

# Security forces kill two protesting workers in Bangladesh

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10 July 2009

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's government has launched a sweeping crackdown on protesting garment workers in Bangladesh after police and paramilitary Ansar forces shot dead two striking workers on June 27 and 28. Around 150 workers were injured in the shooting, six critically. Hundreds have since been arrested and prosecutions filed against thousands of workers.

The violent assault shows that the Awami League government, which falsely claims to be "pro-people," will not tolerate workers' unrest as the global recession hits the country. The Bangladeshi economy is heavily dependent on garment exports produced in the country's sweatshops.

The conflict started when workers of S Suhi Industrial Park Ltd, a sweater manufacturing factory in Jamgara, returned to work on June 27 after several days of agitation for wage rises. They found that three leaders were sacked on charges of leading the demonstrations. Hundreds of workers immediately demonstrated, demanding their reinstatement. Police shot workers to break up the protest, killing one striker, Al-Amin, 26.

In response, angry workers attacked the factory premises, set fire to a van, blocked the Dhaka-Tangail Highway and damaged several vehicles. Nearby factories shut down, fearing the spread of the agitation, but many workers joined the protests.

Despite the employers announcing a general holiday for garment factories in the Jamgara area on June 28, more workers took to the streets that day and blocked the Ashulia-Tongi Road, demanding the punishment of the Ansar members who killed Al-Amin, and compensation for his family.

Police and Rapid Action Battalion officers blocked a march of thousands of workers toward the Dhaka

Export Processing Zone. According to *New Age*, when a local Awami League official led a group of thugs to attack them, workers ransacked numbers of garment factories.

Police attacked the marchers with truncheons and fired rubber bullets and teargas, killing another worker and injuring more than 100. Among the critically injured was Javed Mostafa, a correspondent of the daily *Jugantor*.

In order to divert workers' anger, the police arrested several Ansar members who had admitted being involved in the shooting. Only three were produced in court, however, while others were released.

On June 29, more than 50,000 workers joined the protests, confronting 3,000 additional government forces. At the end of the day, protest leaders demanded that the government investigate and charge those responsible for the killings and compensate the families of the dead workers.

Instead, Labour Minister Khandaker Mosharaf Hossain warned that strong action would be taken against those involved in the protests. On July 2, police arrested 15 garment workers from the S Suhi Industrial Park on charges of "vandalism and arson".

On July 4, Industries Minister Dilip Barua declared that the government would have to resist the workers "with an iron hand". The next day, police filed cases against 5,000 to 6,000 people, including 38 leaders and activists of trade unions and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Barua claimed that the unrest was the work of a "certain group" as a part of a conspiracy to destabilise the country. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) vice-president Shafiul Islam said the riots were "financed by competitor countries".

In May 2006, the then ruling BNP and the garment employers made similar accusations after thousands of workers from the Savar Export Processing Zone, north of the capital Dhaka, clashed with police and Ansar forces.

The truth is that the working and living conditions in the garment industry, which employs an estimated 1.8 million workers, many of them female, are worsening under the impact of the world recession. Bangladesh companies are trying to maintain profits by drastically reducing wages. Skilled workers, who earned about 10,500 Taka (\$US150) a month in early 2008, have had their salaries cut by up to 30 percent.

The garment industry produces 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports and employs 40 percent of its industrial workforce. Bangladesh earned \$11 billion from apparel exports in the year to June 2008, making it the second biggest garments exporter after China. Bangladesh employers are now in a cut-throat competition against their rivals in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and China because recessionary conditions have squeezed orders from the United States and Europe. The ready-made garment industry's 40 percent growth rate has fallen to just 2 or 3 percent since November.

Mohammad Kamaluddin, 18, who started working as a garment worker two years ago, has seen his salary more than halved from 7,000 Taka (\$US100) a month to 3,000 Taka a month. He told AFP: "Before, it was bearable because I was sending 3,000 Taka home to my mother each month; now there's barely enough to live on for me."

According to a Factory Inspection Department report last week, 122 of 825 factories surveyed between January and May did not pay staff on time, with eight not even paying the minimum monthly wage of \$US25.

The government is backing the companies in driving down workers' conditions. At a July 4 meeting with BGMEA president Abdus Salam Murshedy, the Prime Minister's adviser, Syed Modaccher Ali, Commerce Minister Faruq Khan and Dhaka district police superintendent Iqbal Bahar proposed stepping up intelligence activities to ensure security for factories and their owners. The government is also considering establishing a specialist industrial police unit.

Sheikh Hasina's government came to power six month ago promising jobs, wage increases and welfare programs for the working people and rural poor.

Hoping for better conditions and expressing their opposition to the previous military-backed government, working people voted overwhelmingly for the Awami League. However, Hasina's first budget, presented two weeks ago, ignored workers' demands for an increase in the minimum wage of \$24 a month to \$72 a month, while allocating \$725 million for a stimulus package for companies.



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