

The binds that tie: unions, 'solidarity', civil society & foreign policy in Bangladesh



A look at the new unions emerging as part of the reforms of the garment industry – and Western influences on them. Plus workers continue to struggle to be paid what they are owed...

In the aftermath of the 2012 Tazreen and 2013 Rana Plaza factory disasters⁽¹⁾ all interested parties were agreed that the garment industry had to finally make major changes to working conditions in order to guarantee stability and industry expansion and to improve Western consumer perception of clothing brands. Local and foreign governments, NGOs, garment buyers, employers and unions have both cooperated and disagreed on what measures must be taken.

As well as the implementation of improved factory health & safety measures the freedom to form and join trade unions has been guaranteed by government. (Although previously legally possible, in practice employers and state used many obstacles to prevent workers using these rights.) The US government had last year cited lack of workers rights as a primary reason for suspending the Generalised System of Preference (GSP) which gave Bangladeshi products preferential access to the US market. American Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been at the forefront of lobbying for unionisation and aiding existing unions in becoming functioning workplace representatives and 'responsible organisations of civil society'. (Till now existing garment 'unions' have been prevented by employer and government resistance from functioning as workplace representatives and negotiators and have functioned more as lobbyists and NGOs or in partnership with Western NGOs.)

One US NGO, the Solidarity Center, has recently become prominent in advising existing and emerging new unions. Before we analyse further its role we'll describe a brief history of this organisation to try to determine its present function and goals.

Business unionism's role in US foreign policy

Quote:

According to the Labour Ministry, 152 trade unions have registered following last year's Rana Plaza disaster. There are allegations that 142 of those unions were linked with nine federations "affiliated" with the Solidarity Centre. (Dhaka Tribune, 26 Jun 2014)

In 1997 the main US union federation, the AFL-CIO, merged its four international regional labour institutes to establish the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), commonly known as the Solidarity Center. With the end of the Soviet bloc AFL president John Sweeney, supported by some activists, sought to now distance the AFL's international work from its traditional anti-communist Cold War role. Though often little-known by its rank'n'file membership, the AFL-CIO has a long tradition of political intervention abroad - which began in the early 20th century with AFL leader Sam Gompers' role in influencing US policy in the Mexican revolution. This role intensified after WWII during the Cold War and climaxed in the successful collaborative efforts of the AFL-CIO, CIA and the Vatican to aid the Polish Solidarność/Solidarity union when it emerged in the early 1980s⁽²⁾. There has also been evidence of

numerous collaborations with the CIA and local allies to destabilise governments in such places as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Allende's Chile, Nicaragua and, more recently, Venezuela.

AFL-CIA?

The Solidarity Center (SC) maintains field offices in 20 countries around the world. Though the official stance is that the SC is an independent NGO the funding tells a different story. Over 90% of SC's \$38 million budget comes from the US State Department with the US federal government channeling these funds via the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Only around \$500,000 comes from AFL-CIO itself.

Quote:

"A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

– *Allen Weinstein, one of National Endowment for Democracy's founders. (Washington Post - Sept 22 1991)*

The National Endowment for Democracy describes itself as *"a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world"*. Yet it is primarily funded by the US Congress and is effectively a tool of US foreign policy. It promotes governments, parties, unions and groups that are US-friendly and those that oppose forces seen as antagonistic to US interests. Labour unions are seen as important channels for this; as institutions of civil society they encourage social stability, productivity and (usually) respect for the rule of law – all key goals of the democratic governance the US state seeks to promote in its sphere of influence. They can also harness a large constituency of members and target where members' political support is placed. Depending on the desired outcome AFL-CIO, its Solidarity Centers (and its predecessors) have sometimes promoted highly politicised union movements to destabilise regimes 'problematic' to US policy – while at other times promoting apolitical unions restricting activity to the arena of bread'n'butter worker-employer relations which would be no threat to US-friendly regimes.

In the specific case of Bangladesh the US appears concerned to try to stabilise the country's political arena and civil society – which has been turbulent and unstable, punctuated by periodic suspensions of democracy, ever since the nation state was born in the aftermath of the 1971 War of Independence resulting in the breakaway from Pakistan. Those pan-Islamic forces who resent the more secular society of an independent Bangladesh remain a powerful and often militant, if minority, national political force. The US is concerned that internal unrest does not lead to a "failed state" in the country where an ideal strategic location and terrain could become a regional haven for Islamic (and possibly other) terrorism. Nor does it want to see established an Islamic state antagonistic to US interests and allied with its rivals. South East Asia is also increasingly an arena where the US and China are contesting for regional influence.

Quote:

"It is a moderate and generally secular and tolerant — though sometimes this is getting stretched at the moment — alternative to violent extremism in a very troubled part of the world," said Dan Mozena, the U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh. (Washington Post – Mar 22 2014)

Bangladesh – a democracy with a Muslim majority and economic growth averaging six percent GDP over the past decade - is considered a bright spot in South Asia by Western observers. The Bangladeshi garment industry is the main generator of this growth and has a workforce 80% female. This employment in urban factories has changed the life options for millions of young women and partially overcome the restrictions imposed by traditional Islamic and village values on women. The new intense and dangerous factory exploitation of low paid wage slavery is no liberation for women but it has given opportunities to escape and undercut some of the older social conservatism.

Solidarity Centre and NED know that trade union blocs with mass memberships can function as important leverage tools in the political arena; their backing in political contests – whether elections or coups - can help tip the balance towards desired outcomes for US foreign policy. The imposition of the US neo-liberal 'free market capitalist' vision for developing countries ideally desires a democratic political framework – it is obviously harder to influence political forces, bargain and play off rivals against each other and influence ideological debate in a dictatorship. Policy makers now consider more authoritarian regimes as politically and economically less cost-effective and less conducive to the modern global economy. In the contest with China for regional influence in Asia the ideological promotion of democracy - in contrast to the long rule of the one party Chinese state - is perhaps a factor too and democracy is also

seen as a buffer against one party Islamic statism.



Quote:

Promoting democracy and governance is an important objective of U.S. foreign policy and is critical to advancing Bangladesh's development. Increasing citizen confidence in governing institutions is directly aligned to this objective. (USAID site, Mar 2014)

Quote:

These three essential elements of a free nation -- representative government, a well-functioning market, and civil society -- work like three legs of a stool. They lift and support nations as they reach for higher standards of progress and prosperity.

- US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "Civil Society: Supporting Democracy in the 21st Century," at the Community of Democracies, July 3, 2010 (3)

The role of USAID and its affiliates has been spelled out by its officials;

Quote:

... it is imperative to note the partnership between the State Department and the Solidarity Center toward fulfilling foreign policy objectives of the American administration.

This partnership was well pronounced on March 10, 2010 by the acting Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) – a sub division of the State Department – Susan Reichle at a testimony given before a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade and the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives.

She said: "USAID's efforts to increase democracy in the work place have been largely implemented by our partner, the Solidarity Center. Together, we have focused primarily-though not exclusively-on promoting core international labor standards, encouraging freedom of association and collective bargaining, and strengthening the capacity of democratic labor unions to represent workers' interests and concerns both in the workplace and in public policy.

"Under a current grant with the Solidarity Center, which was awarded in 2002, USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance provides \$7.25 million annually in support to Solidarity Center programs in 20 countries, including: Bangladesh, Brazil, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Thailand."

Among the programs she outlined the following was one: Support the development and strengthening of free and independent labor unions and other labor-related organizations in their efforts to support and enhance democratization, equitable economic development and a democratic political culture through encouraging effective citizen participation (especially among marginalized populations and vulnerable groups.

Then she said what the State Department-USAID endeavor to achieve through the Solidarity Center: Support for labor-enabling environments also includes emphasis on rule of law, human rights; freedom of association to form worker and employer organizations; promotion of competitive and well-regulated market systems; and support from government institutions.

Initiated in mid-2007, the USAID official told the Congress, the Global Labor Analytical Initiative which was undertaken to systematically review United States labor programming established a cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary framework for understanding the labor sector and its contributions to U.S. foreign assistance goals, including promotion of civic participation, broad based economic growth, and political accountability.

The simple interpretation to this is to ascertain how the labor sector could contribute to U.S. foreign assistance goals, and it is through the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center the State Department endeavors to achieve this and fulfill its foreign policy objectives in the countries the Solidarity Center operates ...

She outlined the political agenda the Solidarity Center would help the State Department/USAID to implement in the countries she mentioned the Center is operating:

Civil Society: The labor sector is a key arena in which to build the culture of compromise that is a key to the functioning of democratic institutions, the formation of interest-based party systems, the sustainable and demand-driven development of an accountable justice system, and a strong and sustainable civil society. Worker organizations are a special subset of civil society organizations because, when properly understood, worker organizations can be engaged in ways to promote democracy-building, good governance, and economic growth as well as other labor sector issues

Governance: Worker organizations, employer organizations and nongovernmental organizations may find common ground in promoting good governance. They often have acted on their common interests in promoting predictable rights- and rules-based systems. For example, there is a role for labor to play in anti-corruption efforts.

Workers in the public sector are often losers in corruption: Public funding may be diverted from teacher salaries and school books to a minister's offshore account, or from supporting law enforcement training to pay a drug cartel. Public sector unions have strong institutional reasons for fighting corruption.(4)

There has been a close parallel between US foreign policy missions and Solidarity Center operations in various 'developing countries' where SC has cultivated links with unions to try to influence political debate and outcomes (5). SC appears to be making similar arrangements in Bangladesh using unions to gain an influence in civil society...

Unions & NGOs – cut from the same cloth

Most of the newly registered garment unions in Bangladesh are affiliated to the Solidarity Centre; SC provides funding for paying organisers' wages and is helping unions negotiate the government registration process. Those unions – often more leftist - seeking a more independent existence claim that their applications for registration are being rejected while SC-backed unions are accepted. The professional expertise and US state backing ensures SC affiliates a more sympathetic hearing – while the smaller leftist groupings, being more cynical of NGOs and of less interest to NGOs as potential loyalists to US foreign policy, are easily excluded.

Quote:

Most of the country's RMG trade unions are reportedly controlled by workers' federations affiliated with US-based non-profit organisation Solidarity Centre, with many labour leaders and factory owners raising concerns that the sector might become a hostage to a vested quarter.

According to the Labour Ministry, 152 trade unions have registered following last year's Rana Plaza disaster. There are allegations that 142 of those unions were linked with nine federations "affiliated" with the Solidarity Centre.

Sources said around 20 leaders of those RMG workers federations were controlling the entire sector. (Dhaka Tribune – 26 Jun 2014)

Nevertheless, whatever the motives of the emerging union movement, they face an uphill struggle for acceptance by employers of their role in the workplace. 94% of garment workplaces remain un-unionised and workers active in trying to set up unions at work report many cases of violence, intimidation and sackings for their activities. A recent incident illustrates the prevailing attitude of garment bosses and their BGMEA federation. They responded angrily on finding that union leaders had sent a letter to US Congressmen detailing repression against union organisers;

Quote:

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association accused Bangladeshi union leaders this week of undermining the nation's image and garment industry by asserting that some labour leaders and pro-union workers have been tortured, beaten and harassed.

Atiqul Islam, president of the manufacturers' association, said in a speech on Monday in Dhaka that the labour

leaders' complaints were subversive to the state, adding that the government should punish them. (New York Times – 27 Jun 2014)

BGMEA President Atiqul Islam recently said individuals and labor rights activists who directly contact the US Government or Congress should be prosecuted for sedition. (Dhaka Tribune – 26 Jun 2014)

The bosses' arrogance blinds them even to what is appropriate and diplomatic for them to say in public at this sensitive time. The BGMEA statement was strongly criticised by exasperated US officials – who are clearly having a hard time keeping garment bosses “on-message” for the promotion of ‘democratic values’ (or for at least maintaining the appearance of some commitment to them).

One can predict that the new union movement will be dominated by those who already have links with Western NGOs or have the professional skills and resources to cultivate them; it will be organisation of workers from above by educated middle class specialists in representation rather than workers' self organisation. Those who are comfortable allying with the very moderate and reformist NGOs will have little interest in any radical agenda.

Yet garment bosses are unhappy with the organisational capacities and centralising tendencies of the NGOs;

Quote:

“It is dangerous if most of the trade unions are under the control of a vested quarter. The whole sector would be hostage to them and they can create anarchy at any time in the sector,” Reaz Bin Mahmood, vice president of the BGMEA, told the Dhaka Tribune.

We want trade unions with the “real” presentation of “real” workers, said Reaz, adding that only some of the unions had genuine workers as members, while others were made of fake ones. (Dhaka Tribune – 26 Jun 2014)

Till now employer resistance has meant unions have only functioned as NGOs and lobbyists rather than as workplace representatives and negotiators. The demand for “unions with the “real” presentation of “real” workers” may simply reflect that if bosses must accept unions then they at least want them to be genuine representatives able to deliver workers' obedience to any settlements and deals negotiated. But that begs the question of whether in their new role unions will be able to assert much control over garment workers – and that is probably partly dependent on whether bosses are willing to negotiate and concede long term improvements in wages and conditions and so allow unions to be seen as having some use for workers. Thanks to the bosses' refusal of unions in the workplace workers now have over 30 years of experience in militant self organisation without the mediation of union representation. This is a militancy that both bosses and union leaders want to tame to protect their investment in the ‘national economy’ and their social status.

It's possible that the resistance of bosses to unions - regardless of workers' formal legal right to organise and despite pressure from Western powers to accept this ‘democratic norm’ - will make unions of limited use to workers. The moderate reformism of a largely middle class union leadership – influenced by their paymasters like the Solidarity Centre – may also quickly breed in workers a cynicism about ‘their’ representatives who have appointed themselves to bargain in their name.

The price of a life - pay up!

Many of the survivors and the relatives of dead victims of the April 2013 Rana Plaza and November 2012 Tazreen factory disasters are still waiting to be paid their final compensation settlements. Most have received partial interim payments but are suffering unexplained delays; some of the money apparently still sits unused in a government fund.

Despite their massive profits from the blood and sweat of these workers the BGMEA bosses' federation have complained that the requested compensation pay is too high and have dragged their heels over paying up; while some foreign clothing buyers, such as US company Walmart (net worth \$446.950 billion), simply deny any obligation and refuse to pay any compensation(6).



As most of the country has stopped work to celebrate the Eid religious holiday, workers at the Tuba Group of factories have been laying siege to their employers' HQ demanding payment of several months wages owed. Tuba owned the Tazreen factory where 112 workers died in the 2012 fire and the owner Delwar Hossain is in jail awaiting trial on charges relating to the deaths. As Eid approached workers at four Tuba factories began to suspect that, after earlier broken promises, they would not receive their back pay nor the usual holiday bonus. So for several days 1600 workers have laid siege to the BGMEA offices, trapping Tuba bosses inside. They have also surrounded Tuba HQ and trapped several relatives of the owner inside. The company is in serious financial trouble – but, with banks refusing loans to Tuba, neither the BGMEA nor government has offered to step in to relieve the workers' hardship, despite their clear financial ability to do so.

The Tuba workers are also demanding immediate payment of full compensation for Tazreen victims, that the bail granted to Hossain last week should be scrapped (they allege that their wages have been withheld as part of the BGMEA's pressure to secure him bail) and a death penalty sentence, medical and psychological treatment for those hunger strikers fallen ill and that Tuba factories should be kept open to provide them with paid work.

The 1600 workers have now occupied three Tuba factories and on Monday began a hunger strike to secure their wages. Malnutrition is common under normal conditions among poorly paid garment workers and 86 fasting workers have already been hospitalised. They say they will "fast unto death" if necessary. If it comes to that, a few more deaths can be added to the tally of lives consumed in the ruthless pursuit of capitalist profitability in the garment trade.

Yesterday, 2nd August, as the hunger strike entered its sixth day a demonstration of strikers and supporters, including various left parties, was met by a massive police deployment. The strikers' organising committee has vowed to begin a nationwide movement if their demands are not met.

NOTES

- 1) See our earlier articles; <https://libcom.org/news/death-trapped-burning-cage-ashulia-inferno-27112012> and; <https://libcom.org/news/house-cards-savar-building-collapse-26042013>
- 2) See this article which relies largely on sources in Ronald Reagan's government; http://www.carlberstein.com/magazine_holy_alliance.php
- 3) <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143952.htm> This speech was delivered at a conference in Poland during which Clinton praised Poland as a model for democratisation. It's interesting to note that the new European Solidarity Centre, opened on the site of the former Gdansk shipyard in 2014, has a centrepiece exhibition with a script that could easily have been written by the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center or the National Endowment for Democracy. Though the Polish Centre was financed jointly by the Gdansk city council and the EU its ideological content is heavily indebted to US policymakers. As its promo video shows, the exhibition is pure democratic ideology

as spectacle; an “inter-active experience” leads visitors through various stages, from the country’s “communist tyranny” through the birth of the Solidarność union and to the eventual “birth of Freedom” in the form of free trade unions and elections. Nothing is said (at least in the video) of the subsequent mass unemployment, rampant privatisations etc that became part of this vaguely defined “freedom”. See the video;

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KA-1Y8yJgs>

4) See this 2008 article focussing on intervention in Sri Lanka; <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/08/15/us-state-department-funded-afl-cio%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98solidarity-center%E2%80%99-enters-sri-lanka-destabiliz>

5) For an analysis of the active role of AFL-CIO, NED & SC in furthering US foreign policy, this long dissertation maps the correlation; <http://www.countercurrents.org/nelsonbass040313.pdf>

At the same time that that AFL-CIO was officially opposing the 2003 occupation of Iraq Solidarity Center personnel were ‘embedded’ with invading US troops. Once installed in the country they gave recognition only to the sole Iraqi union federation that supported the military occupation. This support for one federation over others was criticised by union activists as in contradiction to AFL-CIO’s long-held commitment to workers’ “freedom of association”; i.e. the principle that workers should be free to choose which union to represent them.

6) <http://websbd.net/news/wal-mart-refuses-to-compensate-tazreen-fire-victims/>