

# Bangladesh: Garment workers strike over safety amid COVID-19 crisis

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Garment workers in Bangladesh walked out late last month in opposition to bosses' demands that they maintain production as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the country.

Garment workers at the IFL factory in Dhaka's Turag area demonstrated on Saturday outside their plant and later marched to demand a shutdown of the facility and payment of all wage arrears.

Thousands of garment workers, including from Safa Sweater and Jahin Textile in Gazipur, Siraj Garments in Mirpur and plants in Mohammadpur, Ashulia, also protested over the same issues. The demonstrations are part of a growing wave of working-class opposition around the world to employers' demands that they keep working in the face of life-threatening risks.

On March 23, the Bangladesh government, following warnings by medical experts, announced a nationwide shutdown or unofficial lockdown. It later declared that all government and private offices would remain closed between March 26 and April 4.

Emergency service providers, such as hospitals, food markets, utility service providers and cleaners, have to keep working. The banks are open for limited times, but all public transport, apart from the movement of essential goods, such as foods, oils and medicines, is not operating and all educational institutes are closed.

According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, 48 people have been confirmed COVID-19 positive, including five who have died, 15 who have recovered, and 28 under medical observation. These numbers, under conditions where there is no mass testing—as of March 29 only 1,185 people had been tested—and community transmission has already begun, are simply not credible.

Currently, 80 percent of factories owned by Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters'

Association (BGMEA) members and 60 percent of plants owned by Bangladesh Knit Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) members have been closed.

On March 29, however, 985 factories, including 299 garment plants, remained open. BGMEA spokesman Monsur Ahmed told the media that some factories were still operating to produce Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for doctors.

Prior to the unofficial lockdown, scores of companies, working in collaboration with the garment unions—the Shramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad and the Garment Sramik Odhikar Andolan unions—were maintaining production.

The anger of Bangladeshi factory workers is mounting because they are unable to practice “social distancing” in their plants or travelling to and from work. Shahena Akhter, a garment worker in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone, told the *Daily Star*: “It really scares me whether I would be touched by any infected person or not during my daily commute.”

There are almost five million people, mainly women, employed in about 4,000 garment plants in Bangladesh who face the prospect of losing their jobs because of falling orders from the US and Europe. Giant global retailers, such as Wal-Mart, H&M, C&A, Mark and Spencer, Esprit, GAP and Li & Fung, make huge profits from these highly exploited workers, who are paid about \$US95 a month or less.

According to the BGMEA, garment factories have been hard hit with \$1.8 billion in orders put on hold and another \$1.4 billion cancelled, threatening the jobs of two million workers. With the garment industry contributing 84.21 percent to export earnings in the last fiscal year, this is having a major impact on the

Bangladeshi economy.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina during her televised March 25 Independence and National Day address, nervously urged the general public to “stay at home” and “strictly follow health instructions.” She did not call for the export-oriented industries or non-essential sectors to be marshalled to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Hasina announced a “stimulus package” of 50 billion taka (\$US595 million) for the export-oriented industries and politely suggested that they pay workers’ wages. There are no media reports as to whether big business heeded her request. Fearful of working class opposition, BGMEA President Rubana Huq later warned that any failure to pay wages would “create serious social unrest.”

The spread of COVID-19 has also placed thousands of oppressed tea estate workers at risk. About 500,000 workers in 163 tea gardens at Moulvibazar district have not worked since March 27. These workers live in overcrowded and unhygienic dwellings.

Oppressed people in urban areas, such as street vendors, hawkers, rickshaw-pullers, and trishaw and van drivers who have lost their meagre daily income are threatened with destitution, and are also vulnerable to infection.

Falls in foreign remittances, which constitute over 5 percent of GDP (about \$17 billion in the 2019 fiscal year) are also impacting on the economy because some 630,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers have returned home since the coronavirus outbreak. About 10 million Bangladeshis work in the Middle East and other regions.

Hundreds of thousands of ordinary people are unaware of official health precaution warnings because authorities have not conducted any public awareness campaigns. “Social distancing” is virtually impossible for the urban poor.

Since the first case was detected on March 8, the government has pledged two billion taka for testing kits, Intensive Care Unit facilities and other protective clothing. But this equipment has not yet reached the hospitals.

Health and medical workers have not been properly trained or equipped. Three doctors and two nurses have been confirmed positive and 10 physicians and 12 medical workers are under self-quarantine. Fearful that

they will contract the coronavirus, doctors and medical workers are reluctant to attend to infected patients. Hundreds of doctors at hospitals in Sylhet, Rajshahi and Khulna have staged strikes demanding PPE.

At the same time, the government is carrying forward militarisation programs, deploying the army and police, supposedly to enforce “social distancing.” On March 25, police opened fire on jute mill workers in Dinajpur protesting the closure of mills and demanding the payment of three weeks’ wage arrears. Five workers were wounded and a nearby tea-vendor killed in the shooting.

Fears are also growing about the vulnerability of around a million Rohingya refugees living in overcrowded and unsanitary camps in Cox’s Bazar. They lack basic facilities, such as clean water and medical facilities. Their freedom of movement has been restricted and access to phone and internet communication was stopped.

The Human Rights Watch told the media that entry restrictions on volunteer workers are blocking knowledge about the extent of coronavirus infections in the camps. Over 89,000 people are also at risk in the country’s seriously overcrowded prisons.

Mirroring the callous indifference of their ruling counterparts around the world, the Bangladeshi authorities are preparing the Khilgaon-Taltola graveyard in Dhaka for mass burials of COVID-19 victims.



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