

Bangladeshi government cracks down on opposition to jute mill privatisation

Wimal Perera
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On July 7, Bangladeshi courts jailed two jute mill union activists—Waliar Rahman, 44, and Nur Islam, 48—after plain clothes police raided their homes between 2.30 and 3.30 a.m. the previous day. The arrests came amid rising anger by jute mill workers over the government’s announcement on July 2 that it was shutting all 25 state-owned Bangladeshi Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) plants and laying off 50,000 workers, including 25,000 permanent employees.

Rahman and Islam were temporary workers at Eastern Jute Mills and Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills, respectively, in Khulna. Rahman is the convener of Jute Industry Protection Youth Alliance and Islam is an adviser to the alliance. The men will be held for a week in Khulna jail for “questioning.” According to one press report, they were planning to hold a press conference to denounce the mill closures.

Family members told Agence France-Presse (AFP) that they feared both men could be murdered in a so-called “crossfire” incident. “Crossfire” is a pretext commonly used by security forces to justify extra-judicial killings.

Islam’s son Mohammad Jewel told the AFP that they had visited several police stations before he was informed about the arrests and the charges, more than 30 hours after his father had been seized by police.

Police claimed that Rahman and Islam were arrested because they were suspects in the vandalism of a police box [police post] and had obstructed police during workers’ protests over unpaid wages on April 4, 2019. The allegations are bogus and have been cooked up in an attempt to intimidate jute workers opposing the Bangladeshi government’s destruction of thousands of jute mill jobs.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s administration has exploited the crisis created by COVID-19 pandemic to

push ahead with long-held plans to sell-off the state-run jute industry, claiming it cannot compete against the private sector. There are about 130 private sector jute and spinning mills in Bangladesh employing some 120,000 workers whose poverty-level monthly wage is just 4,380 taka (\$US52) or less than half that paid to government workers.

On June 27, state-sector mill workers opposed to the government’s privatisation agenda walked out on strike for three days before unions called it off on the basis of a worthless government “promise” to reconsider its plans. A few days later the government announced that it was closing all 25 plants.

In line with World Bank demands for the privatisation of all state-owned industries, Hasina declared that jute mill workers should “peacefully” accept the closures and “help the government to implement the decision.”

The Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and other “left” unions in the jute industry claim to disagree with the closures and have denounced the arrest of Rahman and Islam. However, these apparatuses have paved the way for privatisation of BJMC plants and the mass job destruction.

Instead of mobilising jute mill workers in nationwide industrial action, the unions and so-called left parties have organised harmless protests appealing to the government to change course.

In the lead up the government’s closure announcement, the union bureaucracy, including the Patkal Sangram Parishad (PSP), the main jute mill union, held high-level meetings with State Minister for Labour Monnujan Sufian.

In late June, PSP convener Shahidullah Chowdhury, who is also president of the CPB-controlled Garment Workers’ Trade Union Centre, called on the Hasina

government to invest 10 billion taka (\$US118.5 million) to make the mills “profitable.”

The PSP dropped its “opposition,” however, after the government announced a so-called “golden handshake” redundancy program. The redundancy scheme does not include the 25,000 casual and temporary workers employed in the industry.

The Hasina government has cynically claimed that its measures will revive “the glory of the jute sector in the future” and last month allocated 366 billion taka to create an investment-friendly environment for the private sector. Only 50 billion taka is allocated to terminate permanent jute mill employees and to pay pensions owed to workers who have retired since 2014.

Following the arrest of Rahman and Islam, the “left” parties, including the CPB and Socialist Party of Bangladesh (SPB), along with the Workers Party—a government coalition partner—and several other groups, held nominal demonstrations demanding their release. These formations, however, have refused to mobilise garment workers—one of the largest section of the Bangladeshi working class—in solidarity with the jute workers for the release of Rahman and Islam or to fight the mill closures.

While CPB President Islam Selim has called for a united movement against the mill closures these appeals are entirely nationalist and directed towards defending the capitalist elite in Bangladesh. The privatisations, Selim declared, are a violation of the “spirit of the 1971 war of independence”—i.e., the struggle to establish Bangladesh as a capitalist nation state.

In 1980s, Bangladesh had the world’s largest jute industry, employing over 250,000 mill workers and earning 80 percent of Bangladesh’s national export income, today the industry annually earns just under \$1 billion. Corruption and mismanagement, privatisation, the emergence of jute substitutes, and outdated machinery have produced a decades-long decline of the industry and the closure of scores of mills.

Jute workers have for years fought for wage increases, repeal of the privatisation program, payment of pensions and gratuities to retired workers and funds for the modernisation of the jute industry sector. These demands have been systematically betrayed by the unions.

In January this year, protests by tens of thousands of

workers were sold out by the unions on the basis of bogus government promises. Workers were demanding the monthly minimum wage be lifted from 4,150 taka (\$US48) to 8,300 taka—a level recommended five years ago by the 2015 national wage commission.

In mid-May, Khalishpur Jute Mill workers in Khulna walked out on strike to demand full payment of the annual Eid religious festival bonus and five weeks’ outstanding wages during the national COVID-19 lockdown.

Their counterparts in other industries in Bangladesh face similar attacks. During and after the COVID-19 lockdown, thousands of garment workers, sugar mill employees, tea estate workers, agricultural workers, journalists and others have staged protests against plant closures, job and wage cuts, and unsafe working conditions. These struggles have been betrayed by the unions.

To defend jobs and wages, jute mill workers must break from the unions, form independent rank-and-file committees and turn out to other sections of the working class under attack. Rather than trying to pressure the government, workers need to unify their struggles to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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