

Bangladesh legislates for garment worker unions

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The Bangladeshi parliament passed amendments to the country's labour laws on July 15, permitting the formation of trade unions in the garment and apparel sector. Far from being a measure to secure the rights of workers, as claimed by the government and the media, the changes are aimed at suppressing any independent action by garment workers to fight for their interests.

After the disastrous collapse of the Rana Plaza building in April that killed at least 1,129 people, mostly garment workers, the Awami League-led government has sought to contain the widespread anger among workers while at the same time appeasing the retail giants, which fear having their corporate image tarnished by international scrutiny of the brutally exploitative conditions in Bangladesh's sweatshops.

Previously the government has resorted to massive police deployments to suppress strikes and protests by garment workers over their poverty wages and their onerous, unsafe working conditions. Now, amid fears of mass eruptions of workers' struggles, the government has given the green light for the formation of unions, as another mechanism for suppressing the resistance of workers.

The Labour (Amendment) Bill 2013 ensures that the unions will work in close collaboration with the government and the companies. A union can only be formed once 30 percent of workers employed are enrolled, making it difficult without the agreement of management. Both the government and companies engage in systematic blacklisting of worker activists.

Where trade unions are formed, a two-thirds majority vote of members is required before any strike or other industrial action can legally take place. The new law also bans any strike for the first three years of any newly-started establishment that is owned by foreign investors or developed in collaboration with foreign

investors.

The government also retains extensive powers to prohibit strikes and industrial action on the pretext that it would cause "serious hardship to the community" or be "prejudicial to the national interest". These measures were included in the 2006 Labour Act and have been incorporated into the new amendment.

The legislation also proposes the formation of joint "participation committees" and "safety committees" involving representatives of workers and management. Such corporatist committees, which will be firmly under management control, are designed to co-opt workers to enforce the company's demands. Factories must set aside 5 percent of profits for a welfare fund, but export-oriented companies—that is, most of the garment industry—are exempt.

Though the legislation was supposed to specifically apply to the garment industry, it prevents the formation of unions in a range of other workplaces, including "non-profit" education and training facilities and "hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres". The measures not only ban unions but any action by workers to fight for their rights in these sectors.

Parliamentary labour reform committee chairman Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain hailed the new legislation, falsely claiming that it would strengthen workers' rights. He also pointed to its real purpose, adding: "I am hoping this will assuage global fears around this issue."

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), whose members run the country's cheap labour sweatshops, also praised the laws as a "timely initiative".

The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina passed the legislation after the US suspended the generalised scheme of preferences (GSP) program on

the grounds that Bangladesh was “not taking steps to afford internationally recognised worker rights to workers in the country.”

The Obama administration is no more concerned about workers’ rights in Bangladesh than it is in the US, where it is overseeing an onslaught on the living standards and rights of American workers. Its GSP decision followed a petition by the AFL-CIO union leadership to Congress. The AFL-CIO is intimately involved in establishing unions in many countries as a means for controlling and suppressing the working class. The Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) is associated with the Solidarity Centre, an organisation created in 1997 by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to promote Washington’s objectives. It receives US funds through the National Endowment for Democracy. When violent protests of garment workers erupted in 2010 demanding higher wages, the BCWS urged workers to “peacefully petition” to the government on their demands.

Other global organisations such as the Swiss-based UNI Global Union (UNIGU) and the IndustriALL Global Union (IAGU) have signed a cosmetic agreement with major retailing companies designed to publicly distance themselves from the appalling conditions facing garment workers in Bangladesh. These unions also call for the formation of unions in the Bangladesh garment sector.

The Bangladeshi government expressed dismay over the US ruling on the GSP program. The country’s garment exports to the US under the GSP are only about 1 percent of total garment exports but the government has been campaigning for greater access under the facility. The government also feared the US decision would prompt the EU to take a similar decision, even though the EU had ruled it out.

However, Dan Mozena, the US ambassador in Dhaka, reassured the government that the GSP withdrawal was only a temporary measure. The *New York Times* reported there were differences within the US State Department over the decision, as Washington is seeking to develop closer strategic ties with Bangladesh as part of Obama’s aggressive efforts to encircle China with the help of US allies and partners in the region.

The formation of unions is not a step forward, but a trap for garment workers. In Bangladesh, as in other

countries, the unions no longer function as defenders, in any sense, of the rights of workers. Rather, under conditions of globalised production, they operate to enforce the demands of management and the government for constant cost-cutting to maintain “international competitiveness” against their rivals such as in China, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Garment workers can only defend their rights and living standards through a complete break with the unions and all the political parties of the ruling class. Independent rank and file committees should be formed and a turn made to workers throughout the country, the region, and internationally, on the basis of a socialist program directed at abolishing global capitalism.



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