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No Christmas joy for oppressed sweatshop workers

Tony Magliano | Dec. 10, 2012 Making a Difference

Because most retail companies put profit above all else, exploited sweatshop workers constantly experience misery -- and sometimes even tragedy.

On Nov. 24, more than 112 Bangladeshi workers were burned to death [1], trapped in a locked sweatshop sewing garments for Wal-Mart, Disney, Sears, Sean Combs/ENYCE, Target and others.

Feeling pressure from the above retailers to sew clothing at a frantic pace and get it shipped out in time for the Christmas shopping rush, management at the Tazreen garment factory outside Dhaka, Bangladesh, had been forcing employees for the last three months to work 12-hour shifts, six and seven days a week, for less than 27 cents an hour.

Charles Kernaghan, executive director of the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, told me the factory was a death trap.

"The warehouse stacked with clothing was on the ground floor -- the very worst place it could be," he said.

"Retailers like Wal-Mart knew the Tazreen factory was a dangerous sweatshop," Kernaghan continued. "The factory had a permit for just a three-story building, but instead constructed a nine-story factory. There were no exterior fire escapes or fireproof stairwells. All the windows were locked shut. There were just three stairways, all of which led down to the ground floor warehouse.

"The minute the fire broke out, the workers were trapped as the warehouse was engulfed in flames. On top of this, the supervisors and managers tried to prevent the workers from fleeing by closing the collapsible gates and [padlocking] them."

Show your outrage by signing this online petition [2]. Also, urge your U.S. senators and your local House representative to co-sponsor and actively support the reintroduction of the "Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act [3]," which, according to Kernaghan, would provide oppressed workers with legal protections that are as strong as current laws protecting corporate trademarks, copyrights and intellectual property.

"It is time that brutalized workers had the same legal protections as corporations are guaranteed under intellectual property and copyright laws," Kernaghan said.

Additionally, kindly consider giving a much-needed Christmas gift to the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights [4]. They are a small, but highly effective team dedicated to the abolition of sweatshops.

Catholic social teaching insists that all workers deserve just wages, medical and disability insurance, safe and decent working conditions, pensions, adequate leisure time, and the right to form unions.

When these labor and human rights are denied, Catholics have a moral responsibility to actively engage in solidarity with oppressed workers.

In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote: "There is a need for ever new *movements of solidarity of* the workers and *with* the workers. This solidarity must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subject of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by the growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the 'Church of the poor.' "

In recognition that Jesus was born into poverty, it would be Christ-like for us to give time and treasure to oppressed workers this Christmas.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about the principles of Catholic social teaching. His email address is tonymagliano4@yahoo.com [5].]

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/world/asia/bangladesh-fire-exposes-safety-gap-in-supply-chain.html
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