

Editorial Dignity Triumphant – *Building Partnerships for Change*

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What is the place of industrial culture in the total environment directly influencing the lives of a large part of urban and suburban populations today and affecting the wellbeing of the whole populace through its environmental and social impacts? Do we need to drastically expand our understanding of what constitutes urban culture in these time of rapid change? What partnerships are called for to complement our traditions of research and intervention? The Journal of Urban Culture Research in partnership with the Urban Research Plaza wishes to direct the special attention of researchers and activists to the industrial development following in the wake of the open borders corporate policies of “outsourcing,” directly impacting urban living conditions globally.

On April 24, 2013, an eight story communal building Rana Plaza in Dhaka City collapsed, burying alive and killing 1,129 factory workers who had been producing clothes for leading chain stores and companies world wide, like Benetton, El Corte Inglés and Walmart. They were caught in a death trap, working under condition that Pope Frances recently designated as “slave labor.” Commenting on the anniversary of the tragedy, Nazmus Sakib of the Open Democracy network writes “... can the giant brands and glamorous global fashion and passion industry deny the fact that these laborers, innocent sweatshop workers, laid down their lives just to allow the production and perpetuation of ostentatious fabrics and fads at a cheaper price....”¹

This is just one example of the grim reality behind contemporary industrial culture in urban Asia today mainly resulting from the “outsourcing” policies implemented by a majority of Western corporations to circumvent labor protection laws in their home bases.

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Is there a way to turn humiliation into lasting dignity? The fascinating story of the garment workers of the collapsed Bangkok Bed and Bath factory setting up their own production facility demonstrates how turning the tide is possible through building partnerships and solidarity for change.

In October 2002 the Bed and Bath factory became insolvent, throwing 800 workers out on the streets without promise of compensation. The jobless workers started a fight for compensation supported by an international solidarity campaign. Finally after four months they got not only just compensation, but their fight also resulted in a revised law from the Ministry of Labor on worker compensation for all workers in Thailand exposed to similar measures.

With this compensation and pooling together loans from the Government Savings Bank 40 former workers were able to start a small factory cooperative in Bangkok – The Solidarity Factory.

The Solidarity Factory started operating as a cooperative, where all workers are members and shared responsibility for production, marketing and finance. The working standards agreed upon included an 8 hour working day with 2-3 hours overtime allowance and equal wages for all. All profits from sales were to be shared between members.²

Commenting on the achievements of the Solidarity Factory, Doris Lee via the Asia Monitor Resource Centre in Hong Kong comments:

“Each day that they work cooperatively and survive by their own management, they demonstrate to the world the possibility of production without exploitation, the possibility and manner of implementing a democratically run workplace.”³

And the example is not unique. Simultaneous with the foundation of the Bangkok Solidarity Factory the economic crisis in Argentina had disastrous impacts on businesses and workers, with unemployment rising to 35%. It resulted in spontaneous workers actions to take over their workplaces and save bankrupt businesses. Within a short period more than 200 factories had been cooperatively organized with workers dividing work and profits equally. Still there are 150 remaining. Some like La Alameda, having continued operations from 2002 until now, are all based on three guiding principles:

1. Having a strong base in the community
2. Staying independent of political parties
3. Keeping the principles of democratic and transparent decision making⁴

All the while textile workers in Asia and Latin America continued to be exposed to inhuman working conditions by foreign companies bent on destroying trade unions, relocating their business to obtain cheaper labor and deposing of old workers who had served the company faithfully for many years. Forced overtime, sexual harassment, and hazardous working environments leading to frequent disasters followed in the wake of these policies.

In Thailand a crisis came in June 2009 with the layoff of close to 2000 workers from a company production facility Body Fashion owned by the world trade mark Triumph based in Switzerland. This happened after its trade union leader, Jitra Kotshady, in July 2008 had been fired for wearing a T-shirt with a political message on a TV discussion program that resulted in workers' protests and strikes.

Three months before the Thai layoff the Asia Monitor Resource Center had organized a meeting in Bangkok focusing on Asian workers situation in the face of the new economic crises. At this meeting a spokesperson from the leading Argentine collective textile factory La Alameda was invited to present their common experiences of crises leading to a weakening of workers rights and a democratic deficit. Learning about the experiences of the Bangkok based Solidarity Factory which by now had been renamed Dignity Returns, he proposed to form a global brand of workers cooperatives - No Chains - symbolizing the workers breaking away from the chains of exploitation of the international garment industry.⁵

By this important juncture an international support organization – the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) – organized 10 years previously by a coalition of trade unions and NGO's in 16 European countries, had taken important steps to support the fight of textile workers globally. Through invoking the ILO (International Labor Organization) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted in 1998, they demanded brand name companies follow the international standards for safe working conditions and livable wages. At the same time the CCC acknowledged the right of workers themselves to take the lead in organizing themselves, giving full support to the Bangkok Dignity Returns initiative.⁶

From its very start the Urban Research Plaza has seen as its goal to focus on the whole range of cultural and social conditions on which a livable city must be built. A vibrant urban culture can not exist if a large sector of its industrial base, even part of the so-called creative industries, still denies a large part of the city work force access to the most basic human needs. It is the express intention of the JUCR editors in conjunction with the URP Forum organizers to promote and call for needed research that can throw light on some of the most urgent challenges facing urban future development and result in corrective action and legislation.

Endnotes

1. www.opendemocracy.net/nazmus-sakit/rana-plaza-garment-catastrophe-one-year-on-who-needs-labor-rights-and-safety.
2. <http://archive.cleanclothes.org/campaigns/when-the-postman-rings/102>.
- 3-5. <http://blog.p2pfoundation.net/no-chains-for-the-thai-dignity-returns-sweat-free-garment-labnour-cooperative/2010/12/18>.
6. www.cleanclothes.org/about/who-we-are.