Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand reopening of closed mills

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Workers retrenched from state-run jute mills in Bangladesh held a protest demonstration on October 19 demanding the reopening of the factories closed by the government. This was the latest in a series of protests by jute workers against closures.

In July, the Awami League government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina shut down all 25 remaining state-owned jute plants of the Bangladeshi Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), laying off more than 50,000 workers, including about 25,000 permanent employees. The decision was part of the government's market reforms and privatization of state utilities dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Protests have been triggered by the intolerable living conditions that have deepened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that the closures occurred months ago, the *Daily Star* reported on October 22 that nearly 35,000 workers—both permanent and retired—had not received their compensation .

About 1,000 laid-off workers demonstrated in Khulna and Jashore on October 19. They made 14 demands, including the immediate payment of dues, arrears and gratuities for all workers, the modernization of state-owned jute mills and an end to corruption and looting.

The police attacked the protesters with batons and tear gas, injuring 22 workers including 12 women. Kudrat-e-Khuda, convener of Citizens' Combined Forum (CCF) for protecting jute mills, told the *Daily Star* that the police attacked workers without any provocation. Nine leaders were detained, including Kudrat-e-Khuda, and another five workers picked up and arrested from their homes.

On October 4, workers organized a protest in the Khalishpur area in Khulna and carried a coffin in a march to demand the reopening of jute mills. Prior to the protest, the police detained three of the main organisers of Jute Mill Protection Workers-Farmers-Students-Janata Oikya Parishad.

On September 27, hundreds of jute mill workers demonstrated in Khulna and Sirajganj voicing similar demands.

On August 24, hundreds of workers staged demonstrations in Khulna and Tangail. In Tangail, workers and farmers formed a human chain in front of the Tangail Press Club to demand the protection of jute farmers and reasonable prices for jute.

The jute workers' struggles have radicalized jute farmers whose lives depend on the industry. Many farmers participated in the recent demonstrations **.** At least 4 million farmers cultivate jute, which contributes 0.26 percent of the country's GDP and makes up 1.4 percent of agricultural output.

The growing unrest compelled Textiles and Jute Minister Golam Dastagir Gazi to announce on October 21 the payment of all compensation by November had been assured by Prime Minister Hasina. Previously, Hasina had only pledged compensation in three years.

Among the organisations involved with jute workers are the Jute Mill Protection Workers-Farmers-Students-Janata Oikya Parishad, Revolutionary Students Youth Movement and United Front of Workers and Employees (SKOP). These are affiliated with various Stalinist parties including the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Socialist Party of Bangladesh and Workers Party of Bangladesh (WPB). Their role has been to prevent the opposition of workers from challenging the Hasina government. The WPB is a partner in the ruling coalition.

When the jute workers staged a three-day strike in June against plant closures and privatization, the unions and the CPB ended the struggle on the basis of a worthless government "promise" to reconsider its

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plans. Prominent in this betrayal was Patkal Sangram Parishad, the main jute mill union. Its convener was Shahidullah Chowdhury, who is also president of the CPB-controlled Garment Workers' Trade Union Centre.

The government later announced a so-called "golden handshake" for laid-off workers, allocating 50 billion taka ($US590 million) in compensation—40 billion taka for permanent workers and 10 billion taka for workers who had retired after 2013. The prime minister's principal secretary Ahmad Kaikaus declared the money would be paid in "the quickest possible time."

On average, each worker was supposed to get 1.39 million taka ($16,360)—half in cash and the remaining amount through savings certificates.

More than 32,000 substitute workers (those recruited to fill temporary absences) and temporary contract workers have been deprived of any compensation. Some of these workers have been working in mills for over a decade and have still not been made permanent.

On condition of anonymity, a BJMC official told the *Daily Star* how the jute industry breached workers' rights: "We used to sack these workers just several days prior to completion of their three-month probation. Then we would reappoint them after a gap of several days… they would never get permanent status."

Imposing further burdens on workers, Bangladesh Jute Mills Limited, one of the closed mills in Ghorashal, has sent eviction notices claiming they have "built shanties illegally on the mills' property."

The closure of jute mills has been done under consecutive governments. Adamjee jute mill—once Asia's biggest—was closed in 2002 by Khaleda Zia's Nationalist Party government, sacking 40,000 workers.

Jute workers protests indicate the explosive social opposition developing in Bangladesh against the Hasina regime, which is rapidly entrenching authoritarian rule.

Workers at state-owned sugar mills staged a protest on October 7 in Dhaka and other places against the government's threat of privatization. The Workers Party of Bangladesh, which was involved in the protest, submitted petitions to the government authorities.

Workers at the Diganta Sweater Factory in Gazipur protested on October 28 against management's decision to retrench workers. They blocked the Dhaka-Tangail Highway for an hour in the morning.

Workers told the media that when they had entered the factory some lights and machinery had been damaged to try and implicate them. In response the workers held a march. The police were called. Other factories in the area declared a holiday fearing the protest would spread.

In the midst of the pandemic, many garment factories have been closed. One estimate predicted that about one million garment workers would lose their jobs by December.

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