

Bangladeshi garment workers clash with police

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Tens of thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh clashed with the police on Sunday during a protest in the industrial area of Narayanganj, 20 kilometres south of Dhaka. Workers set fire to a police post and four police vehicles. The government deployed the notorious Rapid Action Battalion, along with the police, to suppress the protest, which lasted for seven hours. They fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse workers, injuring 50.

The protests were triggered by a rumour that a worker from a factory in the Adamjee Export Processing Zone (EPZ) had been mugged and killed. What happened is not clear, but workers said that there had been about 15 attacks by thugs during the 10 days before the protest. They had complained to police about the lack of security, but to no avail.

Several hundred workers from Epic Garments started the protest, but the numbers quickly swelled to about 100,000. Workers blocked the main Dhaka-Chittagong, Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Narayanganj highways for several hours and demanded police action to prevent the attacks. The protesters' demands quickly widened, however, to include calls for shorter working hours and other improvements to conditions.

The sudden eruption of the protest points to seething discontent among garment workers. In June, workers in the Ashulia zone, which produces 20 percent of the country's apparel exports, took part in a week-long campaign to demand a 50 percent wage hike. The factory owners, with the backing of the Awami League-led government, reacted by shutting down all 350 factories in the zone, locking out about 500,000 workers. The owners ignored the demand for higher

wages, and reopened the factories after Prime Minister Hasina Wajed promised tough security measures.

The worsening recessionary trends in Europe and the US, which take 57 percent and 23 percent of Bangladesh's garment exports respectively, have impacted heavily on the industry. According to the Export Promotion Bureau, apparel exports to the US declined by 1.7 percent in the 2011-12 fiscal year and exports to Europe have been falling since March.

The result has been a wave of retrenchments. Bangladesh's eight export processing zones had laid off 23 percent of their total workforce by July 1—the largest loss of jobs since the zones were established in 1983.

Rising prices are eating into workers' real incomes. World Bank figures show that annual inflation increased from 8.1 percent in 2010 to 10.7 percent in 2011. According to the trade unions, the living costs of workers rose by 30 percent over the past 18 months. Workers are compelled to work 10 to 16 hours a day, six days a week without extra payment.

The minimum wage for textile workers was first set in 1994. Pay rates have only increased twice, in 2006 and 2010, and then only after weeks of determined struggles by workers in the face of severe police repression.

The growing unrest among garment workers has provoked concerns among foreign corporations that their public image will be damaged by the exposure of the appalling conditions in the sweatshops that manufacture their products.

In August, Karl John Person, the CEO of the Swedish multinational H&M, met with Prime Minister Hasina to discuss how to deal with the explosive situation that has built up in the country's free trade zones. H&M does business with around 250 Bangladeshi factories.

An article in the *New York Times* on August 23, entitled "Export Powerhouse Feels Pangs of Labour Strife," highlighted similar issues. It noted: "In late July, representatives from 12 major brands and retailers, alarmed by the rising labour unrest, prodded the Bangladeshi government to address wage demands, a suggestion rejected by the labour minister."

The article pointed out that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had "raised labour issues and the Islam murder case" during her visit to Bangladesh in May. Union organiser Aminul Islam was abducted, tortured and killed in April in circumstances that pointed to the involvement of the country's security apparatus.

The *Times* blurted out that Washington's real concern was not the oppressive conditions of workers, but the potential damage to corporate profits. It explained that the US ambassador Dan Mozena had warned Bangladeshi factory owners in June that "any perception of a roll back on labour rights" could scare off multinational brands. "These developments could coalesce into a perfect storm that could threaten the Bangladesh brand in America," he said.

Fearful that any concessions to garment workers would undermine the country's "international competitiveness," the Hasina government rejected these suggestions. Garments constitute 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports and the government plans to increase exports from \$18 billion to \$28 billion in the fiscal year that began on July 1.

In response to labour unrest, the *Times* explained: "Bangladeshi leaders have deployed the security tools of the state to keep factories humming. A high-level government committee monitors the garment sector and includes ranking officers from the military, the police and intelligence agencies. A new special police force patrols many industrial areas. Domestic intelligence agencies keep an eye on some labour organisers."

The comments of Clinton and US ambassador Mozena reflect fears that these police-state measures will not be able to contain an explosive eruption of the country's more than 3.5 million workers, mainly young women from rural areas, who have demonstrated their determination and militancy.

The call for minimal improvements to wages and conditions seeks to enable the trade unions and a host of non-government organisations (NGOs) to more effectively suppress the struggles of garment workers. The American AFL-CIO union federation works with a number of labour organisations in Bangladesh, such as the Solidarity Centre in Dhaka, to perform this function.

The Bangladeshi trade unions are notorious for serving the interests of big business and the government. During the June struggles, Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC) general secretary Kazi Ruhul Amin urged the employers and the workers "not to treat each other as enemies." The GWTUC is affiliated to the Stalinist Bangladesh Communist Party (BCP), which backed Prime Minister Hasina's Awami League in the last general election.

The oppressive conditions facing garment workers are not unique to Bangladesh, but exist throughout Asia and other parts of the world. The worsening global economic crisis is intensifying the competition for markets and the pressure to cut labour costs even further. The only way to end this dreadful exploitation is through a unified struggle of the working class to abolish the profit system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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