

Bangladesh garment workers strike for higher wages

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Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers in industrial zones near Dhaka went on strike this week, demanding a near-tripling of their monthly wage, to \$US100. Police clashed with the striking workers, who had blocked roads and highways as part of their protest, firing rubber bullets and tear gas. In one incident on Thursday, 50 people were reported injured.

The industrial action was triggered by an offer of a 20 percent wage increase issued by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). This was taken as a provocation by the workers. They were last granted a wage rise in 2010, when the minimum wage was raised to 3,000 takas per month (\$US36).

Sporadic strikes began last week, then on Monday workers from all the main industrial districts, including Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Ashulia, joined the action. On Monday, more than 200,000 workers held demonstrations in Gazipur district. On Tuesday and Wednesday, employers tried to open factories and resume work but failed. On Thursday, more than 100 factories remained closed and thousands held protest demonstrations in Fatullah and Gazipur districts and clashed with police and the paramilitary Border Guards Bangladesh. Workers defended themselves by hurling stones.

Most garment factories reportedly reopened yesterday, after the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF) worked to shut down the industrial campaign. Union bureaucrats held several round of talks with the government and factory owners, and declared that workers would receive a wage increase by November. BGIWF leader Babul Akter has refused to say whether the \$US100 wage demand will be met. The union is working to organise another sell-out agreement covering the country's garment

workforce.

The Bangladeshi government has appointed a committee to “discuss” new wage rates in the industry, but it has said that these will be announced by December. The government is preparing repressive measures against the garment workers, on behalf of the corporate manufacturers and transnational investors.

Home Minister Muhiunuddin Khan Alamgir openly threatened the striking workers on Thursday. He declared: “Garment [making] is a national industry. Those going against this industry will be considered as anti-national.” He added that the “unrest in the sector will be contained with all force.”

BGMEA head S.M. Mannan, weighed in to denounce the strike. “A conspiracy has begun at local and international levels to destabilise the industry at a time when negotiations are going on to fix the minimum wage for the garment workers,” he declared. “As part of this plot, these motivated, false and misleading news reports are being published in the local and international media.”

Bangladesh garment workers endure appalling conditions. They are lowest paid garment workers in the world, and are also forced to work long hours, 10 to 16 hours a day, six days a week.

The unsafe working conditions in the industry was exposed in the Rana Plaza building collapse in April, which killed at least 1,129 people, mostly garment workers, in the world's worst industrial disaster. Five garment factories were housed in that building which was shoddily built. In another industrial disaster last November, Bangladesh's worst factory fire killed 112 workers and injured another 150 at Tazreen garments in Ashulia district.

After both the Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters, the international retailers that manufacture garments in

Bangladesh shed crocodile tears and declared they would press for better conditions and wages for workers. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the government promised the same—but nothing has changed. The much touted “safety deal” announced by the big brands such as H&M, Marks & Spencer, Carrefour, Inditex, Tesco and Premark was designed to protect their own commercial interests, not garment workers.

Bangladeshi garments account for 80 percent of the country’s export earnings, valued at \$19 billion in 2012. Nearly five million people, mainly girls and young women from impoverished rural areas are employed in the industry.

Bangladeshi businesses and the government are worried that the worsening global economic crisis will lower export earnings as sales decline in the US and European markets. The Hasina government and the employers are determined to maintain low wages in the garment sector amid growing competition from other low wage platforms, including Vietnam and Cambodia. While the workers have been promised a wage rise, the reality is that behind the scenes, the government, corporations, and trade unions are preparing a sell-out agreement as well as further repressive measures to suppress any resistance by workers.



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