

Bangladesh tea estate workers oppose government's land seizures

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Over 15,000 tea estate employees in northeastern Bangladesh's Habiganj district are fighting government's moves to seize land on which they cultivate paddy rice. The Awami League-led government wants the land to set up more low-wage Economic Zones (EZs) for foreign and local investors. The Habiganj district authorities have already taken over about 512 acres at the Chandpur tea garden.

The estate workers, who formed a "Land Protection Committee" on December 1, began holding protests on December 11. Local government authorities ignored the widespread opposition and the next day marked out the land to be seized at the Chandpur tea garden.

On December 13, thousands of angry employees from the Chandpur, Ramgonga, Joalbhanga and Begum Khan tea estates began taking industrial action and occupied the land. Workers from 23 tea estates in the nearby Laskarpur Valley joined them in solidarity on December 19 and held a rally on January 9. A demonstration was organised on January 22 by the Jatiya Mukti Council, which warned the government there would "tougher measures" unless it stopped taking over estate land.

For generations, tea plantation workers have been allowed to cultivate paddy rice on surplus land in the estates as a compensation for their poverty-level wages. The estate workers' forefathers—mainly impoverished landless Dalits who are considered the "lowest" in the reactionary Hindu caste system—were sent to these areas in the 1850s by then British colonial rulers of India.

Tea estate workers are paid only 69 taka (89 US cents) per day. If they work 30 full days, their monthly wage is 2,017 taka (\$27), which is just 39 percent of average minimum wage of a garment worker. Estate workers receive a subsidised ration of 3.5 kilograms of

wheat a day per family. They survive only by growing their own food on estate land.

As 54-year-old Atit Bakti explained to the media: "For four generations we have lived on this land and this is the first time we are facing this uncertainty ... We will starve to death if this land is taken from us."

All the establishment political parties are working desperately to keep workers' opposition trapped within safe political channels and prevent it from challenging the government's big business program.

Bangladesh Workers Party general secretary Anisur Rahman Mallik, for instance, fostered the illusion that the government could be pressured to reverse its policy by declaring that he would raise the land acquisition policy in parliament. The Bangladesh Workers Party is part of the ruling coalition that is implementing the seizures.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh and the Socialist Party of Bangladesh, which posture as opponents of the government, issued a statement declaring their "solidarity with the protesting tea workers." But the statement covers up for the government's plans to create Economic Zones in the region and attributes responsibility for the land seizures to unknown "vested interests."

The statement declared: "This is a conspiracy against the tea workers who have worked on infertile land for more than 150 years and turned it into arable land. Now a group of vested interests wants to take away the workers' only source of livelihood." It called on the government to "allot some other, infertile land for the economic zone," but expressed no fundamental differences with the plan to establish cheap labour zones for big business investors.

The government has mobilised Awami League members in the Habiganj district to intimidate and

terrorise workers, while deploying police to suppress protests and strikes.

On January 16, Chunarughat municipal mayor Abu Taher, an Awami League member, and the Jubo League, the party's student wing, convened a rally against the protesting estate workers. They were joined by local members of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiya Party and fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. The Bangladesh Tea Labourers Union reported that unknown thugs assaulted two tea estate workers in Chunarughat.

Workers took whatever they could find to defend themselves—including arrows, bows and bamboo sticks—and chanted slogans such as, “My land, my mother, we shall not let them snatch it away.”

Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority executive chairman Paban Chowdhury told the media the government would do whatever was necessary to impose the government's program. “There are some challenges in developing EZs, such as acquisition of land, but we are making all-out efforts to overcome those,” he said.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina declared: “Our duty is to create a business-friendly environment, which we're doing. Massive reforms have been carried out in infrastructures and rules and regulations. We've undertaken all types of initiatives to create an investment-friendly environment.”

The government plans to establish 100 EZs over the next 15 years and wants to increase annual export earnings this year to \$40 billion, up from \$31 billion in the 2014–2015 financial year. More than 30 sites have already been selected for EZs, with Hasina expected to lay the foundations for 10 EZs this month.

On January 25, the *Dhaka Tribune* reported that Hasina assured the Bangladesh Investment and Policy Summit 2016 her government had the “highest level of commitment” to local and foreign investors. According to the newspaper, the prime minister told the summit that the “security and profitability of investments are guaranteed in Bangladesh” and “you will never find another country like this anywhere else.”

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