

Workers Memorial Week, NH Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health

An Injury to One is Still an Injury to All

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Four years ago, this past Monday a building in Bangladesh called “Rana Plaza” collapsed and came crashing down.

The building housed five garment factories which employed 5000 people.

Brands that were sourcing from the factories in Rana Plaza building include Benetton, Bon Marche, Cato Fashions, The Children's Place, Walmart, and JC Penney.

The owners ignored warnings about the building’s structural flaws.

The workers did not have a union.

The laws were weak and unenforced.

When the building collapsed, one thousand one hundred and thirty-four workers lost their lives. Thousands more were injured.

The scale of the disaster was so large, and the capacity of NGOs like the International Labor Rights Forum and the Clean Clothes Campaign was strong enough, that even though the workers were unorganized it became possible to pressure the companies and the government to reach agreements for inspections, compensation for affected workers and families, and renovating factories to make them safer.

But workers in Bangladesh still face repression when they try to organize.

That makes reforms hard to defend, especially when workers are inter-changeable pieces in a global supply chain, thousands of miles away from the consumers of the products they make, and several corporate intermediaries away from the firms whose logos they sew onto the apparel they make.

That’s one reason why we need to stand together, as workers, as consumers, as citizens.

One hundred and thirty-one years ago next Monday, hundreds of thousands of American workers went on strike calling for an eight-hour day. (The eight-hour movement followed the earlier ten-hour movement, which was led largely by young women like New Hampshire’s Sara Bagley and conducted in places like Dover, Manchester, Exeter, and Lowell.)

In Chicago, at the same time, a strike was going on at the McCormick Reaper plant, whose owner was trying to replace workers with machines. Several days of protest followed the May Day strike. Police killed 2 strikers on May 3. During a rally the next day protesting killings by

police, a bomb went off. No one ever knew who was responsible. Several police officers and strikers lost their lives in the violence.

To be brief, Albert Parsons and August Spies, leaders of the eight-hour movement, were blamed, tried, convicted, and executed, despite the lack of any evidence tying them to the violence. (Hanging, not injection of toxic chemicals, was the method used back then.)

The following year, May Day was observed in their honor throughout the world and became known as International Workers Day.

In this country, over the past decade or so, International Workers Day has become associated with protests, rallies, strikes, and marches led by immigrant workers. That includes this coming Monday in Manchester, 5 to 7 pm, in Veterans Park.

Why does this matter?

When immigrants are afraid to complain about the toxic chemicals they use to clean our schools or the excessive heat in bakeries, factories, and laundries, the rights of all workers to a safe workplace is threatened.

When immigrants can be scapegoated and threatened with loss of jobs, the rights of all workers are weakened.

When capital can cross borders with barely any restriction, but workers face walls and troops, we have to stand together.

When workers are so desperately poor that they will take jobs that put their lives at risk, we have to stand together.

When the number of people forced to flee their homes due to violence, climate disruption, and economic desperation is at an all-time high, we have to stand together.

When xenophobic and nativist movements are on the rise the world over, we have to stand together.

When workers anywhere are afraid to organize, we have to stand together.

And when workers do organize, despite the fear, despite the risks, despite the threats, despite the scapegoating, we have to stand with them.

During Workers Memorial Week, we say, injustice anywhere is still a threat to justice everywhere.

We still say, an injury to one is an injury to all.

We still say, Solidarity forever.

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