

# Garment workers protest in Bangladesh as COVID-19 spreads

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Thousands of clothing workers demonstrated on Monday in Dhaka, the national capital, and in industrial zones across Bangladesh to demand outstanding wages and protest against terminations and layoffs. An estimated 20,000 garment workers also demonstrated the day before, following protests the previous week.

The Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had previously imposed a national lockdown—from March 26 to April 4. Confronted by widespread action by workers demanding hand sanitisers, face masks, gloves and proper social-distancing practices, it then extended the lockdown until April 25.

Employers have responded to the lockdown, and a drastic fall in international orders, by shuttering the plants, sacking thousands of temporary workers and refusing to pay outstanding wages.

When the lockdown began, thousands of mainly female garment workers, whose monthly wage is only about 8,000 takas (\$US95), were forced to return to their remote villages without any pay. According to media reports, less than 300 garment factories have paid salaries, with an estimated 200 factories still operating.

Facing destitution and expecting the plants to be reopened on April 4, workers returned to the industrial zones, where they were confronted by an unprecedented situation. Scores of factories had closure notices on their gates. Thousands of workers had been laid off. Factory managers in some plants attempted to make workers sign resignation letters.

Public transport services were not operating, so workers' journeys were perilous. They travelled by ferries, vans, auto-rickshaws, trucks and motorcycles. Others walked long distances—some for up to 30 hours—to reach Dhaka and other industrial zones.

Bangladesh is the world's second-biggest garment maker after China. Its more than 4,500 officially registered plants account for some 84 percent of the country's \$40 billion annual export earnings. Hasina's government and the garment industry bosses, like their counterparts in Europe and the US, are urging a reopening of the plants.

Mehedi Hassan, a garment worker who had returned from Netrokona village, 150 km from Dhaka, told the *Dhaka Tribune*: "We are just pawns in this risky game [of the factory owners]." It had cost him over 1,000 takas, a large amount for a low-paid worker, to return to his plant.

Another worker, from TSS-Fashion at Mowchak in Gazipur, told the *New Age*: "I risked my life on my way to Gazipur to join my factory tomorrow. It is my livelihood. I don't understand the policy of the government since they've kept everything else closed, except garment factories."

Garment worker Sajedul Islam, 21, told the AFP: "We are afraid of the coronavirus. We heard a lot of people are dying of this disease but we don't have any choice. We're starving. If we stay at home, we may save ourselves from the virus but who will save us from starvation?"

Speaking with *New Age*, Iqbal Arsalan, a Bangabadi Medical University professor, warned: "We are increasing the risk factors by allowing them to come to Dhaka and begin work in factories where physical distancing cannot be maintained."

Last week, hundreds of garment workers protested in Mymensingh district over the closure of the Crown Wears plant and non-payment of wages. They were violently attacked by police and more than 20 were injured. Two protesting workers were killed when a truck ran over them.

APS Holdings workers in Gazipur also protested against the management seizure of their identity cards and attempts to force them to sign blank sheets of paper that could be later used to terminate them.

About 150 Risingtex Fashion workers in Savar were confronted with the same demands. According to media reports, over 3,000 workers were laid off from 20 factories in the Gazipur, Ashulia, Savar and Chattogram areas.

Confronted with this rising working-class anger, the government ordered the closure of all garment factories, apart from those producing personal protective equipment. Following discussion with garment industry owners, it announced that shut downs would be extended until April 25.

This meant those workers who had travelled from their villages confronted an impossible situation, unable to return home, while facing police restrictions to prevent them from entering or leaving Dhaka.

Hundreds of thousands of poor people across the country have lost their earnings and are starving because no government food aid is reaching them. This has led to suicides and protests. Among the suicides was Wahidul Islam, 30, a van-puller and father of four children from Dalbhanga village in Maheshpur sub-district.

Last week Narayanganj residents marched toward a district administrative office on Wednesday, demanding aid and defying bans on public gatherings and official social-distancing measures.

The government's claims of providing generous aid were exposed by a survey conducted by BRAC, an NGO. It found that only 4 percent of the population had received any emergency relief support as of April 5 and that at least 14 percent of low-income people had no food at home. It also revealed that the average household income of 14,599 taka before the lockdown had fallen drastically by 75 percent to 3,742 taka this month.

Currently about 30 districts out of 64 in Bangladesh, including areas of Dhaka, are in lockdown. For the majority of people "social distancing" is virtually impossible, particularly in Dhaka's slums, where 4.8 million people—nearly one-third of the city's population—live.

On April 13, Health Minister Zahid Maleque for the first time admitted community transmission is taking

place widely. About 1,012 persons had tested positive for COVID-19 with 46 deaths by April 14. On April 14, 209 people tested positive, the highest single-day count so far.

These low figures are mainly due to the lack of mass testing, as recommended by the World Health Organisation. As of April 10, only 7,359 people—in a population of 160 million—had been tested. Jahidur Rahman, a virologist and assistant professor at Shahid Suhrawardy Medical College, has called for at least 10,000 tests daily.

An April 12 comment in the *Daily Star* said the government's response to the coronavirus outbreak "had been plagued by inappropriate decisions, delayed actions and muddled thinking—right from the beginning."

Even as health authorities warned that COVID-19 could become practically uncontrollable if it spread, Prime Minister Hasina initially downplayed the pandemic, saying it was "not that deadly."

Her government announced a massive bailout package of \$US8.56 billion for the garment industry, almost three times the \$3.02 billion losses from cancelled export orders. The amount that the government recommended for workers' wages is about 7 percent of that handed over to the employers.



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