



New International Accord to guarantee HEALTH AND SAFETY in the TEXTILE and GARMENT INDUSTRY

April 23, 2021 was the 8th anniversary of the terrible catastrophe of the Rana Plaza collapse. This disaster was unprecedented as regards its magnitude and seriousness. There were four textile factories on top of each other in an 8-story building. Its collapse can be summarised by two horrifying figures: 1,134 dead and more than 2,500 injured, many seriously. It was the worst industrial accident in history.

This industrial homicide led public opinion to question global commercial practices. It also highlighted the need for changing the rules of the game for large multinational enterprises, in relation to their Corporate Responsibility policy and practices.

This situation resulted in a five-year agreement (until 2018) to prevent fires and guarantee building safety, which was called the Bangladesh "ACCORD¹." It involved a commitment on the part of 220 global brands, who reaffirmed their promise to keep this agreement for the time established therein, thereafter handing it over to local authorities and interest groups, with a view to its continuation in order to contribute to the sector's long-term safety and sustainability in the country.

In October 2017, a Transition Agreement was reached involving the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association), brand representatives and trade unions.

ACCORD operations were therefore able to continue from May 2018 onwards, with the proposal of a national remediation structure that would sustainably assume the ACCORD's objectives. Its renewal included new elements², based on the original ACCORD, giving more importance to trade union freedom, with improved protection for workers whose factories were closed or relocated due to safety problems, as well as establishing compensation for dismissal in the case of workers losing their jobs.

The ACCORD has involved an effective effort on the part of the multinationals that produce in this country, resulting in important changes in the conditions inside industrial installations. However, in my opinion, it is more important the fact that Safety Committees have finally been considered as necessary entities for representing workers. Not in vain has their election often become special days in companies, with workers coming in their best clothes as if it were a special celebration.

¹ <https://bangladeshaccord.org/>

² See reports on the ACCORD and Bangladesh on CCOO Industry's website: <http://www.industria.ccoo.es/Publicaciones/Internacional/Informes&14305>

In May 2018, the extension of this agreement was renewed by 119 brands, including the following Spanish multinational retail brands: Inditex, El Corte Inglés, Mango, Mayoral Moda Infantil, Desigual and Madness.

It is important to remember some facts³ regarding the signing and application of this agreement, as well as what is still pending in relation to factory safety:

- It has covered approximately 2.5 million workers in Bangladesh's textile and garment sector, in the 1,692 factories covered by the ACCORD –now the so-called RMG Sustainability Council (RSC).
- > 1.8 million workers have been informed about essential safety in the workplace.
- 1,300 safety committees have been trained to handle and monitor safety in the workplace.
- Health and safety training was imparted to the staff in 846 factories.
- Workers have submitted 1,507 complaints in relation to health and safety measures, 270 of which have to do with COVID-19.
- 1,632 factories have been inspected, due to problems in their: structural, electrical and fire-prevention integrity, on an independent basis, in order to identify safety dangers as well as demanding renovations and verifying their completion. The following has been carried out in this regard:
 - Initial inspections: 4,914,
 - Follow-up inspections: 33,381
 - 39% fire-prevention inspections,
 - 40% electrical inspections,
 - 21% structural inspections.
- 118,500 infringements of electrical, structural and fire-prevention safety standards have been identified.
- There has been 100% implementation of the initial correction actions derived from ACCORD inspections, in 361 factories
- > 90% of initial remediation was carried out in 1,272 factories, with different percentages in the rest, based on workplace danger, identified in the original round of ACCORD inspections.
- 188 inspected factories have been closed for different reasons, the most serious being structural, etc.
- **Since its signing, there have been NO deaths due to fire or structural collapse in factories where inspections have been completed and renovations initiated.**

Some factories have still to be completely validated, in accordance with ACCORD standards, as follows:

- 1,243 factories have not yet verified the installation of their fire detection and alarm system.
- 1,055 factories have not yet verified, as completely functional and installed, their fire extinguishing system.

³ Data published on ACCORD's website on September 1, 2021

- 917 factories have not yet implemented and verified, as safe, all their evaluation measures.
- 375 factories have still to complete their structural remediation based on the Engineering Assessment.

Since its renewal, the Bangladesh Government has been legally appealing the established procedures, preventing the ACCORD from continuing to develop its activity. Even the Bangladesh Supreme Court, in late 2018, held a hearing due to the Government wanting the ACCORD to continue operating in Bangladesh under a series of restrictions, hindering its initiatives and without respecting its capacity for operating; its aim was to establish a paralysing control by the Government and employers.

We cannot forget that the ACCORD's infrastructure was coordinated separately with the Government and the national three-party committee that supervised the National Action Plan on Fire Safety and, therefore, always taking into account the request to be integrated into it. This was so that the Government would not consider its obstructionist measures as a wrongly understood defence of "national sovereignty," thereby avoiding a possible conflict that could endanger the defence of worker Health and Safety in the country's garment industry, but which, in part, hindered the application of this initiative and even promoted the possibility of its extension.

On February 18, 2019, the Supreme Court hearing decided that this would be the last permitted extension. It would therefore come to an end after the extensions permitted up to April 30, 2021, a period that has been successively extended by global trade unions and international clothing brands, by means of a 3-month extension of the 2019 Transition Agreement commitments, in order to continue negotiating, due to not reaching an agreement, until the final initial extension, up to August 31, 2021. The idea is to link up with this new period, as long as control of the programme is handed over to the recently created RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), where the three parties of the ACCORD are represented.

Global trade union organisations and trade unions in all countries clearly pointed out the danger facing the ACCORD's future, and we have demanded, both actively and passively, in all the forums in which we have participated, in individual and collective meetings with the multinational enterprises in our countries, including Spain, its compulsory extension in Bangladesh, as well as the need for creating a similar entity at a global level.

All interest groups (the sector's brands and retailers, employers' organisations and trade union organisations) are obliged to consider and assume, and finally accept, that this demand will lead us to a system that will prevent another Rana Plaza from occurring, either in Bangladesh or in any other country, as is unfortunately the case.

There are sad, recent examples of this. Let's consider just the year 2021: 1) in February, 28 workers died in an underground garment factory in Tangiers, Morocco, when the workshop was flooded; it was located in the basement of a residential building and did not comply with the minimum health and safety conditions that are required; 2) last March, 20 people died and another 24 were injured in a fire in a textile factory in the industrial district of Al Obour, to the northeast of El Cairo, Egypt, in one of the garment factories located in a four-storey building. In Egypt, there are frequently fires in factories and workshops, which normally do not comply with occupational safety measures, involving obsolete, unsuitable installations in most cases. And recently, last month, a fire broke out in another factory belonging to the Valeo company in Tunisia, or a few days ago, on August 27, when 17 workers died in the

city of Mehran, Pakistan, due to a fire that razed an illegal factory that made bags, since the factory's exits and windows were blocked.

In this context, the Bangladesh ACCORD has now become an International Accord for guaranteeing health and safety in the textile and garment industry. On August 25, an agreement was reached between international retail brands and global trade union federations, after the convulsive times we have experienced in recent months, and almost 9 years after its initial signing, striving to survive.

It was necessary to globalise this tool, as has finally been confirmed.

It will not be easy to organise its extension, identifying countries, negotiating other spheres, incorporating non-European brands. We cannot forget that the ACCORD mainly covers the factories that produce for European brands. From the beginning, most American brands decided to join the "Alliance"⁴, an agreement similar to the ACCORD, but since the latter includes a legal commitment, in the case of settling disputes, it was not so convenient for these brands. Therefore, one of the most complex challenges will be integrating these brands into this new International Accord, so that there does not arise an unequal, discriminatory situation, in other countries, between some brands and others. In the end, they all share the same factories, which means that European brands could end up paying to improve the former, while American brands will not have to guarantee their workers' safety, since this will be done by others, who would clearly be subject to unfair competition. Once again, this will be a challenge for the garment sector and global trade unionism.

This new International Accord extends the previous one, based on the structures created by the ACCORD, and it has been signed by international retail garment brands and global trade union federations. It comes into force on September 1, 2021.

This new Accord features the following essential elements:

- It will maintain the legally binding commitments in relation to safety in the workplace.
- It will be in force for two years and two months.
- It is committed to being extended to other countries. Within six months of it coming into force, the agreement's signatories will jointly define the criteria for determining where and when its extension is appropriate, and will agree, in relation to a list of initial countries for consideration, on its scope therein by means of a feasibility study. What was the first global, multi-enterprise agreement will thereby add a new feature, that of becoming a global, multi-country agreement.
- Its scope will be extended to deal with due diligence in the field of human rights.
- It establishes a new, simplified and optional arbitration process, in order to guarantee the Accord's fulfilment.
- Respect for freedom of association will be guaranteed.
- Guarantees will be provided regarding information, transparency and independency in its implementation.
- Financial remediation by means of an annual fund, which each of the signatory brands will finance, up to a maximum of 350,000 dollars.
- Training of Safety Committees, and an awareness programme for workers, by means of a credible and independent complaint mechanism.

⁴ <https://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/>

- In the case of Bangladesh, the implementation of past agreements will be continued, with a clear and specific commitment to extend its health and safety programme, which is already being implemented by the national, independent RMG Sustainability Council, made up of the country's industry, trade unions and brands.
- Creation of a credible accountability and compliance mechanism in the entire industry.

It is now up to the sector's multinational retail enterprises to join it individually. We can confirm that 100 of them have already done so, with some Spanish ones being among those that were notified to us: Inditex and El Corte Inglés; we suppose that these will be joined by others and this is the goal we will continue working towards at CCOO Industry. Yesterday, the signatory International Trade Union Federations, IndustriALL Global Union and UNI Global Union, and the ACCORD⁵ itself, announced the first wave of brands and retailers that have signed the agreement and called for the incorporation of new brands; the objective is to guarantee the future, and the health and safety, of those that work in their supply chains, urging all garment and textile companies to sign this agreement and join our collective objective of attaining a safer and more sustainable sector.

In the next stage, Bangladesh will continue to be a reference point for evaluating the progress made towards the goal of decent work in the world. It is therefore necessary for the monitoring of the sector's industrial and trade union reality to become a priority aspect of the worldwide working class' solidarity action, raising awareness that the defence of labour rights initiated in Bangladesh is an essential element in defending workers' rights in the world.

In our case, **at CCOO Industry, we urge the Spanish brands to continue with this project; those included from the beginning, and we call on those yet to do so, to join this new Accord in order to assume their evident responsibility and contribute to its international extension.**

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⁵ <https://internationalaccord.org/updates?s=09>