also notable for its seeming success. The Bangladeshi government attempted to meet pay raises and improvements to general working conditions with the hallmark Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. This legislation guaranteed a minimum wage and compensation for injuries among other things, yet was eventually, and presciently, met with workers' skepticism following its enactment. Demonstrative of the superstructural divide that Khanna gives name to, some workers accused unions, the state, and industrialists of an "unholy alliance" with each other when creating the Labour Act.²³ Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, a member of the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (a terminus point of this revolt), subsequently denied this accusation of collaboration, adding that the responsibility of the legislation failure was that of the industrialists for not implementing it.²⁴

The legislation itself, however, did much to curtail the growth of these spontaneous labor revolts, as it did improve general working conditions, imposing and contributing to the structural limitations imposed against the labor movement. Article 13(1) of the Labour Act, for example, gives explicit permission for factories to close down and fire their workers if a strike is declared illegal by the state.²⁵ As will be seen, this provided even greater precedent for mass firings following labor upheaval.

But one of the most forthright draconian measures against the labor movement came the following year in 2007. After a series of political upheavals, the Bangladeshi government under the control of the president Iajuddin Ahmed would declare a state of emergency ahead of upcoming elections. According to the *New York Times*, "such measures have not been taken in Bangladesh since the restoration of democracy in 1991 after years of military rule."²⁶ During this state of emergency, Ahmed also placed an explicit ban on strikes, hoping to keep striking power out of the hands of political opponents. This declaration was seen by many, including businessman Syed Manzur Elahi, to be a strong implication of military rule, with Elahi stating: "As it is we have an image problem. . . . [T]his will multiply the problem."²⁷

In spite of this authoritarian takeover, RMG workers continued their battle against management, striking and rioting against the closure of a factory in Tejgaon and for a bonus for the Muslim holiday of Eid and a wage of 5,000 taka (Tk) a month, a mainstay demand of the RMG workers'

¹⁹"EPZ Workers go Berserk," *Daily Star*, May 23, 2006.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Khanna, "Making Labor Voices Heard," 120.

²³Md Hasan, "Accords with Workers Hardly Implemented," *Daily Star*, May 31, 2006, <https://www.thedailystar.net/2006/05/31/d6053101085.htm>.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006, "Chapter II, Article 13 (1): Closure of Establishment."

²⁶Somini Sengupta, "Bangladesh Leader Declares State of Emergency," *New York Times*, January 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/11/world/asia/11cnd-bengla.html>.

²⁷Ibid.

movement.²⁸ While 3,000 workers took to the streets, damaging twenty factories and injuring two police officers, the Bangladeshi government subsequently utilized its legal power over labor, closing four units of a garment factory “for an indefinite period of time” while citing the Labour Act.²⁹ When pressed by police officials to negotiate with workers, the bosses summarily responded that they “were not bound to have talks with the workers.”³⁰ Workers, however, claimed abuse: “A number of affected workers said the owner used to force them to work under inhuman conditions. They alleged that factory officials would forfeit a significant part of the salary and overtime bill if anyone was found taking rest even for a minute during work hours.”³¹

In 2008 unions attempted to negotiate with industrialists and quell the ferocity of labor revolt by bringing workers back into the fold of mainstream trade unionism. Representative again of the superstructural divide, the trade unions nonetheless failed in their ambition. Amirul Haque Amin (secretary of the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), said with dismay to the *Daily Star*, “We know we have a lot of responsibilities in the wake of any unrest in the industrial sector. But, sometimes we feel helpless as we have no control over the workers.”³² He would later go on to cite lack of effective unionization at the point of production as one of two primary factors for this problem.³³

With the failure of the trade union negotiations at hand, workers’ wages remained stagnant. The fight for Tk5,000 a month was becoming growingly unrealizable through dialogue, as negotiations continued to conclude below this demand. But the strike wave of 2006-2007 was also by no means the end of the labor struggle. In 2009 RMG workers again went up against their bosses following the closure of the Ha-Meem Group factory, which employed one thousand workers in Ashulia. Originally contained to workers of the Ha-Meem Group factory, this revolt soon spread and fifty thousand workers in Ashulia joined the original group in damaging and vandalizing over fifty factories.³⁴ While the *Daily Star* cited the 2008 Financial Crisis and decline in global demand for the “sick” Ashulia factory, the rapid spread of one factory’s upheaval to a more general population of RMG workers signifies the more unanimous feeling of discontent amongst workers.³⁵

But while wage battles and riots continued to grip the RMG sector, other, more indirect structural consequences of the RMG sector’s brutality would begin to emanate in textile factories. In 2008, for example, there was an uptick in sightings of ghosts and witches, many of which were said to haunt the floors of RMG factories. As a result of this, many workers actively refused to work in these factories until their exorcism.³⁶ Seemingly sociocultural and even irrational at first, these sightings are more indicative of the immiserated daily life that workers lead. Low caloric intake and grueling hours had led workers to extreme psychological problems, with one doctor citing over one hundred cases of anxiety disorders among RMG workers per month, stating:

²⁸“Tejgaon Garment Workers Vandalise 20 Factories,” *Daily Star*, September 23, 2007, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-5091>.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Refayet Ullah Mridha, “Weak Trade Unions Fail to Tackle Labor Unrest,” *Daily Star*, September 14, 2008, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-54695>.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Refayet Ullah Mridha, “It All Started with the Sacking in a Sick Unit,” *Daily Star*, June 29, 2009, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-94829?amp>.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Kelsey Timmerman, “Bangladeshi Workers Attacked by Ghosts,” *Where Am I Wearing?* <http://whereamiwearing.com/2008/09/bangladeshi-workers-attacked-by-ghosts/>.

“Poor garment workers suffer mainly from malnutrition and anxiety, which make them weak and vulnerable to nervous breakdown.”³⁷

Wage battles, then, were simply the most direct and immediately recognizable point of discontent for workers. Other problems, however, namely psychological and medical ones, were the more indirect consequences of the structural reality of globalized production in Bangladesh. With this perspective, “poor working conditions” are only a stand-in for a wider, underscoring immiseration of RMG workers’ lives.

The correlation of the 2008 Financial Crisis and “sick factories” of the 2009 uprising are still accentuations of a wider trend of the pauperization of RMG workers, with the uprising triggered by a shift in demand and factory closure but underscored by the general discontent of RMG workers. The psychological trauma of the workers is indicative of this immiseration that generated the repeated violent response on behalf of workers. Nonetheless, struggle for higher wages then defined the 2006–2010 strike wave on the ground in verbal demands, culminating in a more extensive and persistent campaign for Tk5,000 in 2010.

The 2010 wage battle came after a global report from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) stated Bangladesh’s working conditions were some of the worst in the world, with exploitation on the rise.³⁸ During this strike, police fought with workers, allegedly including children, in the streets, as workers pelted them with rocks and vandalized cars in response to massive wage cuts.³⁹ Feeling undermined and exploited, one rioting worker stated “We were forced to take to the streets as the owners exploited us right under the government’s nose. I have to spend Tk1,000 for food and Tk1,500 for house rent. How will I maintain other things with this wage?”⁴⁰ After workers blockaded roads and attacked commercial districts throughout Dhaka, the government conceded to a fixed entry-level minimum wage at Tk3,000, much below Tk5,000 RMG workers had been fighting for throughout the strike wave and much to the discontent of the workers.⁴¹

Beneath the fight for Tk5,000, however, was the ever decreasing purchasing power of the Bangladeshi worker. As studies have shown, while wages in larger industrializing countries such as China rose in purchasing power, from 2001–2011 the purchasing power of Bangladeshi workers fell by three dollars despite tenuous wage raises.⁴² To underline this decline in purchasing power, while incidents reported by the media highlighted the largest ruptures in the Bangladeshi labor movement, the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies counted 358 incidents of worker unrest from 2008–2009 and 72 incidents in 2010.⁴³

The labor movement itself continued into the 2010s. In 2012, worker unrest spilled over as attacks on factories again, burning cars and ransacking around ten factories, blockading roads and lighting barricades on fire.⁴⁴ This action, starting in one Ashulia factory and spreading rapidly amongst RMG workers, was again demonstrative of a generalized discontent with conditions.⁴⁵

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Jason Burke, “Children Beaten by Bangladeshi Police as They Join Garment Workers’ Strike,” *Guardian*, June 30, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/30/bangladesh-strikes-children-beaten-police>.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰“RMG Wage Sparks Violent Protests,” *Daily Star*, July 31, 2010, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-148818>.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Jenni Avins and Marc Bain, “The Thing That Makes Bangladesh’s Garment Industry Such a Huge Success Also Makes It Deadly,” *Quartz*, April 24, 2015, <https://qz.com/389741/the-thing-that-makes-bangladeshs-garment-industry-such-a-huge-success-also-makes-it-deadly/>.

⁴³Bjorn Claeson, “Enemies of the Nation or Human Rights Defenders?: Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh,” International Labor Rights Forum, 2010.

⁴⁴“More Violence in Ashulia RMG Belt,” *Daily Star*, June 13, 2012.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Five months later, however, came the Tazreen fire, one of the worst industrial disasters in Bangladeshi history, which claimed 112 lives.⁴⁶ Only a year later, the Rana Plaza disaster became the worst industrial disaster in modern human history (see above).

The direction of the labor movement's focus, however, shifted away from wage battles alone and added a direct response to structural disaster in factories, something that eventually garnered worldwide attention. In 2013, after Rana Plaza, workers, assisted by residents, burned a Gap, Wal-Mart, and Zara factory, which created \$100 million in damages.⁴⁷ At one point two hundred thousand workers, while also pressing for higher wages (this time Tk8,000, perhaps after being emboldened by a global spotlight) alongside safety standards, burned factories and even cars in response.⁴⁸

The state's response to the factory revolts has mostly been that of repression and attempts to circumvent this movement's capabilities. One journalist, for example, was arrested in 2017 for "false" reports that could incite garment workers, citing again the Labour Act as legal precedent.⁴⁹ In the same incident, labor law was cited as allowing factories to close given an illegal strike.⁵⁰ In 2012 Aminul Islam, a prominent labor activist, was found dead outside the city. For some observers such as Scott Nova, executive director of the Workers' Rights Consortium, this was a sign of a deteriorating situation: "There have been unionists killed in clashes with the police in the midst of protests, but no recent case of assassination. Thus, this represents a deterioration of an already grim labor rights situation in the country."⁵¹ A deterioration of the situation, according to Nova, and an intensification of a state power built to stabilize and uphold the backbone of its economy. In the wider view of the globalized developing world, these measures would be what Mark Anner calls the despotic version of the "market control regime," by which organized labor is curtailed by weak labor markets and, in the case of Bangladesh (and also Indonesia), the state attempts to exert parameters toward embryonic or underdeveloped labor movements.⁵² According to Anner, the establishment of the market control regime leads to workers seeking help from international labor organizations as opposed to other forms of protest such as wildcat strikes and riots. The peculiarity of this claim is most evident in the fact that while labor accords and international organizations have been an undeniable part of the Bangladeshi labor movement, the riot and factory burning has also been mobilized as a tactic in as much as the state has developed its repressive apparatus around it.

The workers' revolt in 2010 in response to massive wage cuts, for example, was followed by the intensification of state power in the form of the Industrial Police, founded only months later with the goal of preventing and monitoring labor unrest.⁵³ The creation of the repressive

⁴⁶Syed Zain Al-Mahmood, Kathy Chu, and Tripti Lahiri, "Bangladesh Fire Raises Pressure to Improve Factory Safety," *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324296604578176983283834310>.

⁴⁷Serajul Quadir, "Workers Burn Down Bangladesh Garment Factory That Supplied Gap, Wal-Mart, Zara," *Business Insider*, December 3, 2013, <https://www.businessinsider.com/workers-burn-down-bangladesh-garment-factory-that-supplied-gap-wal-mart-zara-2013-12>.

⁴⁸James Pogue, "Bangladeshi Workers are Rioting and Burning Down the Terrible Factories They Work In," *Vice*, September 24, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/znwex5/bangladeshi-workers-are-going-berserk.

⁴⁹David Bergman and Muktadir Rashid, "How Repressive Law Enforcement Crushed Minimum Wage Protestors in Bangladesh's Garment Sector," *Wire*, February 2, 2017, <https://thewire.in/labour/bangladesh-garment-workers-minimum-wage>.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Julfikar Ali Manik and Vikas Bajaj, "Killing of Bangladeshi Labor Organizer Signals an Escalation in Violence," *New York Times*, April 9, 2012.

⁵²Mark Anner, "Worker Resistance in Global Supply Chains: Wildcat Strikes, International Accords, and Transnational Campaigns," *International Journal of Labour Research* 7, no. 1-2 (2015): 17-18.

⁵³"Industrial Police Launched," *Daily Star*, October 4, 2010, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-157098>.

state is then the continuous unfolding of its regulatory power exerted upon the spontaneous labor movement. Or, in the words of Home Minister Sahara Khatun: “The activities of this newly formed branch of police is not the same as the general activities of police. It’s a specialized branch engaged in resolving all sorts of unwanted situation in industries especially in garment sector.”⁵⁴ This winding and often circular battle between the state and RMG workers that has taken place in and around Dhaka is also more historically situated than an immediately globalized movement. The mainstay tactic of the revolts, the riot, is also an indigenization of industrial struggle as much as it is a response to global industrialization. The violence expressed at the hands of the workers is a markedly South Asian tactic known as the *hartal*, mass rioting toward a certain political or economic goal. These are often used by political parties, and in the case of Bangladesh the workers’ revolts are often co-opted by them with the promise of improved conditions.

In 2013 alone, for example, *hartal* generated \$7 billion in damage with over \$200 million for each day of strikes.⁵⁵ One case points to a manager of a GAP supplier losing his truck to a riot, resulting in 2,500 garments in flames.⁵⁶ Or in other words, “it’s enough to bankrupt a factory.”⁵⁷ Thus while the *hartal* is a certainly indigenous tactic, it has transformed into one of industrial labor. Given the ability of the workers to bring production not only to a standstill, but to its demise, the *hartal* is the logical conclusion to the institutional restraints on labor. Its effectivity in circumventing these limitations has made it a continuous asset of Bangladeshi labor on the ground, with unions unable to hold workers accountable due to the superstructural divide experienced between organized labor and workers

The strikes and *hartals* inflict massive financial losses – the workers’ means of disrupting this local economic system. The function of the industrial police is therefore to stabilize the situation against the threat of riots and strikes as well as dangers to the already low profit margins. Given that the draw of foreign investment in Bangladesh is low wages, the primary object of the state is the defense of its economic interests, and granting a living wage to Bangladeshi workers would be severely detrimental. The state then has no option but to weaponize itself to suit the needs of an ever-mobile capital. In 2012 factory owners in parliament actively worked to undermine and block legislation after the Tazreen disaster that might have improved general working conditions. When speaking of this move, Ifty Islam, a managing partner at a Dhaka-based asset management company stated “it’s hard to continue to improve factory compliance when there’s ever-increasing downward pressure on the prices that global retailers are willing to pay.”⁵⁸ This structural conflict between workers and industrialists is entirely within the theater of globalized production.

PRECARITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BATTLE FOR DHAKA

As has been seen earlier, Bangladeshi RMG workers are up against large institutional limitations under the pressure of market forces. These limitations include the “superstructural divide” between workers and unions as well as the criminalization of strikes through legislation such as the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. Other notable limitations include the corruption in political parties and lack of coherent and direct international support for the workers’ movement. These

⁵⁴“Resolve Anarchy in Industrial Sector with Sincerity: Sahara,” *Daily Star*, December 5, 2010, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-164826>.

⁵⁵Patrick Barta, “Culture of Mass Strikes Suffocates Bangladesh’s Economy,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323971204578628043063823914>.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Al-Mahmood et al., “Bangladesh Fire Raises Pressure.”

limitations have helped shape the workers' response to their immiseration by forcing them to be spontaneous rather than organized and destructive of industry as opposed to engaging in peaceful negotiations with industrialists. These workers, however, are not simply responding to a lack of institutional, parliamentary political power, but rather the riot is political in its nature as a tactic when striking at a center point of global textile production.

Among the idiosyncrasies of the capitalist world economy is the unity of the political and economic. That is, no longer does economic or political power rest only in town or country respectively, but the dominant political class is also the dominant economic class. Economic struggles become political struggles, and vice versa. As Engels notes of England's great urban transformation in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

They [the workers] were comfortable in their silent vegetation, and but for the industrial revolution they would never have emerged from this existence, which, cozily romantic as it was, was nevertheless not worthy of human beings. In truth, they were not human beings; they were merely toiling machines in the service of the few aristocrats who had guided history down to that time. The industrial revolution has simply carried this out to its logical conclusion by making the workers machines pure and simple, taking from them the last trace of independent activity and so forcing them to think and demand a position worthy of men. As in France politics, so in England manufacture, and the movement of civil society in general *drew into the whirl of history the last classes which had remained sunk in apathetic indifference to the universal interests of mankind.*⁵⁹

Insofar as the Bangladeshi working class has been the product of an industrialization process on a mass scale, its entrance into the city and the world of production is an entrance into the political-economic realm. Its assault against the factories and struggle with industrialists and the global economy are a means of testing their political power as much as they are improving working conditions; in fact the two are essentially the same. The political immobility of corrupt parliamentary politics is shaken off in the avenues of the general strike and riot.

But RMG workers are also marked by a distinctive precarity and thus marginalization in their working and living conditions. That is, the workers are superfluous, unskilled, and ultimately disposable to industry. The slum, in this case, embodies this facet of their existence, as it is a living condition equal to the overall cost of their labor (see below). These spaces are cramped, overpopulated, subject to eviction, and prone to massive life-threatening fires. In the words of a female garment worker when speaking with a researcher: "You want to know about our life. Housing is the biggest problem. Today 'shorkar' (government) is coming to evict us at 10:30am. So we don't have much time to talk. We don't know what will happen after that."⁶⁰

The phenomenon of the slum, however, is not new to industrialization; to the contrary, in fact, as Engels noted in his own time: "Every great city has one or more slums, where the working class is crowded together. True, poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich; but, in general, a separate territory has been assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can."⁶¹ The massive growth of slums is also not confined to Bangladesh alone, but is to be discovered in many parts of the developing world

⁵⁹Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17, emphasis added.

⁶⁰Syeda Sharmin Absar, "Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 29 (2002): 3012-3016.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 39.

as the transition from rural to urban accelerates beyond the planning capabilities of third-world states. In the age of the globalization, the slum is the primary living condition of the growing urban poor in the Global South. The slum is then the globalized form of the capitalist city. Mike Davis, writing on the slum and the global city in the present day in *Planet of Slums*, states:

Thus, the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay. Indeed, the one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years ago.⁶²

As is discussed in the UN's thorough and Engelsian 2003 report, *The Challenge of Slums*, slums owe their existence in part due to the lack of political mobilization or even the ability to do so among residents.⁶³ Slums in Bangladesh are also conducive to riots, as the enclosed terrain is within walking proximity to the factory, their starkest reminder of exploitation and general suffering. As Hobsbawm noted, the emergence of riots in the late twentieth century was due in large part to:

[T]he increase in the number of buildings worth rioting against or occupying, and the development in their vicinity of accumulations of potential rioters. For while it is true that the headquarters of central and municipal government are increasingly remote from the riotous quarters, and the rich or noble rarely live in palaces in the town centers (apartments are both less vulnerable and more anonymous), sensitive institutions of other kinds have multiplied. There are the communications centers (telegraph, telephone, radio, television). The least experienced organizer of a military coup or insurrection knows all about their importance.⁶⁴

For the Bangladeshi RMG workers, their sensitive institutions are the factories, transportation trucks, and highways, symbols of their relationship with the supply chain. With the Industrial Police mobilized to contain and repress this immiserated population from reprisal, the reality of this socio-political battleground becomes clear. Slums allow industrialists to keep the working class benign to their own political power, a means of disarming them in squalor. The *hartal* as a tactic is then a strategic intervention to force the hand of the industrialists and the state. The riot is the most formidable response to problems that the state and parliamentary democracy have failed to ameliorate. Thus, the socio-political context of the slum becomes gradually more evident in light of the reality of workers' limited institutional political power.

INFORMALIZATION AND THE DHAKA SLUM

The slum, in the case of the globalized Bangladeshi industrial landscape, also carries an economic function. As the global labor force grows at an exponential rate, those within these slums are

⁶²Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2017), 17.

⁶³United Nations Human Settlements Program, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* (London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications, 2003), 68.

⁶⁴Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Cities and Insurrections," *Global Urban Development Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 2005).

being accommodated for their labor with this housing. In this way, their housing is seen as equal to their value as workers. At first this seems obtuse and anecdotal, but slums in themselves are critical as a site of this production process. For industrialists, in fact, the stagnant conditions of the slums make workers an easily accessible pool of cheap labor, often for informalized production. Slums, therefore, are a tool of capital accumulation, a place where labor power, the catalyzing commodity of production, can be maintained at a low cost.

Informalization, precarity, and globalized production then go hand in hand with the slum:

When a large portion of an urban population resides in slums and squatter settlements (for example, in Mumbai, Mexico City or Dhaka), the hiring prospects for small industrial and service firms are enhanced because labor costs are kept low by severe job competition among a plentiful labor supply in the informal sector. The tradeoff is that an expanding informal labor market increases wage instability, job turnover, the exploitation of women and children in low-wage jobs, and the income disparity between socio-economic groups. *Currently, dominant globalization and the associated "informalization" of the economy that is seen in many places is not only widening the chasm between rich and poor, but also generates "a large growth in the demand for low-wageworkers and for jobs that offer few advancement possibilities."* Increasingly, the informalization of low-wage jobs becomes the burden of women and new immigrants.⁶⁵

In Bangladesh and Dhaka, this informal sector composes 65 percent of workers overall.⁶⁶ The city's poor, while making up 70 percent of the city's population, inhabit only 20 percent of the area.⁶⁷ This massive urban population is then surplus to production; it shares only a tentative and marginal relation to production, and is disposable, as mass dismissals during strikes have demonstrated. Its fluidity in production then allows it to be immediately malleable and used in shifts in production.

In the RMG sector specifically, informalization has been critical to cope with large and sudden shifts in global demand while maintaining production levels. According to an NYU study, the total number of export volumes fluctuated, but exporter numbers remained the same, meaning that exporters use informalization to accommodate to a number of shifts.⁶⁸ This strategy is built to ensure the RMG sector's security in the global marketplace, yet is hinged on lowering wages, quickly building new factories with the same machinery, and dramatically extending the working day. While direct exporters "assume responsibility of every aspect of production," the informal sector allows producers to circumvent minimum wage laws and safety standards that would otherwise damage already fragile profit margins.⁶⁹ In two sub-districts of Dhaka alone, 32 percent of the 479 factories were informal.⁷⁰

On one hand, the necessity of low wages to stabilize profit margins and preserve the RMG sector is a response to the global economy's incentivization of them. On the other hand, workers are condemned to stagnant mobility as a result. In the informal sector, this means harsher labor practices and lower wages. In the formal sector, however, RMG workers are also marked by

⁶⁵United Nations, *The Challenge of Slums*, 68.

⁶⁶Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 116-117.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 94-95.

⁶⁸Dorthée Baumann-Pauly and Sarah Labowitz, "Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg: Bangladesh's Forgotten Apparel Workers," NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, 2015, http://people.stern.nyu.edu/twadhwah/bangladesh/downloads/beyond_the_tip_of_the_iceberg_report.pdf.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

a distinctive precarity and thus marginalization to the production process. The most obvious example of this general condition is the mass firings following labor disputes.

In 2016, RMG workers mobilized in a spontaneous strike in response to the torture of workers, rising rent/market prices, and unsafe conditions without compensation. When the strike began, factory owners immediately shut down around eighty-four factories, firing workers en masse. Upon doing this, industrialists declared the strike illegal due to its spontaneity, and their actions justified under article 13(1) of the Labour Act.⁷¹ In 2019 around five thousand workers would be fired; three thousand would have cases filed against them, and one hundred arrested, with Ben Venpeperstraete (garment labor activist) claiming the government was actively working to suppress the labor movement.⁷²

The disposable RMG workers are also some of the least productive in comparison to regional competitors, such as those of Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Hong Kong, yet the industry has managed its competitive advantage of low wages predicated on the labor of these unskilled female workers.⁷³ In order to compensate for low skills and flatlined technological improvements, the Bangladeshi industrialist has also extended the working day. In one study, for example, it was found that 72 percent of respondent RMG workers labored 10 to 12 hours a day, 12 percent working more than that.⁷⁴

This informalization and extension of the working day has been done in part to ensure production quotas stay in place without having to make costly improvements to existing constant capital in order to stay afloat in the market. The brutality that the RMG workers are up against often comes not only in the form of the aforementioned production strategies, but from their productive consequences. The most obvious and infamous example being the Rana Plaza disaster and Tazreen industrial fire (see above). The former being the result of a low quality and expedited three-floor addition to the factory and the latter due to the lack of adequate fire escapes and alarms. While the Bangladeshi labor revolts themselves attracted limited international attention, the disasters would elicit an unparalleled global response to the textile industry.

THE GLOBAL RESPONSE

With the unprecedented disaster at Rana Plaza shocking the world, the cyclical dynamics of Bangladesh's RMG sector became a focal point of international labor and human rights organizations. While abusive and exploitative working conditions have been a focal point of global concern for many years, the response to Rana Plaza directly challenged the ethics of the global supply chain and the consumer habits of western citizens. Corporations that source heavily from Bangladesh, such as H&M, Walmart, and Gap, immediately had to answer for their participation in this dynamic. While numerous solutions were generated, they have yet to prove their enforceability or capacity to undermine the weight of the global market in the Bangladeshi dynamic.

⁷¹Ibrahim Hossain Ovi and Nadim Hossain Savar, "What Are the Ashulia Protests About?" *Dhaka Tribune*, December 22, 2016.

⁷²"Almost 5,000 Bangladeshi Garment Workers Sacked Over Strikes," *Al-Jazeera*, January 29, 2019.

⁷³K. M. Faridul Hasan et al., "Role of Textile and Clothing Industries in the Growth and Development of Trade and Business Strategies of Bangladesh in the Global Economy," *International Journal of Textile Science* 5, no. 3 (2016): 39-48.

⁷⁴Md Islam and Kamrul Dilara Zahid, "Socioeconomic Deprivation and Garment Worker Movement in Bangladesh: A Sociological Analysis," *American Journal of Sociological Research* 2, no. 4 (2012): 82-84.

In the immediate aftermath of this disaster came the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, drafted by the IndustriALL Global Union and the UNI Global Union to create a framework by which the structural safety of factories could be ensured through cooperation between trade unions and industrialists. The Accord was signed by H&M, American Eagle, Hugo Boss, and several others.⁷⁵ Following this, North American companies created their own Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety to achieve a similar task on their own terms. The Alliance was signed by Gap, Fruit of the Loom, Kohl's, Walmart, and others.⁷⁶ Both of these frameworks hope to make safety standards an enforceable and necessary facet of Bangladeshi industry in response to the disaster. As direct connections were drawn between retail corporations and the Rana Plaza factory in the supply chain, prevention of this disaster also became a growingly pertinent issue for the stability of the brands' reputations.⁷⁷ With renewed and mounting pressure campaigns, the Bangladeshi situation, while already globalized, was experiencing an intensified form of globality. Globalization then became the object of critique in the ideal as well as material form. The Accord and Alliance would address these concerns.

But as the material was being drafted, doubts concerning these policies were already fomenting. In an interview with *Huffington Post*, Amirul Haque Amin, president of the National Garment Workers Federation, said, "Improvement is not happening." The news outlet reported:

[A] total of 600 workers have died in factory accidents in the last decade. "The multinational companies claim a lot of things. They claim they have very good policies, they have their own code of conduct, they have their auditing and monitoring system," Amin said. "But yet these things keep happening."⁷⁸

The same article also noted that the Tazreen and Rana Plaza buildings both passed inspection, and checklist regulation standards in the hands of approved NGOs might not be sufficient to truly ameliorate the situation.⁷⁹ Indeed, the sheer number of factories in Dhaka alone presented a challenge in terms of enforceability, where the application of both the Accord and Alliance may be insufficient to truly tackle the issue. The Accord itself requires corporations to contribute money directly toward the safety inspection efforts, holding them partially responsible by requiring a \$500,000 a year donation for these purposes.⁸⁰ For this reason, Walmart and H&M believed that the primary responsibility for factory safety lies in the hands of the Bangladeshi state and industry, giving impetus to the creation of the Alliance.⁸¹ International labor organizers, such as UNI Global Union general secretary Philip Jennings, claimed Walmart had "sunk to a new low" by doing this.⁸² As widespread as the concern for Bangladesh's place in the supply chain was, it was unable to apply itself directly to the point of production and force the hand the global economy's largest interlocuters.

While concerns for the Accord and Alliance's enforceability grew and the mainstays of the supply chain attempted to shirk responsibility, the structural reality of the Bangladeshi situation was soon to be realized by many adherents of international labor liberalism. The capacity for large

⁷⁵ Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, accessed December, 5, 2019, <https://bangladeshaccord.org>.

⁷⁶ Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety, accessed December 5, 2019, <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/>.

⁷⁷ Steven Greenhouse, "As Firms Line Up on Factories, Wal-Mart Plans Solo Effort," *New York Times*, May 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/15/business/six-retailers-join-bangladesh-factory-pact.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁷⁸ Kay Johnson, "Major Retailers Rejected Bangladesh Factory Safety Plan," *Huffington Post*, April 26, 2013.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Accord on Fire and Building Safety.

⁸¹ Johnson, "Major Retailers Rejected."

⁸² IndustriALL Global Union, "We Made It! – Global Breakthrough as Retail Brands Sign Up to Bangladesh Factory Safety Deal," accessed December 5, 2019, <http://www.industrialall-union.org/we-made-it-global-breakthrough-as-retail-brands-sign-up-to-bangladesh-factory-safety-deal>.

international labor organizations to directly mediate and stabilize the situation was growingly dim. As Doug Miller presciently pointed out, liberalization of trade had left enforcement of global policy in an ambiguous place; thus agreements made even in collective bargaining (as opposed to unilateral codes of conduct) can be circumvented through EPZs and informalization.⁸³

As time continued, studies began to show the Alliance and Accord to have had little general impact on Bangladeshi factory safety. As Miller noted, not only were producers able to circumvent newly imposed standards and codes of conduct, but informal factories were virtually impossible to track by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and could not be held accountable to any standards. In one case, the ILO had mismeasured the sheer number of workers in the RMG sector by one million, as discovered in an NYU Stern study.⁸⁴ Thus, the Accord's program of remediation and training was only touching the "tip of the iceberg."⁸⁵

While other studies argued that informalization had not curtailed the observational capability of the Accord, the Bangladeshi situation would continue to unravel and escape the public eye as time went on.⁸⁶ As recently as 2019, fifty thousand workers launched wildcat strikes over poor pay.⁸⁷ After mass vandalism and looting, twelve thousand workers were fired indiscriminately. H&M responded, stating that they were "closely monitoring the situation."⁸⁸ Soon some began to question the impact of the Accord, arguing that while it provided a level of safety standards, it conveniently gleaned over the workers' rights to organize and establish a minimum wage. Chaumtoli Huq, a labor law professor at CUNY stated, "What's odd is that you have these two parallel movements—you have the Accord piece and you have the wages and unionization piece."⁸⁹ Thus while providing an amount of stability and mediation between workers and bosses, the international labor movement is seeing its capabilities challenged at the point of production. At the point of production there then remains the dynamic between the workers, the state, and global capital.

CONCLUSION

As has been uncovered, the dynamic of the Bangladeshi labor movement is a decidedly global one. Workers have responded (and are actively responding) to globalized industrial conditions, being led by economic forces into packed cities and slums; their industrial experience has been marked by inflexible, substandard, low wages to meet market demands. The institutional limitations placed upon the RMG workers generated a tenacious movement and, indeed, attack on the global supply chain. But as mentioned earlier, globalized production in Bangladesh is also stagnating rapidly, as the RMG sector plateaued and then declined in the nation's overall GDP makeup. Thus while attempts at maintaining quotas by extending the working day and the previously discussed

⁸³Doug Miller, "Preparing for the Long Haul: Negotiating International Framework Agreements in the Global Textile, Garment and Footwear Section," *Global Social Policy* 4, no. 2 (2004): 215-239.

⁸⁴Gillian B. White, "Are Factories in Bangladesh Any Safer Now?" *Atlantic*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/bangladesh-factory-workers/421005/>.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶Jennifer Bair and Mark Anner, "The Bulk of the Iceberg: A Critique of the Stern Center's Report on Worker Safety in Bangladesh," PennState Center for Global Workers Rights, 2016, <https://ler.la.psu.edu/gwr/documents/CGWRCritiqueofSternReport.pdf>.

⁸⁷Saurav Sarkar, "Bangladesh Accord Gets a Lifeline While Workers Organize Wildcat Strikes," *Labor Notes*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.labornotes.org/2019/08/bangladesh-accord-gets-lifeline-while-workers-organize-wildcat-strikes>.

⁸⁸"Bangladesh: Widespread Garment Worker Protests Over Minimum Wage Increase; Leads to Mass Dismissals," Business and Human Rights Resource Centre.

⁸⁹Sarkar, "Bangladesh Accord."

informalization managed to stabilize the situation, a decline in the industry's overall growth is looming. A potential crisis of overproduction would bring about a significant and potentially devastating change to Bangladeshi labor and economy.

As the situation continues to unravel and the internal dynamic is seemingly unending, the future of Bangladesh remains in relation to the global market and its own internal conditions, as was the genesis of its industrial system. The Bangladeshi labor movement has responded and continues to respond to this by its own means, slowly gaining wages and continuing to apply real terminal pressure on Bangladeshi industrialists without restraint. Whatever the result of this labor movement may be, it will be indicative of industrialization in a globalized capitalist economy, as have the lessons of the Bangladeshi labor movement.

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