The police shooting of Bangladesh garment workers

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The fatal shooting down of four striking Bangladesh garment workers by police deployed by the Awami League government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on December 12 is the sharpest expression of a global process—the increasing turn by governments to violent repression to impose the burdens of the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 onto the backs of the working class.

While the character of the policies may vary from country to country—in Bangladesh it has taken the form of suppressing wage demands by textile workers amid soaring inflation—they are being imposed with intensifying state repression.

The events in Bangladesh follow the Spanish government's declaration of an emergency and the deployment of the army to break the air traffic controllers' strike in early December and the Greek government's mobilisation of troops against striking Greek truck drivers in August.

The police shootings in Bangladesh marked an escalation of the methods used against strikes by garment workers in July. Then, riot police wielded batons and opened fire with rubber bullets and tear gas. The crucial role in ending the strikes was played by the trade unions, which struck a sell-out deal with the government and employers. The minimum wage was to be lifted to about $US43 a month, still well below the poverty line and just over half what had been demanded.

The government used the breathing space to prepare for further confrontation, establishing "industrial police" to maintain "law and order" in the export processing zones (EPZs). When workers struck this month over the failure of companies to honour the pay deal, the police were mobilised to crush the protests. On December 12, police fired into protesting workers—this time with live rounds.

Behind this police crackdown is the global economic crisis that has fuelled competition in the international garment industry. Garments account for 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports and last year the industry fetched $12 billion. In the first quarter of this year the revenue increased by 37 percent compared to same period last year, a measure of the mounting exploitation.

Some of the biggest retail and clothing names in the world—such as Tesco, Gap, H&M, Wal-Mart, Marks & Spencer, Asda, Zara, Carrefour, Levi Strauss and Tommy Hilfiger—source low-cost garments from Bangladesh. Confronted by rising workers' struggles in China and elsewhere, they roam the globe looking for the cheapest labour platforms in order to maximise profits. The *Financial Times* noted in July that "garment companies and importers were looking for cheap labour destinations after China's [labour] unrest."

Bangladeshi employers are fearful that orders and profits could rapidly disappear if the country's wage levels cease to be internationally competitive. Currently a clothing worker's minimum average wage per hour in Bangladesh is just 21 US cents. The comparable rates for Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, India and China are 24, 35, 46, 52, 55 and 93 cents, respectively.

Workers, however, who have received no rise since

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2006, simply cannot live on their present pay. The inflation rate has risen sharply in recent months and for basic food items has hit more than 10 percent. In addition, Bangladeshi workers are forced to work unpaid overtime and meet onerous quotas. Their over-crowded and unsafe conditions were highlighted by a fire last week in a 10-story garment factory in the Dhaka EPZ that killed at least 29 workers.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina denounced the latest protests by garment workers as a "foreign conspiracy" and directed her ministers to "remain alert to possible conspiracies to create unrest in the nation's top-earning sector". Her comments are targeted in particular against any attempt by garment workers in Bangladesh to link up with their class brothers and sisters in other countries waging similar battles.

In Cambodia in September, the Hun Sen government responded to a strike by 200,000 garment workers by sending in military police to intimidate and attack workers. The strike ended after employers threatened to sack anyone who did not return to work. The industrial action was directed against a wage deal struck behind the backs of workers by the government, employers and some unions.

The struggles of workers in Asia fighting poverty level wages are intimately connected to the protests and strikes that have erupted in Europe against draconian austerity measures. Whether it is in Bangladesh, Cambodia and China or Spain, Greece and Britain, workers confront a common offensive by employers for an endless driving down of wages and living standards. The driving force is the worsening crisis of global capitalism.

The chief obstacle to any unified international resistance by the working class are the trade unions. In every country, the unions operate, not to defend even the most basic interests of workers, but to ensure the competitiveness of "their" employers in the international battle for profits. Just one day after the December 12 police killings, the garment unions in Bangladesh sat down with Labour Minister Monnujam Sufian and employer representatives to work out a mechanism for suppressing future struggles by workers. The minister proposed joint union-employer-government committees in every factory to "solve the problems" and the unions readily agreed.

Trade unionism by its very nature accepts the capitalist order and the framework of wage-labour exploitation. The globalisation of production over the past three decades, however, has completely undermined any ability to wage a campaign for any, even limited reforms within the framework of the nation state. In countries such as South Korea and South Africa, where illegal militant unions waged bitter struggles in the 1980s, the same unions are now central to propping up the country's corporate and political establishment.

The latest repression against the struggles of workers is a warning to the working class in every country. Either workers begin to unite in an international battle to defend their living standards and basic democratic rights, or divided they will fall. Such a struggle will only take place in a rebellion against the existing treacherous leaderships in the working class. It requires the building of a revolutionary party on the basis of a socialist program to unify workers against their common class enemy—the profit system. That is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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