

Bangladesh government cracks down on protesting garment workers

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Police used batons, tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to break up a protest by more than 20,000 garment workers in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka last Wednesday. Witnesses said scores were injured, including children. The protesters had blocked the Rokeya highway, a key road junction, for over four hours, amid continuing strikes and agitation against low wages and appalling conditions.

More than two million garment workers, mostly female, in Bangladesh are among the lowest paid in the world. A US consulting firm last year noted that they receive only 22 US cents per hour. Despite soaring food and living costs, the minimum wage remained frozen between 1994 and 2006, and has not increased for the past four years. Workers are demanding an increase from 1,662 taka to 5,000 taka (\$US72) a month.

Wednesday's protest started when workers were locked out at three Outright Group garment factories in the Ashulia district after agitating for a wage increase during the weekend. Within an hour, the protest swelled, underscoring a growing militancy among workers. When the police attacked, workers tried to defend themselves by throwing stones and overturning vehicles. The *Daily Star* reported that this turned "the entire area into a virtual battlefield".

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government has repeatedly mobilised police to try to suppress weeks of protests for higher wages. On June 21 and 22, tens of thousands of garment workers battled riot police for several hours after barricading the Dhaka-Tangail highway with trees and burning tyres. Angry workers ransacked factories, looted one and damaged vehicles.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) closed down all 250 factories in the district, fearing that the struggle would spread to other factories. BGMEA president Abdus Salam Murshedy expressed concern that "violent protests could jeopardise the industry's future" and claimed that "troublemakers are aiming to destabilise the state". Factories were reopened on June 23 after the government assured the BGMEA of a crackdown on workers.

Under the impact of the international recession, both the government and the employers are desperate to retain low wages. On June 22, labour minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain announced that garment factories would be divided into three zones—Ashulia, Naryanganj and Gazipur—where committees of police and local government politicians would supervise security measures to re-open factories. The next day, police filed cases against a large number of unidentified workers on charges of assaulting police and ransacking factories.

Many young garment workers, most 16-30 years of age, are not even paid the minimum wage. The *Just Style* website reports that factories have cut wages by 20-30 percent "in a bid to compete for orders with countries such as Vietnam, China and India". Workers also face pay delays of up to two months. "Unskilled workers in the garment sector are worse off still, receiving just 800 taka (US\$11.50) a month and often forced to toil for 14-16 hours a day," the website adds.

Workers cannot cope with basic expenses, including food, shelter, health care, transport and education for their children. The cost of living has been rising by

10-15 percent annually. According to an International Labour Organisation survey in 2007, 89 percent of workers work more than 8 hours a day. Recent surveys show that 90 percent share beds to sleep.

Factory conditions are atrocious and unsafe. According to the *Daily Star*, there have been 240 factory fire deaths since 1990. In some cases, factory gates were locked, preventing workers from escaping fires, there were no public address systems to warn them, no emergency lighting, and no regular fire drills. There were not enough water tanks, and staircases were crammed with goods.

Bangladesh factory owners are hostile to increasing wages, which could mean cutting their profit margins or losing markets. They are internationally connected to multinationals in the US and Europe, such as Marks & Spencer, H&M, Zara, Primark, Asda, Tesco, Gap and Wal-Mart, which are attracted by the low wages.

Competition for world markets intensified after the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement at the start of 2005, and has worsened in the global slump since 2008. The international agreement had assigned export quotas for each country. Now Bangladesh is in a direct struggle with producers in other countries, particularly China, which has far more developed infrastructure and large economies of scale. A recent US Commerce Department report noted that Bangladesh apparel shipments declined 1 percent in January-April 2010, compared to the same period last year, while India, China, Vietnam and Indonesia recorded growth.

The government is heavily dependent on garment exports, which last year provided 80 percent of export income, worth \$12 billion. While holding down wages, Sheik Hasina announced a stimulus package last November, particularly for the garment companies. Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith announced in April a second instalment of the package, worth 1 trillion takas.

A tripartite wages committee formed on April 28 between the government, employers and union representatives has held nine meetings without any

breakthrough. According to the *New Age*, the employers are ready to offer only 1,887 takas a month. To head off further protests, labour minister Mosharraf Hossain said the government would announce a minimum wage structure at the end of July.

In a comment on June 23, the *Financial Times* raised broader concerns about the mounting wave of strikes internationally, including in Bangladesh. "Economists say the violent labour unrest highlights how pressure for higher wages is not just confined to China, where Japanese-owned car parts plants and other factories have suffered a series of strikes recently, but is likely to spread to other cheap Asian manufacturing bases such as Bangladesh and Vietnam, raising inflationary pressure in the global economy," it stated.

The working class in Bangladesh or any other country is not responsible for the worldwide crisis of capitalism and should not be forced to bear its burdens. Rather than being forced to compete against one another, workers should unify their struggles in Asia and internationally on the basis of a socialist perspective to put an end to the bankrupt profit system.



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