

Bangladesh's government mobilises police to attack striking garment workers

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More than 200 garment workers were injured last week when police broke up an 11-day hunger strike by garment workers from five Tuba Group factories near Dhaka. The workers were demanding payment of wage arrears owed for three months, overtime payments and an Eid festival bonus.

About 1,200 of the 1,450 Tuba Group workers had been involved in strike action since June and about 300 were observing the hunger strike in a factory at the Hossain Super Market complex at Badda.

Tensions remain high this week, despite the payment of the three months' arrears last Sunday, and the end of strike action.

Police locked the factory gates on the morning of August 6, isolating the hunger strikers. They cited "instructions from 'high-level' not to allow anyone to enter the factory," indicating that the operation was ordered by the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina.

Equipped with water cannon and riot vehicles, the police were supported by thugs from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the ruling Awami League and company management.

That evening, the police raided the factory, chased away the doctors helping the strikers, and attacked workers with rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon. An AFP reporter said workers ran out of the factory overcome from the tear gas, while others were bleeding from head injuries.

Dozens were injured, and 10 people were detained, including Mushrefa Mishu, the president of Garments Sramik Oikya Forum, a coalition of 12 organisations. He was only released the following evening.

Some police personnel "threatened to rape protesters if they refused to disperse," the *Daily Star* editorial

reported on August 10. A 23-year-old worker, Minhazul Haque said: "Police were asking us to leave the place. Suddenly 15-20 police personnel stormed into the seventh floor and started spraying us with pepper." Later, the police and thugs beat up protesters, including Dhaka University staff members, human rights organisation personnel and journalists.

The police action provoked protests from other apparel workers. On August 7, workers at nearby factories in North Badda and Middle Badda demonstrated in solidarity with the Tuba workers. The police also attacked them, leaving at least 15 workers injured. But the union leaders isolated the Tuba workers by not calling for any solidarity action. A worker from Mahmud Jeans Limited in Gazipur district commented: "We knew about the strike but we weren't told to stage a strike in the factory."

The government's deployment of the police underscored the concerns in ruling circles that the Tuba workers' struggle could become a rallying point for all garment workers, who continue to be subjected to harsh conditions.

On August 9, police were mobilised in all the country's industrial belts, such as Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur and Dhaka. "There was a tense situation in the industrial area ... and we deployed a sufficient number of police in the industrial zone to avert unrest," Deputy Inspector General of the Industrial Police Abdus Samad said.

The Tuba Group has a record of exploiting workers in sweatshop conditions. One of its factories, Tazreen Fashions, caught fire in 2012, killing 112 workers. Tuba's owner Delwar Hossain violated basic safety and fire protection rules, but he was arrested only in February this year, and was bailed out on August 6, just hours before the police attack.

The BGMEA and the government tried to justify the repression by claiming that workers had been influenced by “outsiders.” BGMEA president Atiqul Islam declared that the government had to take action against them, because they were “confusing workers.”

The workers had earlier rejected a BGMEA offer to pay the Tuba Group’s salary arrears for May and June, in an attempt to break their agitation. Following the August 6 attack, the BGMEA offered to pay all the arrears by last Sunday.

Other demands remain outstanding, but unions like the Jago Bangladesh Garment Sramik Federation and the Garment Sramik Sanghati Federation joined the police in coercing workers into accepting the BGMEA offer. One worker accused union leaders of pressuring the family members of workers, but added: “We’ll not accept it at all. We want full payments, including festival allowances and overtime bills.”

Some media outlets expressed concern that the police violence would generate sympathy for the workers and provoke anger against the government. The *Dhaka Tribune*’s August 10 editorial criticised “the level of violence and intimidation imposed on unarmed members of the public during this protest” as “a gross mishandling of the situation.” It did not rule out repression, however, saying: “Authorisation to use deadly force should be limited only to those situations where it is truly needed, rather than being called on as a first resort.”

Promises by the government to improve workers’ conditions have proven to be bogus. Last year, garment workers demanded an increase in the minimum monthly wage to 8,000 taka (\$US104), but the government recommended only 5,300 taka (\$68). An estimated 40 percent of clothing factories in and around Dhaka do not even pay this.

Garment employers fear losing their competitive edge over rival manufacturers from countries like India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia and Burma. The Awami League government shares this preoccupation because apparel exports earn about \$20 billion annually.

Export growth has slowed to the lowest rate in 15 years, with the value of shipments to the US, the biggest single buyer, falling by 1.39 percent during the first six months of 2014 compared with the corresponding period last year. This slowdown is driving companies to intensify the already harsh

conditions in the factories.

The April 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse tragedy, which killed at least 1,129 people, mainly garment workers, brought the appalling conditions in the sector to the world’s attention. The government, employers and the Western retailers that profit from the exploitation of the clothing workers pledged to upgrade the working and safety conditions, working in partnership with trade unions. Last week’s police assault again demonstrates the fraud of these undertakings.



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