

Bangladesh government opens apparel factory in prison

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30 January 2017

Late last month Bangladesh's Awami League-led government opened a knitwear factory in one of its prisons. The state-owned Resilience Garment Industry plant is located inside the Narayanganj District Jail, near Dhaka.

The factory will employ over 300 of the jail's 2,150 inmates. It has two units—one for ready-made garments (RMG) and the other to produce Jamdani, a traditional Bangladeshi fabric. The goods will be exported and carry the tag "Made by Prisoners."

Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) president Selim Osman told the media the new facility had the potential to earn up \$US1.5 million per annum. The BKMEA provided prison authorities with financial assistance and advice for the project, which Bangladesh big business has enthusiastically endorsed.

Addressing the opening ceremony on December 27, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said the government planned to expand the new system, declaring: "All the prisoners at different prisons of the country are provided with training for their reform and are given all kinds of facilities. Gradually, they will be provided with more facilities."

Bangladesh government authorities claim the initiative is a "benevolent move." It is, in fact, a new kind of slave labour system and one that will be used to put pressure on other garment workers to keep wages low. Bangladesh has almost 80,000 prisoners, held in overcrowded and inhuman facilities designed for 27,000 people.

As prisoners, these garment workers have no democratic rights and will be forced to do everything demanded of them by jail authorities. While the media has reported that the plant will have two shifts, no details have been released about what they will be paid

or their working conditions.

According to reports, only a portion of factory's income will be given to prisoners employed in the factory, with the rest divided between the jail itself and the state coffers. Narayanganj Jail superintendent Subhas Kumar Ghosh said the pittance earned by the inmates will be put in their respective bank accounts and could be sent to their families or taken when prisoners are released.

Bangladesh's garment industry, which has some of the lowest wages in the world, is the country's principal export earner—accounting for 80 percent of total export income. About 4.5 million workers, the overwhelming majority being young girls from rural areas, are employed in 4,500 factories. With one in every eight Bangladeshis, directly or indirectly, dependent upon the textile industry, the ruling elite is seriously concerned about the stability of this sector.

Bangladesh apparel industry chiefs plan to almost double garment export earnings, from \$28 billion per year to \$50 billion by 2021. The sector, however, is facing intense global competition. A *Daily Star* comment on December 14 warned that the "current competitive advantage of Bangladesh is already being challenged by countries that depend on low-cost production—like Ethiopia. Many European and US retailers and brands will follow these countries if better margins are offered."

Bangladesh garment manufacturers and the government are also acutely nervous about the increasing militancy of garment workers and other sections of the industrial workforce.

In December 2016, tens of thousands of garment workers in Ashulia, a major industrial area just outside Dhaka, took strike action for an increase in the minimum monthly pay—from \$68 to \$200 (16,000

taka). Fearful that the walkout would spill over into other parts of the country areas, owners locked out about 85 factories and sacked over 2,000 workers.

The government and factory employers were only able to suppress this unrest because of the assistance provided by the trade unions.

Three years earlier, in September 2013, about 50,000 garment workers from more than 300 factories walked out, demanding that their monthly pay be increased from \$38 to \$103 (8,000 taka).

While the government eventually raised the minimum wage to 5,300 taka there have been no other pay increases, despite its promise of a salary hike every three years.

In January 2017, *Forbes* reported that while Bangladesh garment workers received only 13 US cents per hour, the hourly income of Bangladesh CEOs was 16,000 times that amount.

According to a November survey published by *New Age*, 64 percent of readymade garment workers are unable to pay for their daily essentials. The newspaper reported that “99.6 percent [of] workers have no savings and 100 percent of them are indebted” and that 77.2 percent have to work overtime to meet family needs.

Worried about the eruption of a new wave of strikes, the government is promoting the development of trade unions in the garment sector in order to control the workforce.

On November 21, four senior government ministers met with Siddiquir Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. Rahman told the meeting the garment industry could “benefit from the practice of healthy trade unionism”—i.e., unions that dissipate or suppress workers’ demands.

As a result, the government has decided to amend the labour law and reduce the number of workers needed to form a union. The percentage of workers from a plant needed to legally establish a union will be reduced from 30 percent to 15–20 percent.

The appalling conditions in factories in Bangladesh were underscored five years ago when more than 1,130 people were killed in the Rana Plaza building collapse. The government declared that garment workers’ wages and working conditions would be improved, but virtually nothing has been done.

Now the government has moved to intensify the exploitation in the garment industry by establishing the first prison factory in the country’s history.



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