Legislature Passes Anti-Sweatshop Bill

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Photographs available

Bangladesh Fire Brought Home Importance of Bill
Bangladeshi Labor Leader to Participate in Thursday Press Conference Highlighting Bill’s Importance

AUGUSTA – Maine’s House of Representatives passed a strong measure today giving the State’s Division of Purchases better tools to ensure that the apparel, textiles, and footwear the state buys are made under safe and fair conditions. The bill passed the Senate earlier this week, and has the support of the Governor.

LD 1769 – An Act to Strengthen Maine’s Purchasing Code of Conduct establishes a procedure for workers and human rights advocates to file formal complaints against companies supplying apparel, footwear, and textiles to the State of Maine that fail to meet basic health, safety, and human rights conditions, empowers the Division of Purchases to require manufacturers to comply with independent monitoring organizations investigating those complaints, and sets out clear procedures for the state to work with manufacturers to remedy violations and to cancel the contracts of companies that refuse to cooperate with that process. The bill also creates a study group to suggest how the state can best employ independent monitors, and to look into the possibility of creating a multi-state consortium to fund independent monitoring efforts.

A Bangladeshi labor leader will take part via telephone in a press conference Thursday morning 9:00 a.m. in the State House Welcome Center, emphasizing the importance of the bill and the role state governments and other big purchasers can play in bringing pressure to bear on the garment industry to create better working conditions.

Kalpona Akhter, President of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, worked in a Bangladeshi garment factory for eight years, and in recent weeks has been working with the survivors of a horrible factory fire in the city of Chittagong.

On February 23, a fire ripped through the KTS Composite Textile Factory in Chittagong, Bangladesh, claiming the lives of at least 84 workers, many of them children between the ages of 10 and 13. Locked exits and other safety violations contributed to the death toll.

In the wake of the fire, Akhter said, “We need work but we need dignity. We go to the factories to work, not to die.”

One of the factory’s major customers was Leslee Scott, a company that produces uniforms, underwear, and textiles for schools, prisons, hospitals, and other institutions. The company has had several contracts with the State of Maine in the past (although none of them involved goods
made at the KTS factory,) and is one of the major vendors supplying apparel to state and municipal governments throughout the U.S.

Betty Lamoreau, Director of the state’s Division of Purchases, wrote to Leslee Scott, urging the company use its leverage to ensure that its suppliers “ensure that health and safety standards are fully implemented and regularly monitored” and to make sure that the families of the fire’s victims are fairly compensated.

Sean Donahue, Director of PICA, a Bangor-based human rights organization said:

“LD 1769 will give the Division or Purchases the tools it needs to press manufacturers to treat their workers fairly and to address safety violations like the ones that contributed to the terrible death toll from the fire in Bangladesh.”

Bjorn Skorpen Claeson, Director of SweatFree Communities, a national network of groups committed to stopping sweatshops, added:

“Maine was the first state in the nation to adopt a sweatfree procurement law in 2001, and has learned more about the potentials and challenges of enforcement of sweatfree procurement than any other state. LD 1769 reflects the lessons the state has learned and incorporates advice from worker rights advocates and stake holders in Maine and around the world. It’s a significant step forward, signaling that Maine is serious about ending sweatshop abuses through government procurement controls.”