

Factory fire and police killings fuel discontent among Bangladeshi garment workers

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Tensions remain high in the Bangladeshi garment industry as a result of Sunday's bloody crackdown by the Awami League government, in which police fatally shot four striking workers, followed two days later by a factory fire that killed more than 30 workers near Dhaka, the capital.

Details of the fire, and how many workers perished, are still unclear. The blaze engulfed the ninth floor of the 10-storey Ha-Meem Group's sportswear factory in the Ashulia industrial area at lunchtime on Tuesday. Flames later spread to the 10th floor, a dining area, where about 150 workers were having their lunch. Most of the 6,000 workers were outside, preventing the death toll from being far higher.

Abdul Kader, who escaped from the fire, told Asia Times Online that he saw 50-60 workers forced to jump off the tenth floor because "the emergency exits were closed." Other factory workers also said the doors were locked. The *Independent*, a Bangladeshi newspaper, reported: "As the fire spread fast on the top floor, the workers tried to rush to a safer place, but they found the collapsible gate on the top floor locked. Later, the workers tried to come down from the top floor using fabrics as 'rope' but many of the workers fell down and received injuries."

Lieutenant-Colonel (retired) Delwar Hossain, a Ha-Meem deputy director, insisted that the factory exits were not locked. However, it is a common practice for garment factory owners to lock in workers to prevent them from leaving their machines and to force them to focus on production. This is despite the danger of garment factory fires due to highly combustible piles of clothes. According to Bangladesh's Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, 414 garment workers lost their lives

in 213 factory fires between 2006 and 2009.

Even with the cause of the fire yet to be established, the *New York Times* reported that Hossain had sought to reopen the first eight floors of the factory immediately, because the company was under pressure to "meet all pending orders". Under the name of That's It Sports Wear, the factory makes pants for major clients in the US and Europe, including Gap, the largest American clothing supplier. Gap issued a hypocritical statement, saying it was "terrible saddened" by the deaths. Yet, the tragedy is the direct result of its drive to maximise profits by sourcing clothes from sweatshops around the world.

Several hundred That's It Sports Wear workers demonstrated outside the factory yesterday over the fact that many of their co-workers are still missing since the fire. Hossain said the company had so far recovered the bodies of 23 employees, but registers at nearby hospitals and clinics indicated that at least 31 had died and more than 100 had been injured. The protesting workers also objected to being forced to work tomorrow, a public holiday, to make up for lost time.

Across Bangladesh, many workers appear to have been pushed back to work on Tuesday after unions appealed to employers to honour a July agreement between the government, the unions and the garment companies to lift the minimum wage to US\$43 a month. This is still far less than what workers had been demanding during five days of strikes and protests during July.

According to Bangladesh Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Authority chairman Brigadier General Zamil Ahmed Khan and Chittagong EPZ general manager Abdur Rashid on Tuesday, 148 factories had resumed production. This indicates the scale of the unrest that

began to erupt last Friday over the refusal of employers to pay the increase, which was due last month.

Also on Tuesday, about 4,000 workers at a sweater factory in Uttara EPZ, 400 kilometres from Dhaka, walked out indefinitely to fight for wage increases. They demanded the suspension of a personnel officer who had discriminated against workers, and the reinstatement of workers he had sacked. Workers at Apcot Apparels and the Hotapara garment factory in the northern Gazipur EPZ remained on strike over wages.

The scale of Sunday's fatal clashes, in which police shot down workers in the port city of Chittagong, became clearer when *Prothom Alo*, a daily newspaper, reported that the police had fired 550 rounds of rubber bullets and 95 tear gas shells. Some 20 factories had been damaged. Police attacked initially peaceful protests by workers after the South Korean-owned YoungOne group closed its 11 factories in retaliation for stoppages last week. The YoungOne workers had demanded the reinstatement of a 250-taka (3.5 US cents) lunch allowance that had been withdrawn when the new wage scheme was introduced.

Broader protests and strikes could erupt again as none of the issues has been resolved. A worker at the Nassa Group's Kimia Apparels in the Dhaka EPZ told the *Daily Star* on Tuesday that employees had returned to work only after management promised to properly implement the wage increases. Nassa Group's managing director in Dhaka, Mohammad Abdullah, claimed that the management had made "some mistakes in the calculations of salaries" last month, and pledged to "adjust the salary within the next seven days". In reality, the employers have used various devices, including job reclassifications, to cut wages.

In order to intimidate garment workers, police have arrested at least 65 workers and lodged cases against 25,000-30,000 people on charges of vandalism, obstructing roads or attacking police officers during Sunday's demonstrations.

Serious charges have also been laid against Garment Workers Unity Forum president Moshrefa Mishu, who was arrested on Tuesday. She has been accused of "vandalising" a Dhaka factory, damaging and setting fire to vehicles and impeding police duty on June 30, during the widespread garment workers' protests six months

ago. Monirul Islam, deputy commissioner of police detectives, told the media that Mishu had then played "a vital role in the recent unrest". According to media reports, the police have accused her of having links with other countries "competing with Bangladesh in the garments sector" and of "trying to destroy the sector in the country".

These allegations mirror the words of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. On Monday, she railed against "possible conspiracies to create unrest in the nation's top-earning sector". Such charges seek to block Bangladeshi workers from linking up their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in Cambodia, India, China and other parts of the world. The Bangladeshi government has relied both on the unions and open police repression to contain the opposition of garment workers to poor pay and conditions.

Garment workers have been pitted against each other by giant multinational companies such as Gap, Wal-Mart and Tesco, which scour the globe for the cheapest labour. Under the impact of the deepening global economic crisis, the exploitation of garment workers has intensified, causing a wave of struggles this year. Earlier this month, 16 Cambodian clothing factories dismissed nearly 800 workers for taking part in a nationwide strike in September that involved 210,000 workers, or two-thirds of the country's garment workforce.

As a result of Bangladesh's low wages, the country is now the third largest garment exporter after China and Turkey, with 5,000 factories and three million workers. According to the charity ActionAid, the new \$43 monthly wage in Bangladesh amounts to just 21 cents per hour—the lowest rate in the world. Like other administrations around the world, Prime Minister Hasina's government and the Bangladeshi ruling class, which now depend on garments for 80 percent of the country's exports, have turned to police violence to suppress workers' demands for wage rises.



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