

Bangladeshi police attack garment workers' protest

K. Ratnayake
21 May 2013

Police fired rubber bullets on tens of thousands of protesting Bangladeshi garment workers in the Ashulia industrial belt near Dhaka yesterday, injuring at least fifty.

Workers were protesting to demand higher wages and safe working conditions. They were also demanding the death penalty for the owner of the Rana Plaza clothing factory that collapsed on April 24, killing 1,127 garment workers, according to official figures.

Police sources said 20,000 workers joined the protest yesterday, blocking the main highway in Ashulia. Ashulia is the hub of Bangladesh's garment industry, where 300 factories are located, producing thirty percent of the country's garment exports.

Workers are demanding a \$US100 monthly basic wage. They now receive a paltry monthly wage of \$37, the world's lowest pay for garment workers.

Ashulia workers have continuously mounted protests since the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in the nearby Savar area. Workers organised demonstrations demanding pay hikes, benefits and workplace security.

Though permission had only been granted to build a five-storey building, the Rana Plaza owner illegally added three more floors. Five factories were located in the building. Though cracks were appearing on the walls on the previous day, the building owner insisted it was safe and factory owners compelled workers to go to production lines. Beyond the huge death toll, over 2,000 workers have been maimed for life from this disaster.

Terrible working conditions are not limited to Rana Plaza but are rampant in all garment factories. Despite the Rana Plaza factory collapse, US-based apparel maker VF Corp. confirmed that work is continuing at Liz Apparels, one of its Bangladeshi suppliers, even though a May 12 factory inspection found cracks in the

Liz Apparel building. Liz Apparel makes Wrangler shirts for VF, whose brands include North Face, Timberland and Nautica.

After a four-day shutdown starting Monday of last week, garment factories reopened on Friday. Factory management told workers they would be paid for Friday work because it was a holiday, but that they would not be paid for other days on the basis of "no work no pay." This further angered the workers.

Prior to opening the factories, the owners and ministers including Labour and Employment Minister Rajiudin Ahmed and union leaders met and discussed how to control the workers. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) President Atiqul Islam said, "The government assured us of all assistance in maintaining law and order in the factories."

After the disaster, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and other government leaders feigned sympathy towards the workers. However, by deploying the police to crack down on protests yesterday, the government has shown that it will seek to ruthlessly suppress opposition among workers.

The deaths in to the building collapse have exposed the super-exploitation of the working class in the Bangladesh garment industry. Only six months before, in November, a fire at the Tazreen factory burned 112 workers to death.

The chief responsibility for poverty wages, unsafe conditions and suppression of democratic rights lies with the western clothing retail transnationals. In the face of growing militancy among workers, the retailers' main concern is how to maintain Bangladesh as a cheap-labour platform. They are extracting 60 to 80 percent profit margins from the garment trade, demanding that Bangladeshi factory owners and

businesses keep wages at rock-bottom levels.

After the exposure of the disastrous conditions they have played the key role in creating, the retail giants are moving into damage control mode.

The international trade unions have come forward to support them. The Swiss-based UNI Global Union, the IndustriALL Union and several NGOs took an initiative with German officials to discuss a fire and building safety accord with European retail giants such as Carrefour, Benetton, Marks & Spencer, PVH and Calvin Klein. They are promising to spend a paltry sum of US\$60 million over the next five years to improve factory conditions. They have also agreed to make periodic inspections of safety conditions.

Walmart, the world's biggest retail company, Gap and several other US companies have opposed even this completely inadequate agreement, saying that if they signed such an agreement they would be vulnerable to legal action.

Some companies are also seeking to shift production to other locations, leaving Bangladesh so as to escape scrutiny of the deadly sweatshop conditions upon which they rely. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Karl Johan Persson, the CEO of Hennes & Mauritz (H&M), said that the company is looking for locations in Central and South America or Africa.

The Hasina government faces a massive political crisis as working class opposition deepens. It is desperately trying to deflect discontent among workers and maintain cheap-labour conditions. About 3.7 million workers, mostly young women, work in garment factories. Bangladesh has become the world's second biggest garment manufacturer after China, deriving 80 percent of its export income from garment exports.

The Hasina government and the BGMEA are terrified that workers' unrest could result in the cancellation of orders or in retailers withdrawing from Bangladesh.

Last week, in an attempt to buy time, the Bangladeshi government announced the formation of a panel to make recommendations on salary increases for workers. The workers were told to wait until this committee made its proposals.

The government also proposed possible changes to labour laws, such as allowing the formation of trade unions. Allowing trade unions in the garment sector would be a shift of government policy, reflecting the

view that unions will help control workers and to keep low-wage conditions in line with the requirements of garment manufacturers and retailers. In Bangladesh as in every country, the ruling elite is well aware of the trade unions' role in thwarting working class struggles.

The main concern of retailers, manufacturers and the Bangladeshi government is the unrest building up in the working class. The *New York Times* commented, "Garment manufacturing makes up a fifth of the economy in Bangladesh and four-fifths of its exports, which means that one of the world's poorest, most densely populated countries is desperately dependent on continued export orders to stave off soaring unemployment and possibly further political unrest."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact