

Bangladesh police shoot striking garment workers

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Police mobilised by the Awami League government killed four garment workers and injured at least 150 after opening fire with live bullets and tear gas shells on striking workers in Bangladesh last Sunday. The shooting of picketing garment workers, fighting against poverty-level wages, highlights the growing state violence and repression being unleashed against workers globally.

Just two days later, the appalling conditions facing the mostly female workforce in the country's garment sweatshops, were underscored by a factory fire yesterday that claimed at least 24 lives. Workers were forced to jump from ninth-floor of the 10-storey factory north of Dhaka because the management had locked the exits.

The police attack took place after workers' protests erupted last Friday, triggered by the refusal of some of Bangladesh's 4,500 apparel factories to honour a pay deal between the government, employers and the trade unions in July. Under that deal, the minimum wage was to be lifted to about \$US43 a month, still well below the poverty line and what workers had been demanding.

Garment workers told reporters that Sunday's clashes had broken out because police attacked peaceful demonstrations. One target of discontent was the South Korean-owned Youngone factories in Chittagong. Earlier in the week, workers had walked out, demanding the reinstatement of a 250-take (3.5 US cents) lunch allowance that had been withdrawn when the new wage scheme was implemented.

When employees reported for work on Sunday, they found the 11 Youngone factories shut down. Furious workers started gathered support from nearby factories and blocked key roads. Police fired into the crowds, killing four people and injuring at least 150. About 100 workers were injured in other clashes with police at Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in Dhaka and Narayanganj. At least 65 workers were arrested.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed responded by demanding "tough action" against striking workers. According to media reports, she instructed "authorities to identify those involved in the unrest and take stern actions against them". She also told "ministers to remain alert to possible conspiracies to create unrest in the nation's top-earning sector". Home Minister Sahara Khatun denounced workers as "culprits and conspirators" and accused them of "terrorism".

Despite the police killings, workers continued strikes and protests on Monday. About 5,000 garment workers staged a sit-in at the northern manufacturing district of Gazipur, while another 5,000 stopped work at a factory inside the Ashulia export zone, some 40 kilometres northwest of Dhaka. Some production was reported to have resumed on Tuesday after employers promised to implement the new pay scales.

Police have already filed four cases against some 33,000 people. Just after midnight yesterday, according to a report received by the WWSW, a dozen police detectives arrested Garment Workers Unity Forum president Moshrefa Mishu at her home in Dhaka. Her sister said the police had since charged her with instigating workers to go "berserk".

The police repression is an intensification of the measures used against striking garment workers in June, July and August. Tens of thousands of garment workers fought pitched battles with notorious Rapid Action Battalion riot police in late July and early August armed with batons, tear gas and rubber bullets.

Despite soaring prices and living costs, the textile workers had received no pay rise since the minimum monthly wage was set at \$US23 (1,662 taka) in 2006. After five days of bitter strikes and protests to demand a wage of \$73, the unions agreed to just \$43 and shut down any further

industrial action.

Where the new wage scales were implemented, companies applied a “grading system” to underpay workers. One worker, Delwar Hossain, of Mohakhali’s Rahman Garments, explained to *New Age* that despite his more than 12 years’ experience as a machine operator, he had been included in grade five, cutting his wage. On Monday, the *Daily Star* reported that the new pay scale “has in fact seen a reduction in the total pay package for some sections of workers”.

For months, the government has been preparing to suppress a renewed wave of strikes and protests. In October, it established an “industrial police” for the “maintenance of law and order in EPZ [export processing zones]”. Hasina declared that it would help maintain “smooth and uninterrupted productions” at mills and factories.

The government is determined to keep wages low in order to attract foreign investment. Between July and November, garment export earnings increased by 36 percent to reach \$6.4 billion. Garments account for 80 percent of the country’s exports last year. Far from improving workers’ lives and conditions, as the government claims, this “economic growth” has only provided profits for Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and foreign investors.

Yesterday’s fatal fire, the latest of many, underscores the unhealthy and dangerous conditions facing garment workers. The blaze at the Ha-Meem Group factory in the Ashulia industrial area, about 20 kilometres from the capital, started in the ninth-floor finishing area at around lunchtime. About 5,000 people worked in the building, producing pants for export to the US and Europe. Last night, fire fighters were still battling the blaze, which had spread to the top floor dining hall. The death toll could go higher.

Since 1990, at least 240 garment workers have lost their lives due to factory fires. The only concern of the employers, however, is to restart production as soon as possible. A Ha-Meem manager told reporters the company hoped to reopen the first eight floors of the building as early as today. He said the company expected to meet all pending orders. The company and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said they would each offer the families of the dead workers just 100,000 taka (about \$1,400) in compensation.

The political and media establishment has backed the police attack on striking workers. Addressing a business

gathering on November 27, Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party urged factory owners “to tackle attempts to create unrest in the key economic sector”. Yesterday’s editorial in the *Daily Star* editorial declared: “We have had enough of unrest in the RMG [ready-made garment] sector.”

As they did in July, the trade unions have stepped in, not to organise a campaign for better wages, but to assist employers to bring wildcat protests under control. Mahbubur Rahman Ismail, general secretary of the Bangladesh Textile and Garment Workers Federation, appealed to owners to implement the new wage scales, warning there could be “another massive outburst”. Nahidul Islam Nayan, general secretary of the Bangladesh Sommito Garment Sramik Federation, suggested that workers lodge complaints against undue degradation in the labour courts. This proposal is designed to end protests and bog workers down in futile legal battles.

Garment workers and workers everywhere must draw conclusions from these bitter experiences. These union apparatuses, and their counterparts across the world, operate in the profit interests of “their” employers and governments, pitting workers against each other, country by country. As violent attacks mount on workers around the globe—from the US and Europe to India, Bangladesh and China—working people must build new organisations to unify their struggles across national lines. This means turning to a socialist and internationalist perspective to completely reorganise society to meet the needs of the working class, the overwhelming majority of people, rather than the profit requirements of the wealthy elites.



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