

Bangladesh garment workers denounce minimum wage offer

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Hundreds of Bangladesh readymade garment workers demonstrated outside the national press club and other parts of Dhaka last Friday, a day after the government announced a miserable pay offer from the Minimum Wage Board (MWB). Garment workers have not had their pay increased since 2013. They are demanding minimum monthly pay rates be set at 16,000 taka (\$US189.63).

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League-led government established the MWB in January in an attempt to dissipate garment workers' anger over their low pay. The tripartite board has representatives from the employers, national trade union federations and the government.

Labour Minister Mujibul Haque told the media last Thursday that the MWB had recommended the monthly pay be raised from 5,300 taka to just 8,000 taka, effective from December. The "offer," just half the amount demanded by garment workers, will do nothing to overcome the escalating cost of living. Since 2013, both the general and urban consumer price indexes have risen by a third—from 184.33 to 248.13 and from 180 to 249.31 respectively.

Last Friday's demonstrations, the latest in a series this year, were organised by the Garment Shramik Odhikar Andolan, a platform of 12 labour organisations, as well as the Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC), the Movement for Garment Workers Rights (MGWR) and the Garment Workers Front (GWF). Protests were also planned this week, including local actions outside selected factories tomorrow. Another demonstration in front of the national press club is scheduled for September 28. The limited action is an attempt to divert workers' demands for national strike action.

Addressing Friday's protest, MGWR coordinator

Mahbubur Rahman Ismail denounced the wage board's offer as "unrealistic and unfair" and said workers would "stick" to their demand for a 16,000-taka minimum wage. GWF president Ahsan Habib Bulbul proclaimed the new proposal a "farce." Mujahidul Islam Selim, president of the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh, said the government had "outwitted" the workers and they should push for 21,000-taka monthly pay.

This is empty posturing and a crude attempt by the garment unions and labour rights group leaders to cover up their support for the government's MWB. They have consistently sought to block a unified movement of garment workers and other sections of the working class against the Hasina government and for decent wages and safe working conditions.

Garment workers have been fighting for wage increases for at least five years. Some 50,000 garment workers protested in Dhaka in September 2013 and about 150,000 workers from over 20 factories in Ashulia and Savar struck for 10 days in December 2016 to demand higher pay.

Fearing that the 2016 strike would draw in other sections of the working class, the Hasina government ruthlessly attacked garment workers, mobilising its Rapid Action Battalion and Border Guard Bangladesh. About 3,500 workers were sacked and more than 1,500, including union officials, were arrested under the state's special powers act. Workers were prosecuted for "inciting" the agitation, "trespassing," "vandalism" and "theft."

Bangladesh is the world's second largest exporter of readymade garments. The industry employs four million workers, mainly women, who last year produced 83 percent, or \$30.6 billion, of the country's annual export income.

While making huge profits, the garment companies pay the lowest wages in the world. According to a recent survey by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a Bangladesh think tank, garment workers' average income covers only 49.9 percent of their family expenditure. The survey found that poverty has led to falling birth rates among garment workers, with 47 percent of married workers having only one child and 27.8 percent not having any children.

The working conditions and social life of garment workers are harsh and dangerous. In 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory building at Savar in Dhaka collapsed, killing 1,138 workers and injuring 2,000 others. On July 25 this year, hundreds of garment workers rallied outside the Rana Plaza building, demanding pay rises and punishment of the factory owners responsible for the 2013 disaster. The Hasina government responded by deploying police battalions to disperse the protesters.

Concerned about the growing unrest, the Awami League government, the ruling elite and international investors are encouraging the growth of trade unions in order to pre-empt and derail workers struggles. The Centre for Policy Dialogue survey reported that unions do not exist or are not functioning in 97.5 percent of the country's garment factories.

On September 2, the government passed the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Bill 2018, which reduces the proportion of workers required to establish a legally-recognised union at a factory from 30 percent to 20 percent of the workforce. A European Union delegation is scheduled to visit Bangladesh this month to assess the "labour rights situation."

The unionisation push does not stem from any concern for the plight of workers. As occurs internationally, the government and the companies will use corporatist unions to contain and suppress workers' opposition and ensure that super-exploitation and massive profits continue.



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