

Over 7,000 Bangladesh garment workers sacked after wage protests

Wimal Perera
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Bangladesh garment industry bosses have sacked thousands of workers following the end of recent protests and strikes involving up to 50,000 workers over low wages. The witch-hunts began last month, after garment workers reluctantly ended an eight-day strike under the threat of mass lockouts and police intimidation.

Although media reports vary, the trade union IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) and garment industry unions estimate that more than 7,000 workers have been dismissed.

The unions claim that police have filed cases against about 3,500 named and unnamed workers and arrested more than a 100. Workers have been falsely accused of violence and vandalism. Fearful of arrest, scores of workers are reported to have gone into hiding.

Last month's protests were in response to the ongoing refusal of garment industry employers to even increase workers' monthly minimum pay to 8,000 takas (\$US96), up from the previous 5,300 takas (\$63), as recommended last September by Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's Awami League-led government. The recommended increases resulted from discussions in a government-appointed tripartite committee of employers, unions and state authorities.

Garment workers, who have long-demanded the doubling of their monthly pay to 16,000 takas, were hostile to the government's meagre pay rise recommendations, as well as discrepancies in the increases for junior and senior workers.

While the unions publicly bewail the mass sackings and arrests, these organisations have long played a treacherous role in sabotaging garment workers' struggles for higher wages and better working conditions.

The IBC and the National Garment Workers

Federation (NGWF) last month urged striking workers to return to the factories, opening the way for the mass sackings. The IBC is the Bangladesh section of the IndustriALL, a Geneva-based international union federation notorious for collaborating with employers.

Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, called on the Awami League-led government to "actively protect the nation's assets" and take action against all those who "vandalised factories." NGWF president Amirul Haque Amin made similar unsubstantiated allegations of vandalism.

Recent media reports point to how the mass sackings were carried out. Victimised workers said they were simply told by employers that their services were no longer required, ordered to leave their plants and then sent a payout a few days later.

"I was in jail for 16 days and just got bail last week," Mohammad Ali Hossain, 28, a sacked garment worker, told the *Arab News*. "After getting out of jail, I contacted the factory management but on Saturday, I received a compensation of \$250 from my owner." Of the 1,200 workers at his factory, 92 had been sacked and seven had police cases registered against them, he said.

Shariful Islam, another worker, said: "There are 2,000 workers at my factory and 255 of them lost their jobs on January 11. I received compensation of \$200 on January 26. After my dismissal, I contacted other garment factories to try and get a new job but all of them refused to employ me because I've been terminated."

China Akter, who works for Luman Fashions at Rampura in Dhaka, told one newspaper: "We have been in fear of losing jobs since the announcement of the new wage structure. The owners have tried to

frighten us saying that any increase in wages would force them to shut down... [and] when we demand our lawful wage, the factory owner threatened us.

Rina Akter, from Yolk Garments at Kakrail, said she was paid only 7,000 taka, including overtime, for the month of December. None of the workers were paid the official 8,000 taka minimum, even after the announcement of the new wage structure. They received only a 250–300 taka increase, she said.

A *Guardian* article on January 20 about the Interstoff Apparels factory in Gazipur revealed something of the harsh conditions in the Bangladesh garment industry, which employs 4.5 million workers and is the world's second largest garment producer and exporter.

The Interstoff Apparels plant, which employs 4,500 workers, produces t-shirts with the brand name Spice Girls for export. Salma [not her real name], who is in her mid-20s, told the newspaper she was paid only 8,450 taka a month, including a 600-taka attendance bonus, for a 54-hour week. It would take her about a week to obtain the 2,130 taka (\$25) required to buy a Spice Girls t-shirt.

Salma said management set workers “impossible” targets of sewing up to 2,000 garments a day. If you did not reach that target, she said, you “might even get called inside the production manager’s office and get verbally abused... and sometimes subjected to obscene language such as *khankir baccha* (daughter of a prostitute).”

Amid the current wave of victimisations and mass sackings, the unions are sowing illusions that workers can get redress by appealing to the government. IBC secretary Salahuddin Shapon called for a meeting with Labor Minister Monnujan Sufian. The NGWF organised a “human chain” protest on February 1 to demand the release of arrested workers and withdrawal of police charges.

The Bangladeshi Stalinist parties, such as the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Socialist Party of Bangladesh and the Workers Party, who often back the Awami League, have not called for any mobilisation of workers to fight the mass sackings and arrests.

Apart from the CPB-controlled Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC), which made a lame appeal to the government to stop the repression, these organisations have maintained a stony silence.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) president Siddiqur Rahman told the media that garment workers were not sacked over the protests but then said some plants “may have had problems” because of the pay increase.

Confident of ongoing collaboration with the unions, Rahman issued a direct appeal. “We are very much concerned about maintaining stability in the country’s ready-made garment sector and if the trade union leaders come up with any such [unfair dismissal] issue, we will sit together to find a way out of any situation,” he said.

Like the garment industry owners, Prime Minister Sheik Hasina’s government depends completely on the unions to strangle any attempts by garment workers to win decent wages and working conditions. It is determined to continue attracting foreign investment by maintaining the country’s cheap labour status and exploitative conditions.



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