

Following strike, Bangladesh employers sack hundreds of garment workers

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Garment factory bosses in the Ashulia and Savar districts near Dhaka, the Bangladesh capital, have sacked hundreds of workers following the end last week of an eight-day strike over low wages. Many of the victimised workers face police charges.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government has consistently backed garment manufacturers and deployed thousands of police to break up demonstrations and protests in order to maintain the low-wage regime in this economically key sector.

Bangladesh garment workers have been fighting for a 16,000-taka minimum monthly wage since 2016. When 150,000 workers in Ashulia walked out on strike in December 2016 they were subjected to brutal police attacks, including the arrest of 1,500 and the sacking of at least 1,600 others.

Last September the Hasina government promised garment workers that their minimum monthly wage would be increased to 8,000 taka (\$US95). This was rejected by garment workers who demanded that their wages be doubled to 16,000 taka.

On January 6, apparel workers walked out on strike and held protests demanding decent wages, including for mid-level wage grades that had not received any real increase. The next day about 100 workers were injured and one worker shot dead during police attacks on demonstrations.

In an attempt to contain the widespread anger over the police assaults and workers' demands for wider industrial action, Hasina appointed a tri-partite committee consisting of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturing and Exporters Association (BGMEA) representatives, trade union leaders and government ministers. The committee, it was claimed, would "rectify" workers' complaints about wage disparities.

While workers rejected the committee's findings on

January 13, which proposed minimal increases, they returned to work in the face of union demands that they end the strike and under threat of lockouts and further police repression.

According to union and media reports, over 1,400 workers have been sacked at 16 garment factories in Ashulia and Savar. Most of them only found out after they arrived at their factories and discovered their names and photographs on notices attached to the front gates of the plants. Scores of workers are also believed to have been arrested but no details have been provided by the media or the unions.

In an attempt to further intimidate workers, an unnamed garment union leader told reporters: "The owners are doing it [sacking and arresting] to create a climate of fear so that no one will dare to stage protests or demand fair wages... Police told me not to create trouble. Otherwise I'll be disappeared."

BGMEA president Siddiquir Rahman attempted to cover up the extent of the victimisations, falsely claiming that "no innocent worker" would be suspended. The workers were not given any warnings and have not been paid outstanding wages and benefits in direct violation of Bangladesh's limited labour laws.

One dismissed senior operator, who began work at an Ashulia garment factory a year ago, told the *Daily Star*: "I was paid only one month's salary today [January 17] when I went to my factory." The *Daily Star* also reported that 17 workers dismissed from a factory in the same area had not received any money from management.

Ketro Knitting general manager Atiqul Islam tried to justify the mass victimisations, claiming that 300 workers had smashed his factory's CCTV cameras and computers. He also alleged some 10,000 apparel items made for export were missing. These unproven claims

were reported uncritically by the media.

Garment workers have accused management of deliberately downgrading employees in order to avoid paying the government's paltry wage increase. While BGMEA president Rahman has denied this, the practice is commonplace. Many workers are not given any appointment letter when they are hired and therefore never know their actual grade.

The garment trade unions are working desperately to dissipate workers' pay demands and subordinate them to government and company dictates.

National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) president Amirul Haque Amin told the *Daily Star* that the union does not want the sacking of workers "illogically or illegally" and said the union would meet with labour and commerce ministers soon to "express our concern." The newspaper reported, however, that Amin supported action being taken against "wrongdoers."

Amin is one of the union leaders who participated in the government-appointed tripartite committee, which condemned the garment workers, not the police, for violence at last week's protests and demonstrations.

The NGWF is one of the garment sector unions affiliated with IndustriALL, the Geneva-based union conglomerate, which is notorious for collaborating with trade unions internationally to suppress industrial action. These organisations effectively act on behalf of global retail giants, such as Walmart, H&M, Mark & Spencer, Carrefour, Inditex, Tesco, and their local suppliers to ensure they continue to make superprofits at the expense of Bangladeshi workers.

Following the April 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar which killed more than 1,000 mainly garment workers, the global retailers claimed they would take "remedial measures" to ensure safe conditions and decent pay. These promises were worthless.

While Bangladesh has been named as a fastest growing country in South Asia with around 7 percent average economic growth, social polarisation is increasing.

According to a Centre for Policy Dialogue report last year, the average income of Bangladeshi garment workers covers only 49.9 percent of family expenditure. Oxfam also reported in September that it takes a CEO from one of the world's top five fashion

brands just four days to earn the same amount as a Bangladeshi garment worker will earn over her lifetime.



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