

Bangladesh, guilt and solidarity

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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By the time [Bangladeshi authorities finally stopped searching for bodies](#) in the rubble of a garment factory on Monday, the death toll had reached 1,127. In the meantime, [a fire at another factory nearby had killed eight more](#). In [one incredible story](#), a woman survived, trapped in the collapsed building, for 17 days before finally being rescued. Her refusal to be the 1,128th person to die was a small piece of good news amid a whole heap of bad.

The disaster in Bangladesh is a classic example of the kind of thing that Americans feel powerless to prevent. Some commentators don't seem overly bothered by this. [Richard Epstein thinks there's pretty much nothing anyone can do](#) except for enforce existing Bangladeshi safety codes, which would have the added benefit of weakening unions. (Epstein sees organized labor as not only a non-solution but actually a *cause* of the disaster.) Even the more liberal Matthew Yglesias took the disaster as [an opportunity to point out](#) that different countries inevitably put different levels of priority on worker safety, and that's okay. (He later [sort of apologized](#).)

But even those of us who are furious that global capitalism can lead to such mayhem aren't always sure what we can do about it. You can buy fewer clothes or used clothes or make your own, but it's pretty difficult to opt out of the global garment trade altogether. And even if you could, what would this accomplish? The globalization cat's out of the bag. The factories aren't going away, and at this point it wouldn't be a net positive for these countries if they did.

We're all part of the global economy. And a lot of us middle-class westerners have enough power and privilege that we'll never have to work in a dangerous sweatshop, but not so much that we feel we can do much about the fact that such horrors exist in the first place. How to move from feeling simultaneously guilty and helpless to actually acting in solidarity with the poor?

Justo González puts it well: the key element is naming not our relative power—the instinctual move for us western liberals—but our relative lack of it. The world's evil is not something we could stop if only we cared enough to; we are *captive* to it—and the path from impotent guilt to true solidarity requires naming this powerlessness we have in common with those who have far less power still. For González, [writing about the preaching task](#), the solution lies in the proclamation of the reign of God.

Purifying our individual consumption habits might assuage our guilt, but it's not going to fix the problems that led to the disaster in Bangladesh. That requires solidarity expressed in collective action—the kind of pressure that even big companies can't ignore. Such efforts have already spurred several companies (but [not Wal-Mart](#) UPDATE: [or several other American retailers](#)) to [sign on to a legally binding plan](#) requiring them to pay for safety improvements and monitoring. Meanwhile, [the Bangladeshi government has agreed](#) to raise the minimum wage and loosen restrictions on labor organizing.

These are encouraging developments, good first steps. (They may make our clothes more expensive, but [not much](#).) For deeper reform to take effect, companies will have to figure out [the collective action problem](#): how to make changes without losing a competitive advantage to the next guy? And to put meaningful pressure on them, American consumers will have to act collectively, too—in solidarity with those across the world who have so much less than we do but, like us, lack the individual power to obstruct the powers and principalities.