Aklima Khanam was 14 when she started working in a garment factory in Bangladesh. Her father was ill and could not work, so she went to work to support her family. Six years later, in January of 2013, she started working at Rana Plaza. She worked long hours, 7 days a week.

When the building collapsed on April 24, 2013, she was trapped under a machine and waited 12 hours to be rescued, as her co-workers died around her. She cannot work due to her injuries. She is 20 years old.

This week marks one year since at least 1,138 workers died and more than 2,500 were injured when the Rana Plaza garment factory complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed.

One year later, victims and survivors are still waiting for compensation.

We grieve as we remember the awful details. The workers knew the building was unsafe by looking at cracks in the exterior walls, and yet were forced into work by managers on strict deadlines from international brands. So many women and men were crushed to death when the building collapsed. So many children were left without parents.

Many of the workers who were gravely injured cannot work due to the loss of limbs. Some families have had to pull their children from school to make up for the lost income. Over 250 children have been orphaned.

It was the deadliest event in the history of the global garment industry. It is not the only deadly factory incident in Bangladesh—fires in garment factories have claimed hundreds of lives in recent years, some when workers were locked into buildings and could not escape when flames broke out.

The question is, what has changed since Rana Plaza a year ago? The answer is, not enough.

Shamefully, many of the corporations responsible, whose clothing was made by the hands of these women and men who perished, have not made an effort to change.

Bangladesh workers have two specific demands in the wake of this horrific disaster. They want full and fair victim and survivor compensation, and they want factories required to abide by strong safety standards.

The International Labor Rights Forum is calling on The Children’s Place, whose clothing was made at Rana Plaza, to pay $8 million to victim and survivor compensation. That’s less than half
of what their CEO Jane Elfers made in 2012, and but a fraction of the company’s $53 million net income in 2013.

Compensation is not enough. Workers in Bangladesh’s garment industry have banded together to insist safety standards in the factories where they work. Coordinating with global unions and international labor rights organizations they created the ‘Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh’ which over 150 apparel brands and retailers have agreed to implement. Others, like the GAP, Children’s Place, and Wal-Mart, refuse to sign.

Instead, these retailers and some others designed a much weaker agreement known as The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. While The Accord is a legally binding contract, The Alliance relies on the goodwill of the signers. This goodwill has all too often been missing in the past. Workers in Bangladesh need the rule of law as a sure protection and only The Accord offers that.

L. L. Bean’s chose to sign onto this Alliance rather than the Accord on Fire and Building Safety. Bean’s officials have been in dialogue with us and others advocating for higher safety standards and stricter adherence to those standards. In our conversations, we have learned that Bean’s contracts with only one factory in Bangladesh and requires that factory to meet safety standards.

Bean’s officials have travelled to Bangladesh to both inspect this one factory and to meet with the staff of the Alliance to measure the progress of safety standards for other factories. They are monitoring the number of factories inspected and the steps taken to bring their safety standards into compliance. We urge L. L. Bean to reconsider and sign onto The Accord, but we acknowledge their efforts and we look forward to continued dialogue in the future.

We as consumers can feel confused and lost about how to take action. We all wear clothes, we buy food, and we know we are intimately linked with workers around the world every day. We do not want to be a party to the grave injustice of the current system.

We try to find alternatives, including union made or fair trade products. We look to buy local or buy Made in America. The truth is, while it is important to know where our goods are made and under what conditions, we ultimately cannot shop our way out of this problem. The system is too big, and requires systemic change.

Therefore, we must use our voices as well as our dollars to demand that these companies do what’s right. We cannot wait any longer to create change in the global garment industry. These companies must take responsibility and ensure the safety of the workers who produce their clothing.
This week as we hold the victims of Rana Plaza in our hearts and in our minds, we lift our voices up together. We listen to the voices of the workers of Bangladesh who are organizing to demand their rights.

In solidarity with the workers of Bangladesh’s garment industry, we call on brands like Children’s Place and Wal-Mart to immediately take action to right this wrong by paying full and fair compensation to the victims and survivors of Rana Plaza and the other deadly factory incidents. We call on these brands and all who do business in Bangladesh to sign on to the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, so that not another life is lost in Bangladesh in the name of profits.