

Bangladesh Tuba garment workers confronted by plant closures

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About 1,600 Tuba Group garment workers are threatened with the loss of their jobs after the group's owner suddenly closed down its five factories, near Dhaka, on August 18. The owner, Delwar Hossain, claimed at a press conference that he could reopen the factories if the company could obtain a government-backed bank loan of 250-300 million Taka (\$US3.2-3.8 million) at a lower interest rate.

A notice was hung on the factory gates, stating that the factories were closed, with effect from June 11, the day workers started protests demanding unpaid wages and overtime pay from May. On July 27, workers occupied the factory. The next day, they started a hunger strike which was brutally attacked by the police and thugs, deployed by the government and the employers.

Fearing that the workers' continued protests could draw other garment workers into struggle, the Awami League government and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) organised to pay the wages arrears. However, Tuba refused to pay the Eid (Ramadan) festival bonus.

The Tuba Group, which operates other plants, is one of the largest manufacturers in Bangladesh, supplying giant international retailers such as Walmart and IKEA. The group included Tazreen Fashions, which was gutted by fire in 2012, killing 112 workers and injuring many more.

Tazreen violated basic safety and fire protection rules, but Hossain, the owner, was only arrested in February this year, after much agitation by workers. After just six months in custody, he was bailed out on August 6, reportedly with political backing.

In order to close down the Tuba factories and evade his outstanding liabilities to the workers, Hossain invoked the draconian anti-working class clauses of the

2006 Bangladesh Labour Act.

The Act states that "the employer may, in the event of an illegal strike by any section or department of any establishment, close down either wholly or partly, such section or department and the workers who participated in the illegal strike shall not be paid any wages for such closure." In other words, the company asserted that the workers' struggle was "illegal."

According to the Act, a so-called legal shutdown requires prior notice and the payment of "termination benefits" to the workers. Hossain ignored those requirements, seemingly confident of official backing. Government support was indicated by the State Minister for Labour, Mujibul Haque Chunnun, who said: "It is not our duty to see whether the factories will run or shut."

On August 20, 400 workers marched, demanding the reopening of the factory and the reinstatement of all employees. The police briefly detained Mushrefa Mishu, the leader of the Bangladesh Workers Unity Forum (BWUF) and a student member of the organisation. The BWUF demanded the cancellation of Hossain's bail and the provision of jobs for the Tuba workers, either in the same company or in other factories.

The BWUF is posturing as a militant union in order to take the steam out of workers' discontent. The trade unions later entered negotiations with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government and the garment factory owners, represented by the BGMEA, to try to head off a confrontation that could spread to other clothing workers.

The Tuba struggle highlights the growing unrest among garment workers in Bangladesh over lay-offs, non-payment of wages and dire working conditions. In recent weeks, around 20 garment factories have been

shut down, sacking more than 18,000 workers, after buildings failed fire, electrical and structural safety inspections.

On August 21, Atlantic Garments workers in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone protested against being laid-off.

On August 23, trade unions and other organisations held demonstrations demanding the immediate reopening of the Tuba factories and Helicon, another factory in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone. Helicon was shut down by its Italian owner, leaving more than 700 workers jobless.

On the same day, several hundred Partex Group workers in Narayanganj staged a demonstration, demanding a pay increase. On August 24, about 900 garment workers from the Moons company in Chittagong city demonstrated, demanding the payment of two months of overdue wages.

The ruling Awami League is determined to keep the wages and conditions of more than four million garment workers at the lowest levels in the world in order to attract foreign investment and win orders from the global retailers. The government slightly raised the minimum wage last year to \$68 a month, far less than the \$100 demanded by workers. Many companies do not pay the minimum wage and others fail to pay wages on time.

The government wants to keep the industry competitive against other clothing-export countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Burma. In the 2013–14 fiscal year, Bangladesh garment exports rose by nearly 14 percent to \$24.5 billion, and the government has set a target of \$33.2 billion for 2014–15.

Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a Bangladesh think tank, commented: “Despite some oddities in the sector, major international retailers still have been increasing the volume of work orders to Bangladesh due to the competitive prices of the products.”

The “oddities” is a reference to the Tazreen Fashions fire and the Rana Plaza building collapse in April 2013, which killed at least 1,129 people, which brought the industry’s poor working conditions and lack of basic safety standards under international scrutiny.

In order to attract more investment, the government is planning to set up eight new economic zones across the country. On August 17, the *Daily Star* reported that

Foreign Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Abdul Hamid urged “foreign investors and entrepreneurs to invest more in Bangladesh,” saying the government “is providing various facilities for foreign investment” and “ensuring 100 percent security to the foreign investors.” He further boasted of the availability of cheap manpower, tax holidays and other incentives.

After the Rana Plaza tragedy “a compensatory scheme to protect victims and their families” was established on the initiative of trade unions in Western countries, such as IndustriAll Global Union, in a bid to divert workers’ anger.

The unions declared that the international retailers had promised to set up a fund of \$40 million, which itself is a meagre amount compared to the massive profits extracted by these retailers and their Bangladeshi contractors. As of this month, however, less than \$17.9 million has been contributed, underscoring these companies’ contempt for workers’ safety.



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