

Garment workers in Bangladesh continue protests

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Thousands of garment workers continued their protests in Bangladesh for a fifth day yesterday to demand higher pay, despite widespread police repression and a sell-out deal reached between the National Garment Workers Federation, employer groups and the government on Sunday.

Clashes broke out with police and officers of the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in a number of places as protesters appealed to fellow garment workers to reject the agreement and join them on the streets. The government had deployed large contingents of riot police in key industrial areas to supervise the expected return to work.

At least 10 workers were injured at the Tejgaon industrial zone in the capital Dhaka when police baton-charged hundreds of workers from the Padma Polycotton factories. When workers tried to regroup, police again attacked them with batons and hot water. Nine workers were arrested.

In the Ashulia export zone to the north of Dhaka, several thousand workers from the Rose Garment, Green Life Clothing and Designers Jeans factories stopped work for the day to support their demand for 5,000 Taka (\$US73) per month. Garment workers in Bangladesh are among the worst paid in the world.

On Monday, around 10,000 workers in Fatullah, south of Dhaka, pelted police with rocks. The local police chief told Agence France Presse: "They attacked factories, set up barricades in the road. We had to use tear gas and batons to disperse the workers."

The police filed three separate cases in the Ashulia and Fatulla police stations against around 14,000 workers on charges of damaging factories and cars, and attacking police officers. Hundreds of workers have been detained by police over the past five days of protests.

The protests were smaller than those that erupted last

Friday after the government announced a minimum wage well below the demands of the unions. Nevertheless, they demonstrated the deep hostility of workers and their determination to fight for a decent wage.

In Ashulia alone on Saturday, 20,000 garment workers took to the streets and fought pitched battles with riot police who were sent in to break up the protests with rubber bullets and tear gas. On the same day, 10,000 workers blockaded a major road in Narayangany, south of Dhaka.

Fearing that the situation was spiralling out of control, a tripartite meeting was called on Sunday between government, employers and the unions to find a way to halt the protests. At issue was the new pay structure announced by the country's labour minister, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, last week, which increased the minimum monthly wage from 1,662 Taka to 3,000 Taka.

The pay increase is the first since 2006 despite continuing sharp price rises. The World Bank reported in April that food inflation hit 10.9 percent in February 2010. The government and garment manufacturers were forced to announce the salary increase because of signs of growing unrest among workers. A series of strikes and protests have taken place this year. The increase included an allowance of 200 Taka for medical expenses and 800 for accommodation.

One worker told Reuters: "We are rejecting what has been offered because it is too inadequate to make ends meet. We cannot submit to the [whims] of the government and factory owners." Another worker explained: "We work to survive but... commodity prices are going up and we cannot even arrange basic needs with our meagre income. The 3,000 Taka will be barely enough to buy food for my six-member family. How can I pay for medicines, the education of my children and other needs?"

Speaking in parliament on July 21, Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina Wajed, posturing as a friend of workers, declared: “The wages of workers are not only insufficient but also inhuman. The factory owners should give a portion of their profit to the workers.” Last Friday, however, Hasina rapidly changed her tune, warning that “anarchy and sabotage” by striking workers would not be tolerated.

On Saturday, Hasina ordered “workers to accept the pay hike and return to work” and threatened “tough action” against those who disobeyed. That evening, police arrested Mantu Ghosh, area leader of the Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC), after he participated in a protest in Narayanganj. Ghosh is also general secretary of Narayanganj district unit of Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB).

However, as protests continued on Sunday, the government and employers turned to the trade unions to bring the protesters under control. Late Sunday, representatives from 42 labour unions agreed to accept the new wages at the tripartite union-employer-government meeting and condemned the violence of workers. The government offered extra rice rations and better accommodation in a bid to quell the unrest.

Leaders of unions affiliated to Hasina’s Awami League held a press conference to thank the prime minister for increasing wages. Well aware of the widespread anger among garment workers, the Stalinist CPB and its GWTUC were unable to fall into line immediately with this slavish support for the government. They urged the government and employers to “meet with the workers for immediate resolution of the problem”.

On Monday, as protests continued, the representatives of 13 labour organisations, including the GWTUC, called a press conference to complain about the anti-democratic character of the tripartite meeting and suggested that the outcome had been a farce. While posturing as a more militant alternative, the unions held out an olive branch to government, urging new discussions to “revise” the pay structure and allow unions to operate inside garment factories.

At a meeting in Dhaka in May, CPB president Manzurul Ahsan Khan appealed to the government to use the unions as the means for policing garment workers and stopping strikes. He warned that “unless employers and government ensure unfettered trade union rights and encourage a culture of negotiations, bipartite and tripartite settlement, sporadic unrest and wild-cat strikes can’t be stopped”.

Khan criticised the government for doing “very little for this rising [garment] sector which accounts for the biggest share in industrial export. The new entrepreneurs of the garment industry face obstacles at different steps of import, export and transportation.” Appealing for closer collaboration, he called for “workers and owners of industries to build up joint struggle against all obstacles on the way to higher production”.

Khan’s statements can only be interpreted as an offer to the government and employers to assist Bangladesh’s key garment industry in the face of falling markets in Europe and the US, and intensifying competition from other low-wage countries. During the fiscal year from July 2009 to July 2010, Bangladesh earned \$US12.5 billion from garment exports, which accounted for 80 percent of foreign exchange.

Significantly, a comment in the *Daily Star* on Monday also called for “the growth of healthy trade unions in the industry” to ensure that workers are “guided by proper leadership” and do not become “an amorphous and chaotic mob”. The writer pointed out that those “workers representatives” with whom the government had discussed the pay rise had little legitimacy in the eyes of workers they claimed to represent.

With the protests apparently diminishing in numbers, the representatives of the ruling class are drawing lessons—the need to turn to “healthy trade unions,” possibly even the GWTUC, as a more reliable industrial force. Garment workers need to draw their own conclusions—the necessity to establish their own organisations, independent from all sections of the unions, and to turn to a socialist and international perspective to guide their struggles.



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