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The future of corporate accountability in supply chains isn't some hypothetical question or a legal challenge to ponder. The reality and future of corporate accountability is what is happening to real people and their fundamental human rights—

And the stakes are high.

Every day, from the vantage point of the 60 countries where we work alongside about half a million workers every year, at the Solidarity Center we look at future corporate accountability in supply chains within the context of:

- 1) A massive expansion of corporate and investor global “rights” over the last 50 years, while meanwhile -
- 2) Worker and human rights were severely curtailed, all over the world, particularly over the last decade. In fact, we are witnessing a global contraction of civil rights and resurgence of oligarchy and authoritarianism.

Let me say it plainly from my perspective: No government ever woke up one morning and said, “Let’s create a more fair economy today,” or “let’s expand human rights.” Markets and corporations don’t magically conjure up shared prosperity, either. It is the agency of individual citizens coming together collectively—the trade unions, the NGOs—that **push** governments and corporations to make changes to the way our economies work and make them more fair. But that requires collective voice and collective power. It requires human rights, and democracy and more than anything – it requires freedom of association.

And right now, these fundamental rights are under attack, north to south:

1. Literally half the world’s states have implemented controls on tens of thousands of citizen-led organizations, like laws that

make it impossible to register or fund civil society work, and trade unions, or laws that restrict citizens rights to form organizations at all. And again, the stakes are high:

- More than 1,000 human rights defenders in 2016 were killed, harassed, or detained, and two thirds of them in this hemisphere.
- In 2016, the number of countries that deny or constrain free speech and freedom of assembly increased from 41 to 50, with Poland and the United States added to that list, and Bangladesh featuring high on that list.

2. Labor rights globally are often the most frequently violated set of human rights. For example:

- 82 countries exclude workers from labor law, including freedom of association protections.
- More than half of all countries deny some or all workers collective bargaining.
- Unionists were murdered in 12 countries in 2017. In Guatemala, trade unionists were murdered, over the last nine years, at a rate of every four to six weeks, and murder with total impunity (such as we continue to see in the 2012 murder of organizer Aminul Islam from Bangladesh).

3. Seven out of 10 people live in a country that has seen a rise in inequality in the last 30 years.

- And it is worse for women. Globally, women earn 30 percent of what men earn for equal work, especially a world in which labor rights are under attack everywhere making unionization hard. It will take 170 years for women to be paid the same as men at this rate. And women experience truly horrific rates of gender-based violence, suppressing their freedom of association specifically in supply chains and these figures are especially salient at the root or end of supply chains, like in ready-made garment factories in Bangladesh, or picking grapes or cabbage for export in Morocco or South Africa or the United States.

So – when we are talking about the future of corporate accountability, this is the context.

In the end this isn't a technical question. **It's a human dignity and human progress question.**

It's about Sultan Mollah, whose 18-year-old daughter Anjuara worked on the sixth floor of Rana plaza. He told us when we interviewed him last week, "I remember the day before the tragedy, she told us about a crack in the wall of the building. We urged her not to go there and she said, "I will not enter father, I will just go there and give my attendance. Why should I miss out a day's salary? I will come back." She had no right to refuse unsafe work, no union to stand up for and enforce that right, and she walked into that building and she died that day.

A year after Mr. Mollah lost his beautiful daughter to that building collapse in Bangladesh, in 2015, I met a young woman garment worker who had become a union organizer. She told me that now she now sits across the table and negotiates wages and working conditions with the kind of boss who, before, callously threatened her with rape if she asked that her overtime be paid. Because he HAS to see her as his equal. Freedom of association in Bangladesh—embattled and under attack though it is—and her union helped that woman find her dignity and power.

When we talk about the future of corporate accountability in supply chains, we're talking about Monira Aktar, who told our staff last week that she had watched her sister being beaten and abused in a dangerous Dhaka ready-made garment factory for years. She became an activist and union organizer after the Tazreen fire and Rana Plaza collapse so she could change lives of women like her sister.

When we talk about the future of corporate accountability in supply chains, we're talking about Shamima Aktar, herself once locked in the factory with fellow union organizers and beaten by factory managers. Undaunted she told us last week: "The workers need us on their side to be able to live in peace, and I wish to continue organizing workers no matter how difficult it is for me."

These women have joined 216,000 factory workers in 445 factories who have built new unions in Bangladesh in the last five years.

But let's be really clear, the current generation of post-Rana plaza union organizers and leaders build on decades of grassroots worker organizing in Bangladesh—including by leaders like Babul and so many others who some people in this room have been honored to know and work with—but whose struggles, their training and developing of organizers, is what laid the foundation for the growth in unions after Rana plaza.

But back to Shamima and Monira - THAT's empowerment.

Still, unfortunately, too often when we are talking about corporate accountability in supply chains, we see initiatives that are really going backward, or that aren't up to the moment we find ourselves in. I mean, a small example. I went back on the website of the alternative program on building safety in Bangladesh, the Alliance (the smaller collection of brands that chose not to join the Accord). They list something like 90 factories they interact with, and they have a category called "worker empowerment." The definition of that category is "participation in helpline initiative."

Wow. Ok. Good. There is a number workers can use to call. But tell Shamima and Monira and the hundreds of other brave women forming unions, in Bangladesh or in the U.S. or anywhere – tell them they are empowered *when they can use a phone!*

- **100 years of human history in the advancement of human rights has established one set of fundamental rights for workers, in supply chains or in any form of employment, and that is freedom of association and collective bargaining. If we aren't talking about these rights, what are we talking about?**

We need to call it like it must be: Freedom of association and collective bargaining are essential to corporate accountability in supply chains because workers are best-placed—in the factory, on the farm, in the employ of a supplier to the global supply chain—to

identify problems and find solutions in the workplace. And because it works. But theirs are the rights corporations are LEAST interested in. **That's what made the Accord so unique** – though focused on fire and building safety, the power and credibility of the Accord, when it comes to workers, many brands and to the sustainability of the mechanism, lie in the essential reliance on freedom of association. Unions, global and local and NGOs negotiated this with global brands and that gives it power and meaning.

And then there are the alternatives, like the Alliance program and so many others that take us backward.

With this audience it may seem obvious, but the truth is there are very, very few globally negotiated agreements like the Accord and there are many, and proliferating examples of non-binding, non-negotiated corporate initiatives that fall short and specifically ignore freedom of association.

What we need to see –

- Fight like hell to defend workers' rights to organize.
- Hold every new potential deal or agreement set up by any global brand or corporation to the Accord and similar models.
- We should also be demanding corporations eliminate brutality against women and gender-based violence in their supply chains. I want to see the first global corporation to vow to eradicate gender-based violence in its supply chain and negotiate the terms with global and local unions led by women!

“I am a poor man who has lost a beautiful daughter and I hope and pray no father has to suffer the loss and injustice that I have gone through anytime in the future.” Mr. Mollah deserved better for his daughter. His daughter deserved better from global brands and now we have this model, the Accord. There's really no excuse to go backward.