



2013 World Day for Decent Work Statement

It's time to raise our expectations

by: Jerry Dias

Every year on October 7 workers around the globe recognize the World Day for Decent Work.

World Day for Decent Work isn't meant as a celebration of the labour movement's historic achievements, unlike our Labour Day in September (or, International Workers Day in May). It instead reminds us of the current and constant downward pressure placed on workers, as incomes stagnate, as wealth concentrates in the hands of the privileged few, as social security supports dry up and as jobs become more insecure and more precarious. It's a day when unions recommit to win good jobs for all.

This past year has been punctuated by workplace tragedies, including a major disaster at the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh. More than one thousand low-wage textile workers lost their lives in a tragic, and totally preventable, factory collapse. This event not only shone the global spotlight on the inhumane working conditions many workers in developing nations face, but also the results of industry deregulation, hyper-competition and lack of government oversight in a global economy. It was preceded by a major industrial fire at another Bangladeshi garment facility that claimed the lives of more than one hundred workers.

We were also reminded of the close connections we share with precarious workers in seemingly far off places (some of the brand name clothes Canadians buy were manufactured at Rana Plaza). Ironically, those low-waged Bangladeshi garment workers mass-produced cheap goods that were eventually sold by low-waged retail clerks in Canada and other nations.

Of course, it's unfair to draw direct parallels between these workers. They have vastly different personal experiences. But they do represent interrelated points on the same global assembly line, often tied to the same employer. Their experiences are drawn together in the struggle to win decent pay and decent work standards. Dragging down standards in Bangladesh puts added competitive pressure on workers here and elsewhere. As a union movement, our goal is to bring those standards up – for everyone. The Bangladeshi tragedy reminds us that we're still moving in the wrong direction.

In Canada, job quality and job security are fading, at a relatively rapid pace. Part-time work makes up nearly 1 in 5 of all jobs on offer. Temporary jobs are growing at a rate that's twice as fast as permanent jobs, mostly in work that's short-term

and on contract. Temporary workers earn 70 cents on the dollar, compared to workers in permanent jobs and they often receive no benefits, and are less likely to have a collective agreement. There isn't a sector of our economy where workers aren't threatened with having their jobs "outsourced." The past year has also shown us how corporations misuse and abuse foreign worker programs, to help drag down work standards.

Rana Plaza is an extreme example of negligence and despair. But it's also a bi-product of a global economic system lacking principle – lead by key actors (investors, governments, corporations) that appear to have no conscience. It's a bi-product of misaligned priorities and a workers movement that sets its expectations far too low. The conditions that gave rise to the Bangladeshi tragedy are the same conditions that have enabled giant multi-national corporations to walk away from their responsibility to the victims. This is an outrage.

One month ago, Unifor – Canada's newest union – was formed by the Canadian Auto Workers and Communications, Energy and Paperworkers unions. Our commitment has been to help raise the expectations of all workers, not just union members, in demanding a better standard of living from their employers and from government. We're not interested in entering a race to the bottom.

Raising the bar of expectations is not easy, especially when many workers are just happy to have a job. The change we need requires a full-on paradigm shift in how our economies are structured – a remapping of the power relationships between the richest few and the rest of us. The change we need will come from all stakeholders in civil society (workers, governments, employers) who refuse to accept the status quo.

Unifor has called on the federal government to convene a multi-stakeholder Good Jobs Summit, so that a conversation about creating and sustaining decent work can start in earnest. We need elected officials to help chart a path towards a good jobs future. This summit isn't the solution, it's a start. We need to start raising expectations that we can win jobs that pay fair wages, are safe and stable. And we want all workers in Canada to join in. If the federal government won't lead the way, then Unifor will. We will hold a Good Jobs Summit within the year.

I'm optimistic workers will join in a good jobs revolution, one that takes place in every workplace, at every bargaining table, every boardroom, in our communities, on the streets and right across the global assembly line – from Bangladeshi garment workers demanding higher wages and safer working conditions in recent weeks to North American retail workers keeping on a grassroots campaign to bring workplace justice to increasingly precarious, sub-standard jobs.

Change is on the horizon this World Day for Decent Work. Perhaps that is enough cause for celebration.