

Police attack Bangladesh garment workers

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Thousands of Bangladesh garment workers demonstrated this week over the deaths of at least 112 workers in the country's worst factory fire at Tazreen Fashions in the Ashulia industrial zone north of Dhaka. At least another 150 were injured, either by the fire or after jumping out of factory windows to escape the blaze.

After protests on Monday and Tuesday, workers at the Ma-Meen group walked out on Wednesday morning, following an electrical short circuit in one of the group's units, which raised fears of another factory fire. They were joined by thousands of other workers, with the number reportedly swelling to more than 20,000.

Protesters blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway for six hours and clashed with police. About 50 workers were injured when the police charged with truncheons, and fired teargas shells and rubber bullets. Authorities shut most of the 300 garment factories in the area.

Protesting workers were demanding justice for the dead and injured, including the arrest of the factory owner. They also called for proper compensation for their families and improved safety standards in the country's thousands of garment factories. Hundreds of workers were in the eight-storey factory last Saturday when the fire broke out on the ground floor, trapping those above.

Bangladesh's *New Age* newspaper reported: "[M]ost survivors who became injured in the fire were struggling to pay for their treatment as neither the government, nor the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporter's Association (BGMEA), nor factory owners had come forward to help them."

Seeking to contain mounting public anger over the fire, police arrested three factory staff—administrative officer Dulala Uddin, store supervisor Hamidul Islam Lavlu and security supervisor Al Amin—on Tuesday night, after reports that they had locked the factory gate when the fire started.

The three men were paraded in front of the media and remanded in custody for interrogation by the High Court. Dhaka District Police Chief Habibur Rahman told Reuters they were being investigated for suspected negligence. The factory owner has not been arrested or charged. Nor has any government official. Instead, three low-level supervisors are being lined up as scapegoats.

Speaking to the *Daily Star* on November 29, the factory owner baldly denied any responsibility, saying: "Nobody told me that there was no emergency exit which could be made accessible from outside. Nobody even advised me to install one like that, apart from the existing ones."

The government has established five committees to investigate the fire. However, based on past experience, these inquiries will do nothing to end the lack of elementary safety standards in the country's factories. Labour Minister Raziuddin Ahmed Raju, who visited the burned-out factory, declared: "Any factories without multiple exits will be shut down." But that is unlikely to happen.

The economy heavily depends on garment exports, which constitute about 80 percent of total exports and are worth \$19 billion per year. Major global corporations source their products in Bangladesh, precisely because costs are low. At \$37 a month, wages for garment workers are lower than in China, Sri Lanka

or Vietnam.

On Thursday, the employers' organisation BGMEA called a meeting of media owners and editors to curtail "adverse publicity" on factory conditions and declare that the fire had been "excessively reported".

To divert attention from the lack of fire safety, the government is trying to blame the fire on sabotage. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described it as "pre-planned" and pointed to the arrest of two people accused of setting fire to a different factory in the Ashulia industrial zone. Interior Minister Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir declared: "All culprits will be brought to book."

Hasina pointed the finger at unnamed opposition politicians, accusing "a vested quarter" of committing "acts of sabotage to destabilise the country". General elections are scheduled for next October.

More than enough evidence has already emerged, however, about the real causes of the tragedy: unavailability of emergency exits, locked exit doors during work hours and the lack of proper fire extinguishers and drills. These conditions are common throughout the garment industry, which is the world's second largest after China.

Associated Press on November 29 reported that the Bangladesh High Court had directed the government in 2001 to set up a committee to oversee the safety of garment workers, after a factory fire that killed 24 workers. The directive was never implemented. Sultana Kamal, executive director of Ain O Salish Kendra, a human rights group involved in the court case, told the news agency: "It is unfortunate that government has ignored the directive. Had the government complied with it there would have fewer accidents, I believe."

Over the past five years, at least 500 people have died in factory fires. During the past week, there have been more fires. On Monday, a fire on the first floor of a 12-storey building in the Uttara area of Dhaka forced workers to clamber to safety via scaffolding on a neighbouring construction site. On Wednesday, at least 60 workers were injured in two separate incidents: an

electrical short circuit at Section-7 Limited of Shirt Makers Group in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone and a boiler explosion at Star Light Knit Wear in Dhaka. Both fires were quickly extinguished.

Global transnationals have attempted to distance themselves from the Tazreen factory fire. Walmart initially declared that it was not sure if its items were manufactured there. But after items with one of its brands were found at the site, it blamed a supplier. Similarly, Sears Holdings declared that it did know its items were being made at the factory, and sacked its supplier.

Kalpona Akter from the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity told the *Wall Street Journal*: "They [the corporations] cannot just clean their hands and say they didn't know. It doesn't make any sense unless they are irresponsible about their codes of conduct or their inspection practices."

The reality is that these global giants maintain a façade of concern through a system of codes of conduct, third-party inspectors and audits. These inspections carry no legal force and are designed to protect the companies and their brand names, not the workers. At the same time, global giants like Walmart continue to maintain the pressure on suppliers and factories to lower prices, inevitably leading to deteriorating, not improving, working conditions.



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