

Growing number of Bangladeshi garment workers infected with COVID-19

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18 May 2020

Bangladesh's Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported yesterday that a total 23,870 people nationally had been infected with COVID-19 and that the death toll had reached 349 since the highly contagious infection hit the country. Little more than 185,000 people have been tested in Bangladesh, which has a population of 160 million. Somewhere between 6,000 and 9,000 people are being tested each day, less than the 10,000 minimum recommended by medical experts.

The Bangladeshi media, citing a survey by the Bangladesh Center of Workers Solidarity, recently reported that 96 workers have been infected. This includes 26 workers from Narayanganj, 24 in Savar, 14 in Gazipur, 7 from Ashulia, 6 from Dhaka and the rest from other areas. Ten garment workers and one factory official are reported to have died from confirmed infections or after exhibiting coronavirus-like symptoms.

While the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) rejected the survey figures, claiming that there were only 20 infections among factory employees, the *New Age* newspaper, citing Industrial Police of Bangladesh data, said 90 workers had tested positive—81 from garment factories and the remaining nine from other plants.

Many of these workers have been infected since the government allowed the reopening of garment facilities on April 26, even as the pandemic was escalating beyond the control of health authorities.

While thousands of low-paid workers responded to company announcements that the plants were reopening, the national lockdown of public and private office workplaces remains in place until May 30. Shopping malls are only allowed to be open for a few hours each day. One employee, Mohammad Moshir

told Reuters that he had to keep working, adding: "Do you think I would have gone to work today if I had money? Of course not."

Factory owners claim that they have provided safe and improved working conditions but the media has cited comments from workers warning that they remain vulnerable to the virus. *The Daily Observer* reported workers complaining that "most factory owners are not providing enough masks and sanitiser and that workers have to buy them at their own cost."

Three anonymous government inspectors told Reuters that the machine layouts in many plants made it difficult to keep workers apart. One worker told the news agency that her "factory was cleaner but was just as crowded as before the epidemic." She said: "I'm scared. But sitting at home won't feed my child or pay my rent. We are poor people."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has attempted to justify her government's dangerous reopening of plants by invoking the approaching end of the Ramadan religious festival. "We can't keep everything shut," she declared.

The Hasina government's decision to allow factories to reopen has nothing to do with Ramadan but is in response to the demands of Bangladesh garment bosses and other export industry chiefs. It corresponds with the brutal and medically unscientific "herd immunity" policies being imposed on workers by governments around the world (see: "The murderous pseudoscience of 'herd immunity'").

In late March, Professor Dr Nasima Sultana, the Additional Director General of Health Services declared that the government agency wanted "to build immunity to the virus," a policy that could result in tens of thousands of workers dying.

Amid rising working-class anger and concern about

the lack of proper COVID-19 safety measures, BGMEA director Faisal Samad said the peak big-business group had established a crisis management team with hotline phone numbers. Team members, he claimed, would immediately respond to workers' calls for safe conditions.

The Bangladeshi garment industry accounts for some 84 percent of the country's \$US40 billion annual export earnings. In order to maintain production and profits against global rivals, such as Vietnam, China and Cambodia, industry chiefs are prepared to sacrifice the jobs and lives of tens of thousands of workers. In an interview with the BBC, BGMEA president Rubana Huq warned that "more than two million garment factory workers [out of four million] might lose their jobs."

Faced with job and pay cuts, withheld wages and religious festival bonuses, and the danger of COVID-19, thousands of garment workers have taken to the streets in daily protests.

On Saturday, around 1,500 workers from the Magpie Composite Textile and Magpie Sweater plants in Ashulia rallied and then blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway to demand last month's salaries and leave allowances. Police attacked the demonstrators with batons and tear gas, injuring five workers.

One worker told the *Daily Star*: "We were staging a sit-in programme inside the factory as authorities have yet to pay our salary for April, and last year's yearly earning allowance." Another worker said: "We were prepared to accept 60 percent of our salary for April but the factory owner has not yet paid that. We will starve if we don't get paid." The average monthly wage of Bangladeshi garment workers is about 8,000 takas (\$US95).

On May 16, the government, company owners and union leaders met and agreed to the terms of a sell-out agreement. In violation of workers' demands, the union bureaucrats backed a deal that would supposedly result in the payment of outstanding bonuses in two phases—50 percent of the basic wage before the religious festival and another 50 percent after the festival. The unions involved in this betrayal were the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) and the National Garment Workers Federation.

Most of the garment workers' strikes and protests have occurred in large non-union plants, including

those of the Ha-Meem Group, Envoy Group and Islam Group, which is of concern to both the BGMEA and the corporatist trade unions. The Ha-Meem Group has about 50,000 workers, Envoy Group 21,000 and Islam Group 15,000.

In a direct appeal to employers, IBC Secretary General Salauddin Shapon pointed out the union's usefulness in suppressing strikes. "Most of the factories that are facing unrest do not have trade unions," he said. "If those owners allowed trade unions, we would be able to communicate with them," he added, bemoaning the fact that only 10 percent of Bangladeshi workers were affiliated with unions or labour federations.

Last week, a member of the government's National Technical Advisory Committee on the coronavirus anonymously told the media: "We are in the dark about the government's capability of providing medical treatment to COVID-19 patients."

The comment came after health authorities revealed that three people had tested positive in Kutupalong, one of many camps in Cox's Bazar, where about a million Rohingya asylum-seekers live—the world's largest refugee settlement. These camps are overcrowded and lack adequate sanitary facilities. Dr Shamim Jahan, health director of Save the Children in Bangladesh, warned: "We are looking at the very real prospect that thousands of people could die from COVID-19."



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