

Bangladeshi jute mill unions call off workers' protests

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Ongoing demonstrations and hunger strike protests by tens of thousands of workers at state-owned jute mills in Bangladesh were called off by the unions yesterday (Thursday), after negotiations with Golam Gazi, the minister of textiles and jute.

Union officials claim that Gazi had promised to grant a long-outstanding wage increase to the low-paid workers. No exact details, however, have been published about when the increase would be paid or whether any of the workers' other demands would be granted. This is the second "promise" made by a government minister in the past month.

The jute mill workers want immediate payment of a 2015 national wage commission (NWC) recommendation that their minimum wage be doubled—from 4,150 taka (\$US48) per month to 8,300 taka.

The low-paid workers also called for regular payment of wages, repeal of the government's public-private partnership (PPP) program, payment of pensions and gratuities to retired workers and office staff, insurance for families of deceased workers, and increased funding for development of the state jute sector.

Determined to prevent a direct political confrontation with Prime Minister Hasina's Awami League-led government, union officials called a series of symbolic hunger strike protests early last month. The first of these began on December 10 and involved about 50,000 workers and their families, from 24 of the country's 26 state-owned mills. Two workers died and over 200 were hospitalised before the unions ended the action.

The protest was called off on December 13 by officials from the Jute Mill Collective Bargaining Association (CBA) and Non-CBA Sangram Parishad, who claimed that Minister for Labour and Employment

Begum Monnujan Sufian had promised that the government would implement the workers' "main demands."

The two deceased hunger strikers—Abdur Sattar, 48, and Sohrab Hossain, 55—were from the Platinum Jute Mills in Khulna. Sattar collapsed and was admitted to Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH), where he died. Hossain was admitted to a private clinic and returned to work on December 14. He collapsed again and died at the KMCH.

Before burial, Sattar's body was taken to Khalishpur, where angry jute workers were protesting. Fearful that the deaths would spark further demonstrations, the Hasina government deployed riot police, while Labour and Employment Minister Sufian promised a 50,000 taka payment to his family.

No pay increase was granted, however, and so the unions, under pressure from the workers, organised a symbolic hunger protest on December 25—from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.—at nine jute mills in Khulna and Jessore. According to press reports, 20 workers were hospitalised before unions ended the protest.

Utterly indifferent to the plight of the jute workers, and hostile to their demands, the government, aided and abetted by the unions, is determined to impose the austerity measures and privatisation demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international investors.

Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, the government's last budget allocated 6.35 percent of total government expenditure to 'privatisation development,' the highest for the decade.

In April 2019, a World Bank (WB) Bangladesh Development Update report demanded that all allocations to state-owned enterprises (SOE) be ended. It called for the "delinking [of] SOEs from the national

budget to harden their budget constraint” and “to look for better returns on assets or face restructuring, liquidation or privatisation.” The WB also advised the government to dismantle the mills and put the “valuable land” to “much better alternative uses.”

The jute workers’ struggle for a living wage and an end to their harsh working conditions is part of a growing radicalisation of Bangladeshi workers. In December 2018, around 50,000 garment workers went on strike nationally, and again in January 2019, to demand a pay rise.

Police brutally attacked the strikers, killing one worker, whilst garment factory owners sacked thousands of workers. While workers demanded a 16,000 taka minimum monthly wage, they were granted only 8,000 taka.

Jute exports have been hard hit over the past two years. According to officials from the Ministry of Textiles and Jute, export income from jute and jute products dropped by 20.41 percent during the 2017–18 year, with declining demand from India, Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Egypt and Indonesia.

In 1980, jute constituted 80 percent of Bangladesh’s export income. Privatisation, corruption and mismanagement, outdated machinery and the emergence of jute substitutes, have seen the industry’s exports drop to just 2 percent of the country’s foreign earnings in the last financial year.

So determined are Bangladeshi governments to create an investment-friendly environment for the private sector that the WB’s Development Policy Credit granted its first tranche of \$250 million last January, out of a proposed \$750 million loan payment.

Privatisation of the state-owned jute mills, which employ about 80,000 workers, will fuel the anger of millions who depend on the industry. Currently, about one-fourth of the total population is directly or indirectly associated with jute and jute industries.

Privatisation of the jute and other state-owned industries has only brought misery to Bangladeshi workers. After being retrenched, they have been driven into the informal labour market, to try to access odd jobs as rickshaw pullers and day-labourers. This has driven them into debt, with many forced to sell the few assets they accumulated during their working lives.

The growing unrest of Bangladeshi workers is part of a widening of political and industrial action in the

international working class—from the US, France, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, India, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka—determined to put an end to low wages and attacks on basic democratic rights.

Like their international counterparts, Bangladeshi workers can only advance their right to decent wages, working and living conditions by developing rank and file organisations, independent of the unions, and on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program that will put an end to the exploitative capitalist profit system.



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