Bangladesh primary school teachers demand government nationalise schools

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Hundreds of teachers and workers at non-government primary schools in Bangladesh are continuing their agitation to demand that the Awami League-led government nationalise their schools.

The protestors, who represent tens of thousands of non-government primary teachers at over 4,000 schools, are also calling for permanent jobs and enlistment in the official Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme. The MPO is a pay system for teachers in state-controlled public schools and government-approved institutions.

In 2013, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League-led government took over about 26,000 schools in the face of mass action by Bangladesh teachers. Four thousand private schools, however, were not included in the program.

There are many categories of educational institutes under non-MPO educational institutes. These include primary and secondary schools, colleges, technical and vocational institutions and Islamic-based madrasas. Teachers and employees at these schools depend on student tuition fees. An estimated 16,000 non-government school teachers do not receive regular salaries.

The non-government primary teachers began a sit-down demonstration outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on June 16. On July 3 they started a hunger strike. About 230 fell sick during the protest, including six from dengue fever, one of whom—a teacher from Faridpur—died on July 12. The teachers have told the media that they are determined to win their demands.

The government does not care "about our ordeals," Rabindranath Barman, a primary teacher from Panchbibi, Jaipurhat, told the *New Dawn* newspaper. "We're defying the rain, sun, dust, mosquitoes, and constant noise of vehicles… We can't sleep properly and even we don't have any bathrooms here," he said.

Shipra Rani Dey from the Alamin Bazar primary school on Hatiya Island, about 160 kilometres from Dhaka, told *New Dawn* that she had been involved in the protest for 27 days with her toddler son. The Alamin Bazar school was established on the remote island in 2006 and has over 200 students.

Shipra explained that her husband was bedridden and that she was the only person working in her six-member family. She had worked for the last 13 years but not received a regular salary. "I won't go home unless I get a positive message from the government," she said.

Bangladesh non-government school teachers are organised in a range of different unions—the Non-government Primary School Teachers' Association; the Non-MPO Educational Institutions Teachers' and Employees' Federation; and the Bangladesh Besarkari Prathamik Sikkhak Samity—to name just a few.

Even though non-government teachers in Bangladesh are united in their calls for "nationalisation" of their institutions and for everyone to be enrolled in the MPO scheme, the union leadership has kept teachers divided according to the institutes that they work for.

The leadership of these separate organisations have accommodated themselves to the Hasina government, sowing illusions in its bogus promises and claiming that the school nationalisations are being held up by bureaucrats (see: "Bangladeshi teachers end 'fast-unto-death'"). The government promises in 2013 came to nothing.

Even if the non-government teachers and other employees are included in the MPO scheme, they will only receive about $US137 per month. There is no guarantee that this will be regularly paid. Teachers at state-funded Bangladeshi schools regularly report

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delayed salaries and a lack of basic equipment, including chairs and tables.

The Hasina regime is imposing International Monetary Fund and World Bank austerity measures, including spending cuts on education, health and other desperately needed social services.

While government spending on education is reportedly 2.75 percent of gross domestic product, according to figures from the last financial year, Bangladesh cut 1.6 percent from its estimated allocation for education.

According to media reports, buildings at 126 government primary schools in Gopalganj District are unsafe. In some cases, the buildings are so dangerous that classes are held on school verandas or other locations to avoid a catastrophe.

Just across the border in the Indian state of West Bengal, more than 200,000 primary school teachers recently demonstrated and held hunger strikes for wage increases and a withdrawal of the forced transfer of 14 primary teachers. The teachers were moved to remote areas by state authorities because they played a leading role in the West Bengal teachers' fight for higher pay.

The Usthi United Primary Teachers' Welfare Association, which was backed by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), called off the protests on July 16 after the state government claimed it would grant a small increase and revoke the forced transfers. It admitted that the increase was far less than what teachers had demanded.

Strikes and protests by teachers in Bangladesh and West Bengal coincide with recent strikes by teachers in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, as well as in Poland and the US. This action is part of a resurgence of industrial action by the international working class.

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