

To: WRC Affiliate Universities and Colleges
From: Scott Nova
Date: September 5, 2024
Re: Bangladesh Country Update

Since our last update regarding the WRC's response to the violent crackdown on workers' rights in Bangladesh in 2023, a politically independent, mass student movement succeeded in ousting the dictatorship of Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that at least 650 people were killed between July 16 and August 6—with almost all of the violence authored by the now-deposed government as it employed brutal means to try to stay in power. At the student movement's urging, an interim government has been established, headed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus. He has stated that his immediate priority is stabilizing the economy—which is dominated by the garment sector—and protecting basic human rights.

During the height of student protests and the previous regime's violent crackdown, a government-mandated holiday saw factories closed for at least 11 days. The garment industry reported losses of \$150 million per day due to the closures. With suppliers subsequently facing overdue delivery deadlines and buyer concerns of ongoing instability, the WRC, along with other rights organizations, reached out to brands to remind them of the urgent necessity to maintain responsible business practices during this period by not imposing financial penalties for unavoidable delivery delays and maintaining their volume of orders with suppliers. This engagement with brands is ongoing, as punitive actions against suppliers have immediate negative impacts on working conditions, as we witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the past month, we also continued to work with brands to ensure all false and retaliatory criminal complaints filed against 40,000 workers during the 2023 wage protests were withdrawn by factories. As we shared previously, this included a complaint filed by a factory owned by the Fortis Group, a manufacturing company that also owns a separate factory that produces collegiate apparel for Hanes and Fanatics. We are pleased to report that our engagement with licensees was successful, and after a protracted process of verification with the factory, they produced sufficient documentation indicating that they filed for the egregious complaint to be withdrawn.

This unprecedented moment, hailed as a 'second revolution' by Bangladeshis, holds great possibility for a newfound respect for human rights and democracy. While binding university codes have provided protection for workers' rights in factories producing collegiate apparel, the broader repressive environment in Bangladesh has posed an ongoing threat to our ability to monitor and remediate labor violations.

The removal of the former autocratic regime presents an opportunity to advance rights for workers at a national level. In the first instance, the interim government has the power to nullify all criminal cases against workers collectively by issuing an executive order, removing the need for a lengthy court process for each of the outstanding 36 cases. Students have also called for such an executive action to remove the mass charges lodged against members of their movement by the former regime. While this possibility has always existed under the law, the previous political reality had rendered this option unfeasible.

The WRC will continue to support workers' rights in Bangladesh, which remains a key hub for the production of collegiate apparel. We will keep you updated as our efforts unfold.