

Widespread unrest erupts among textile workers in Bangladesh

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Angry protests by thousands of textile workers broke out last month around the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka and reemerged again this month. The unrest threatened to create a political crisis for the government, as the economy is heavily dependent on textile and garment exports produced in the country's sweatshops.

A march by 4,000 workers from the Universe Knitting Sweater Factory near the Savar Export Processing Zone (EPZ), north of Dhaka, on May 22 triggered the protests. The Universe Knitting employees complained of abuse and set out an 11-point set of demands including an immediate pay rise, a guaranteed basic wage instead of piece rates, payment of wage arrears, overtime rates and an end to employer harassment. The owners had already ignored a previous protest on May 20.

Workers from nearby factories joined the demonstration, particularly after company thugs on motorbikes attacked the demonstrators. According to the *Bangladesh Observer*, management at the Bandhu and other garment companies attempted to physically prevent their employees from participating, provoking bitter clashes. A number of factories, including Bandhu, were ransacked and vehicles were damaged.

Thousands of workers armed with iron rods, bamboos and wooden planks blocked the Savar-Ashulia road and also broke into the Savar EPZ. Authorities mobilised thousands of police and paramilitary units known as Ansar to crush the protest using tear gas and batons. The *Bangladesh Observer* stated that Ansar units fired live rounds into the demonstration. At least 100 workers were injured, six with bullet wounds. The protests continued into the evening, and reports of the clashes spread throughout the capital.

Demonstrations erupted again the following day after news that a 25-year-old worker, Rana, had died overnight of gunshot wounds. The protests were not confined to Savar but took place at textile factories throughout the capital and on the outskirts. According to authorities, at least 200 people were injured in violent clashes as police and paramilitary units attempted to suppress the demonstrations. Around 150 factories were ransacked, 10 were burnt down and scores of vehicles were damaged.

An Associated Press report described the chaotic situation on May 23. After pitched battles in industrial suburbs on the

outskirts of the city, "the protests spread to the capital where workers blocked busy roads and ransacked several factories—looting buildings and burning cars—in an industrial area in downtown Dhaka. They also threw stones at police and firefighters, who tried to control the situation."

According to the *Independent*, large contingents of police, including paramilitary units from the elite Rapid Action Battalion and Ansar, used baton charges and tear gas in an effort to break up determined protests by thousands of workers, who threw up barricades and blocked roads. Police arrested 30 union leaders, including Moshrefa Mishu, leader of the Garment Workers Front.

Employers groups denounced the protestors and demanded that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government deploy the army. Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) officials and members held a small rally and threatened to shut down the industry if government "inaction" continued. BNP secretary-general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan declared that the government was determined to "bring normalcy at any cost".

The following day, however, the media reported calm throughout the city. The main role in ending the confrontation was played by union leaders. The *Independent* reported that 10 organisations of garment workers had banded together to urge their members to return to work immediately. To divert the anger of workers, the leaders issued an ultimatum to employers for a minimum monthly wage of 3,000 taka (\$US43).

Protests erupted again on June 1-2 as workers demanded a 3,000-taka minimum wage as well as mandatory holidays on Fridays, transport, overtime facilities and an end to night work for women workers. As many as 70,000 workers from the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ) took to the streets on June 2 and clashed with police armed with batons and tear gas.

The government, employers and the media have denounced the unrest as the product of a foreign conspiracy. BNP leader Mannan Bhuiyan said those involved in arson were "enemies of the country" and accused "outsiders" of staging the violence. BGMEA and other employer groups blamed a "conspiracy by a neighbouring country". The slurs are a crude attempt to whip up anti-Indian nationalism and communalism to justify the further suppression of protests and strikes.

The BGMEA has dismissed the demands of workers, absurdly declaring that they were “well paid and enjoy good conditions”. The industry, which employs an estimated 1.8 million workers, many of them female, is notorious for low pay, long hours and abuse as well as unhealthy and unsafe conditions.

Competition for world markets intensified after the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement at the start of 2005. The agreement assigned assured export quotas for each country to the major Western markets in Europe and the US. Now Bangladesh is in direct competition with other producers, particularly China, which has far more developed infrastructure and large economies of scale.

Bangladeshi producers have not only retained their market share but increased exports by 20 percent over the past year. They have only been able to do so by ensuring that labour costs remain well below those of their competitors in China. The government is intent on protecting an industry, which is essential to the economy, accounting for 75 percent of exports and an annual income of nearly \$US7 billion.

A garment worker told the *Daily Star*: “They do not pay us wages regularly. So we are on the street and damaging factories.” Most workers earn as little as \$US20 a month—in some factories as little as \$12. Late payment of wages is common. As a result, workers often live in squalid conditions. Women workers rarely receive their legal right to three months’ maternity leave on full pay. Physical and sexual harassment is widespread.

Even according to the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF), which collaborates closely with the Bangladeshi government and employers, conditions are appalling. Following the protests, ITGLWF general secretary Neil Kearney declared that the federation had warned repeatedly of the growing frustration among Bangladeshi workers.

The ITGLWF cited “excessive long working hours, low rates of basic earnings, abuses in piece rate payments, late payment of wages, child labor, issues of structural and fire safety, corrupt police practices of charging workers on the flimsiest of evidence, the practice of supervisors acting as labor contractors who illegally rake off a percentage of workers’ wages, the practice of using hired goons to terrorize and intimidate workers”.

Kearney said workers commonly work longer than the 72-hour week and are often forced to work on Friday, the weekly rest day. He cited the case of a worker who, after working 29 days for 12 hours, received just 400 taka for the month.

While well aware of the conditions in garment factories in countries like Bangladesh, the ITGLWF has not the slightest intention of organising workers in an international campaign against such gross exploitation.

Safety standards are virtually non-existent. In February, more

than 50 workers were killed and another 150 badly burned in the country’s worst industrial fire to date. About 500 workers were trapped inside when fire broke out and many had to jump as one of the two exits was locked. Factories rarely have elementary safety measures such as fire alarms and extinguishers. More than 400 garment workers died since 1990 in factory fires but the figure is certainly much higher, as most are not officially recorded.

The widespread protests reflect deepening frustration and anger not just over immediate issues of pay and conditions, but over the deepening social divide between rich and poor and the contempt of the political establishment toward the masses.

A Bangladeshi correspondent to WSWS wrote: “This finally showed the ocean divide between the urban, that is, the (so-called) educated folks, as well as the workers and farmers in our country. When poor people were dying demanding electricity, our self-styled educated and urban class was worried about cricket! Every single journalist and commentators were trying to protect the owners of these sweatshops in the name of saving the national export industry.”

The opposition Awami League has cynically attempted to exploit the protests for its own political purposes. Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina accused the government of deliberately creating the chaos. “They [the government] have set garments factories ablaze to create anarchy in the sector and blame it [on the Awami League],” she said. While declaring that the government had failed to deal with the “resolvable” problems of workers, the Awami League presided over the same social disaster when it was in government.

The government has now enlisted the unions in a series of tripartite meetings with employers in a bid to head off further unrest. Labour Minister Amanullah Aman met with factory owners and labour leaders on June 12. Empty promises were made to provide better pay and conditions, job security, leave and “a friendly working environment”.

Amid sharpening international competition, however, the already terrible conditions facing garment and textile workers in Bangladesh will only worsen, leading to even more explosive unrest. The key issue facing workers is the necessity of unifying their struggles with those of exploited textile and garment workers around the world on the basis of a socialist program directed at the source of exploitation: the profit system itself.



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