

Bangladesh garment workers jailed on bogus attempted murder charges

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Seven garment union officials and a number of workers are being framed up on “attempted murder” charges initiated by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). They have also been accused of vandalising office equipment.

At the request of police, a Dhaka court initially remanded the officials and workers on April 1. They are members of the Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC), which is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB).

On April 5, amid growing opposition by garment workers, the court granted the accused men three months’ bail, pending a hearing into the charges. According to media reports on Saturday, however, they remain in Dhaka Central prison.

Those jailed include GWTUC general secretary Joly Talukder, CPB central committee member Sadekur Rahman Shamim, K.M. Mintu, Manzur Moin, Jalal Hawlader, Lutfar Rahman Akash and Mohammad Shahjahan.

This persecution follows a series of provocations against workers at the Ashiana Garments plant, south of the capital Dhaka. The garment workers established a union branch at the plant last May and applied for official recognition. Bangladesh’s trade union registrar rejected the application.

On January 29, Ashiana workers protested over the dismissal of a fellow employee. Management then shut down the plant and summoned a group of GWTUC leaders and members to meet with police, company authorities and the Directorate of Inspection of Factories at the BGMEA’s offices.

The GWTUC told the media that union officials and workers waited inside the building but were told the meeting had been cancelled. Manzur Moin, one of the

arrested officials, said Mansur Khaled, a senior BGMEA official, and others started attacking garment workers demonstrating outside the building.

“At least 25 to 30 people from BGMEA swooped on the labourers with sticks and rods and began beating them heavily,” Moin said. Several protestors were injured and BGMEA officials seized a rickshaw carrying workers’ banners and microphones.

The BGMEA made various false complaints to the police of violence and property damage by garment workers. Charges were laid against union officials and 150 members. Some of those named in the allegations were not even in Dhaka at the time.

On February 4, a Dhaka court granted eight weeks’ bail for those charged. When this expired on April 1, police remanded six union officials in order to interrogate them.

This is a joint conspiracy by the BGMEA and the police, backed by the Bangladesh government. Its aim is to intimidate the GWTUC and Ashiana workers, and the more than 4.5 million garment sector employees fighting against poverty-level wages and oppressive working conditions.

The attempted murder charges are similar to those involved in the prosecution and jailing of 13 workers from the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana in India, including the entire leadership of the newly-established Maruti Suzuki Workers Union. They were sentenced to life in prison on frame-up murder charges in March 2017. Their only “crime” was to fight against the brutal exploitation at the plant.

In the context of the growing militancy of the international working class, the BGMEA, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed’s government and international retailers are acutely nervous about the eruption of major struggles.

Bangladesh garment workers have been fighting to have the poverty-level monthly wage (\$US64) increased three-fold to 16,000 taka (\$US192) to compensate for escalating price rises.

In December 2016, thousands of garment workers from about 20 factories in Ashulia industrial area, outside Dhaka, struck for a pay rise. The BGMEA closed about 60 factories in the area for several days and locked out thousands of workers. Thirty-four workers and union leaders were arrested on fabricated criminal charges in February 2017.

In an attempt to prevent further eruptions, the Bangladesh government, at the BGMEA's request, established a panel to set a minimum monthly wage. The government will not declare a new wage structure until after the panel issues a report in the next six months. That means workers will not receive any wage increase for more than two years.

A. K. Azad, a panel member and former president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, bewailed the falling growth in the garment sector, from 14 percent in 2015 to 6 percent in 2016. "We will lag again if worker unrest occurs," he declared.

While the garment sector in Bangladesh, the world's second largest clothing exporter, accounts for around \$28 billion in annual revenue, its workers are the lowest paid. According to recent Oxfam research, top fashion industry CEOs, on average, take home in just four days the lifetime income of a Bangladesh garment worker.

Giant retailers particularly in the US and Europe, such as Wal-Mart, H&M, C&A, Esprit, GAP and Li & Fung, earn huge profits by keeping these workers toiling under dire conditions. The brutal and life-threatening conditions were epitomised by the 2013 Rana Plaza multi-storey building collapse, which killed more than 1,000 workers and maimed thousands more, and in scores of factory fires across the country.

There has been a growing wave of strikes and protests among other workers in Bangladesh.

Hundreds of Dhaka Electric Supply Company workers demonstrated in Dhaka on February 18 for trade union rights and improved conditions. Hundreds of Community Health Care Providers Association members have staged hunger strikes since January 22, calling on the government to nationalise their

companies and provide permanent employment.

At the end of January, about 500,000 teachers and employees from some 35,000 non-government secondary schools and colleges were involved in protests demanding the nationalisation of their institutions and permanent jobs.

While the Bangladesh unions, including the GWTUC, and the Stalinist CPB, have called protests over wages, working conditions and frame-ups of union members, they are promoting illusions that the government and companies can be pressured into granting concessions.

As typified by the attempted murder charges, however, the Hasina government's response to the growth of working class opposition has been increased police repression.



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