Sweatshop Workers Speak Out

Building Solidarity Between U.S. Communities and Workers in Bangladesh and Pakistan

Photo-Essay Highlights from the Speaking Tour

From April 15 to May 5, 2010, the International Labor Rights Forum and SweatFree Communities conducted a speaking tour to raise awareness about the realities that Bangladeshi garment workers and Pakistani soccer ball stitchers face on the job, and to encourage local action for sweatshop workers’ rights. The tour took us to 15 cities in eight states. We gave 29 presentations for students, union members, environmentalists, and other community members. In addition, we held 11 meetings and briefings with a variety of government officials, including purchasing department staff and elected officials, to discuss the new Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium and how government purchasers can support workers’ rights.

Kalpona Akter and Zehra Bano brought stories of dismal working conditions from Bangladeshi garment workers and Pakistani home-based soccer ball stitchers. But they also brought stories of worker power and inspiration and showed their own fierce commitment to struggle for change.

In Chicago Ms. Bano and Ms. Akter learned about key events in the history of working people’s struggles in the U.S. at the memorial of the 1886 Haymarket Massacre, raising their fists in solidarity with workers everywhere.

Our road trip started in St. Paul, Minnesota, where we met with students at Macalester College.

In Wisconsin we spoke to a packed room at Milwaukee Area Technical College and met with the Milwaukee Sierra Club. We discussed fair trade, workers’ rights, and the impact of unscrupulous corporate practices on the environment. Ms. Akter shared concern about the overuse of water used for the dyeing and washing of clothing in preparation for shipments from Bangladesh to the U.S. The workers face the double burden of unsafe drinking water and poverty wages.
At McCall Elementary School in Philadelphia, we spoke with over 50 fifth graders who came prepared with a list of questions for us. The students were eager to hear our stories and plan to stay in touch as penpals.

We met with government officials of the cities of Madison, Wisc., Pittsburgh, Penn., and Washington D.C. and the states of Maine, Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. They were often visibly moved by Ms. Akter and Ms. Bano, and felt newly motivated and energized to pursue their sweatfree work. (Here we gather with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania procurement staff in Harrisburg.)

In Cleveland, Ohio, we met with John Carroll University’s women’s soccer team. Ms. Bano described the conditions faced by the soccer ball stitchers. The team decided to bring the issue to the attention of their coach and school, and plan to write to their current soccer ball supplier to inquire about the conditions under which the soccer balls were made. The students said that, now that they had seen pictures and heard the stories of women who sew the balls by hand in their homes, they would never again look at a soccer ball in the same way.

In addition to Cleveland, we also held events in Delaware and Columbus, Ohio, with the goal of securing a commitment from the State of Ohio to join the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium. Our visit built on ongoing sweatfree organizing in the State.

At the Labor Notes Conference in Detroit, we networked with labor activists from many places and joined Andiamo restaurant workers in their campaign against wage theft, racial and sexual discrimination, and retaliatory firings.
At the May 3rd International Workers Day briefing on Capitol Hill we were joined by Cesar Estacio who had been fired for trying to form a union on his cut flower plantation in Ecuador. This briefing was sponsored by the International Workers Rights Caucus and brought together staff from Hill offices in addition to labor unions and nongovernmental organizations.

Throughout our trip we met with union members, noting the similarities and differences between the conditions and repression that workers face in the U.S., Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

In Maine we held a gubernatorial candidate roundtable discussion on the role of the Maine State government to create a just and sustainable state and global economy. Three Democratic candidates for governor and a representative for a Republican candidate joined the discussion with Ms. Akter and Linda Fairbrother, a paper mill worker and member of the United Steel Workers union. After the roundtable and media briefing, which was covered by the Associated Press and public radio, we headed upstairs for a meeting with staff of the Maine Division of Purchases, discussing the labor practices of state suppliers that contract in Bangladesh. Finally, labor and immigrant rights groups came together at the Solidarity Community Center for an evening discussion on global trade, immigration and worker rights issues, and how the movements for worker rights in the U.S. and Bangladesh can connect. What does this solidarity, crossing boundaries of geography and language, look like?
Speakers’ Biographies

Kalpona Akter, a former child factory worker, directs the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity established in 2000 by garment workers struggling for their rights. The Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) is a non-profit, non-political women’s organization that works for the empowerment of working women, the rights of children, and the security of working families and communities.

Zehra Bano is the General Secretary of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation of Pakistan and the Research and Education Secretary of the National Trade Union Federation. Ms. Bano has been an outspoken leader in the fight for women workers’ rights in Pakistan, and has intimate knowledge of the plight of soccer ball workers especially related to home-based and stitching center workers.

Many Thanks to Our Hosts, Organizers, and Sponsors

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