

Union leader killed in Bangladesh

Sarath Kumara**17 April 2012**

The murder of a union leader in Bangladesh in early April is a sign that the government and garment manufacturers are stepping up their efforts to intimidate and stifle unrest among workers in the country's largest export industry.

Aminul Islam went missing on April 4 in the garment manufacturing hub of Ashulia, 30 kilometres north of the capital Dhaka. He was last seen near the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) office, where he worked as a senior organiser. He had closed the office early after noting a police van outside and suspecting that the office was being watched.

BCWS organisers sought to lodge a complaint at the local police station the next day but the police refused, saying that 24 hours had not passed. The BCWS also informed other security agencies.

Islam's body was only found after family members investigated a newspaper photograph of an unidentified body found dumped on the roadside near the Ghatail police station, some 100 km to the north. The body had already been buried, but police photographs confirmed Islam's identity. His body was exhumed and reburied close to his family home.

Islam had been tortured before his death. His relatives told the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW): "His right leg had injuries under the knee, his toes had been smashed, both knees had coagulated blood, and there were several bruises on the body." There was also a hole in one of his legs made by a sharp object.

BCWS leader Kalpona Akter accused government security forces and factory owners of committing Islam's murder. Akter said intelligence officials had also tortured Islam when he was arbitrarily detained in

June 2010.

In a letter to Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, HRW deputy Asia director Phil Robertson raised concerns about government involvement in the brutal murder. "There has been a rash of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh, with bodies sometimes turning up far from where the person was last seen alive," he wrote.

Robertson noted that Islam and other BCWS workers were facing serious charges in connection with workers' disputes and alleged violence. He said HRW considered the charges to be "politically motivated," as the men had all provided clear alibis.

Islam was well known as a labour organiser. He had been recently involved with workers at a leading garment manufacturer, the Shanta Group, which supplies clothing to leading US companies, such as PVH, Nike and Ralph Lauren.

Islam assisted in an ABC News program broadcast last month that exposed the appalling working conditions in Bangladesh. He had organised interviews with the survivors of a deadly fire at a factory that produced garments for a number of American companies, including PVH, which manufactures the Tommy Hilfiger clothing line.

The program was an embarrassment for the US corporations. When interviewed, designer Tommy Hilfiger denied that his clothing was made at this factory then later admitted he was wrong. PVH announced in late March that it would spend \$US1 million to improve the safety conditions of its factory in Bangladesh.

The garment industry in Bangladesh has been expanding due to its low labour costs of just 21 US cents an hour compared to China, where wages have been rising sharply. Bangladesh has become the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China. Garment exports were valued at \$19 billion last year and accounted for 80 percent of Bangladesh's total exports.

With more than three million workers toiling in around 5,000 factories, the government and the manufacturers are deeply concerned at the potential for industrial action. A series of mass protests and strikes erupted in 2010 over the demand for higher wages. In July that year, heavily-armed riot police used rubber bullets and tear gas against tens of thousands of protesting workers. Five months later, police opened fire with live bullets on strikers, killing four and injuring many more.

However, the critical political role in containing and suppressing the protests was played by the trade unions and labour organisations, which struck a sell-out agreement with the government and employers. The minimum wage was lifted to about \$43 a month, still below the official poverty line and just over half what had been demanded. The country's annual inflation rate stands at about 10 percent.

The BCWS had been deregistered by the government and several of its leaders arrested and tortured. As a result, it did not attend the meetings of unions, government and employers that reached the wage deal. Neither did it oppose the settlement, however.

The BCWS is based on the corporatist perspective that the interests of workers are compatible with those of management. Its stated aim is to promote workers' rights and to establish "a congenial atmosphere in the working place to increase productivity and contribute to the national economy."

The government and employers, however, clearly regard any agitation for workers' rights, no matter how limited, as a serious threat.

Scott Nova, executive director of the Washington-

based Workers Rights Consortium told the *New York Times*: "We are aware of no recent case of a trade unionist being murdered in Bangladesh. There have been unionists killed in clashes with the police in the midst of protests, but no recent case of assassination. Thus, this represents a deterioration of an already grim labour rights situation in the country."

Islam's murder is a sharp warning to garment workers in Bangladesh of the repressive methods that will be used to suppress any struggle for better wages and conditions as the government and employers seek to maintain the industry's "international competitiveness."



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