

Garment workers' protests hit Bangladesh industrial belts

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Working-class protests and demonstrations have swept through Bangladesh industrial belts hitting the export-oriented garment manufacturers and amid rising concerns over coronavirus infections.

Citing data from the government's Industrial Police, the *Financial Express* reported over 440 incidents of "labour unrest" in 374 factories during April and 279 incidents in 179 factories in March.

The more than 5,000-strong Industrial Police, which was established by the Bangladesh government in 2010 to suppress workers' struggles, covers over 7,600 factories. About 4,500 of these are officially-registered garment plants, employing over four million workers.

The coronavirus pandemic began impacting on Bangladesh's industrial sector in February resulting in immediate falls in orders and exports earnings. Garment industry owners responded to reduced, or cancelled, orders by giant US and European retailers, such as Wal-Mart, H&M, C&A, Marks and Spencer, Esprit, GAP, Li & Fung and Premark, by cutting jobs and wages or outright closures.

Bangladesh officially recorded its first COVID-19 cases on March 8, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government attempted to downplay concerns. She was forced, however, to impose a national lockdown, excluding emergency service providers, from March 26 to April 4.

Publicly criticised by medical experts, Hasina decided to extend the lockdown until May 5 for all government and private sector institutions, but allowed export-oriented industries to reopen on April 26.

Over 930 factories are reported to have laid off their employees and not paid months of outstanding wages. Workers' safety was being violated in many plants that had reopened. Workers responded to the refusal of companies to provide a safe working environment with strikes and protests to demand hand sanitisers, face masks

and gloves.

Tens of thousands of garment workers, whose monthly wages are about 8,000 takas (\$US95), are from villages and went back to their rural homes during the lockdown. When they returned to the industrial zones after April 26 and discovered the plants were still shut, some indefinitely, a wave of angry demonstrations erupted that are still continuing.

"The garment industrial belt at Gazipur and Ashulia turned into a battlefield yesterday, as several thousand apparel workers clashed with police," the April 28 edition of *New Nation* reported.

On May 5, a *Business Standard* article revealed that hundreds of workers from around 10 garment factories at industrial zones in Dhaka, Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong had demonstrated demanding their jobs back and payment of all outstanding wages.

- In Ashulia's Narsinghpur area at least 300 Adiyat Apparels workers demonstrated over layoffs. Management shut down the plant on March 28 and later announced that all employees were laid off until June 1. Workers were not paid their March wages.

- Over 100 Dragon Sweater factory workers in Dhaka's Malibagh area on Tuesday demanded five month's outstanding wages.

- About 400 Jeasha Fashion workers protested over their unpaid March wages and another 400 Satter Tex workers demonstrated for three months' wages.

- About 900 Papella workers and 1,300 UFM (BD) employees at garment factories in the Chattogram Export

Processing Zone marched for their March and April salaries.

- About 3,000 Antim Knitting, Dyeing and Finishing garments workers protested for payment of the outstanding 50 percent of their wages.

- On Sunday, thousands workers from factories at Ashulia, Dhamrai and Gazipur industrial zones demonstrated over similar demands.

The Hasina government has provided export industry companies with a 50 billion taka (\$US595 million) “stimulus package” to pay for workers’ wages but this has not reached many workers.

The government and company owners, with support from some trade unions, agreed to cut 40 percent from workers’ gross monthly wages during the closure period.

Fearing widespread protests, some of the unions affiliated with the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) and Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh-controlled Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC) rejected this. They later agreed, however, to a 35 percent wage cut. In 2018, the IBC and GWTUC betrayed mass strike action by garment workers demanding higher pay, opening the way for factory owners to sack thousands.

The reopening of export-industry garment plants has left thousands of workers vulnerable to COVID-19, particularly those living in overcrowded accommodation near the plants in Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur. These areas are now considered coronavirus hotspots. On May 3, the *New Age* reported at least 12 workers at 10 factories had tested positive with the virus.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, warned of the danger of premature and unsafe plant reopenings. “The number of coronavirus patients may increase in the worst-affected areas in Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur after eight to 10 days, as there is a risk of virus transmission among garment workers,” he told *New Age*.

Such warnings have been ignored by the government and factory owners who are facing pressure to fulfil orders for the US and European retailers.

Bangladeshi factory owners fear that they would lose to their global competitors, such as Vietnam, China and Cambodia, which have already resumed production. As of yesterday, over 2,590 Bangladeshi garment producers remain open. The clothing industry accounts for some 84

percent of the country’s \$40 billion annual export earnings. Currently about \$6 billion worth of orders could be lost this financial year.

The reopening of the Bangladesh factories, and threatened loss of workers’ lives, coincides with similar moves in the US and Europe.

Last Friday, 890—or 40 percent of 2,200 workers at the Tyson Foods pork plant in Logansport, Indiana in the United States—were confirmed COVID-19 positive, as a result of President Trump’s executive order forcing reopening of meat-processing plants.

A new wave of workers’ struggles has emerged in the US—a global epicenter of the pandemic—against factory reopenings and unsafe working conditions. There have been at least 140 wildcat strikes in the US between March and April, while workers in other countries have taken strike action or demonstrated over the same issues.

The Hasini government is insisting that the garment factories keep operating. However, because the pandemic is escalating out of control, it has decided to extend the national lockdown until May 16 but only at public and private office workplaces.

In the past two weeks the official number of COVID-19 deaths has more than doubled—from 84 on April 18 to 186 on May 5. Yesterday morning the Directorate General of Health reported two more deaths and 665 new cases—the highest in single day.

The total number of officially-confirmed cases is 9,455 but there is no mass testing. The number of daily tests is less than 6,000 as against at least 10,000 recommended by medical experts. People are dying of coronavirus-like symptoms but these fatalities are not officially counted.

The national healthcare system also faces collapse as increasing numbers of medical workers are being infected—currently 574 doctors and 600 nurses—amid an acute shortage of personal protective equipment. Two doctors have died from the virus and, according to the Bangladesh Nursing and Midwifery Council, the country has only 24 percent of total 300,000 nurses required nationally.



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