

Bangladeshi police gun down six construction workers

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Bangladeshi police shot dead six construction workers at the coal-fired SS Power Plant project at Banshkhali in Chittagong (Chattogram), the country's second largest city. The police shooting occurred on April 17 when about 2,000 workers were demonstrating for regular payment of wages and against harsh working conditions.

Four workers died on the spot and dozens of injured protesters were taken to Chittagong Medical College Hospital. One worker died later that day and another on April 21. According to media reports, about 20 workers suffered gunshot injuries. However, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development reported on April 20 that over 50 workers were injured in the police assault.

The indiscriminate character of the violence is revealed in a police statement which declared that police officers fired “332 rounds of ammunition—202 rounds of rubber bullets, 68 rounds of lead-ball bullets from shotguns, 62 rounds of bullets from Chinese rifles.”

The protest, which began in the morning of April 17, was over nine basic demands. These included a two-hour cut in duty time during Ramadan, a five-hour reduction in duty time every Friday, which is already a Bangladeshi national holiday, salary increases, the timely payment of wages and full disbursement other outstanding benefits. The workers were also demanding an end to harsh working and living conditions.

One construction worker, Md Rafique, told the *Daily Star* on April 21 that almost every worker confronted substandard and overcrowded accommodation, along with unhygienic water supplies and toilets.

A *Daily Star* journalist who visited the construction project after the police attack noted the terrible conditions: “Accommodation was unhealthy and

crammed, and the toilets used by workers so unhygienic that it would be hard to expect anyone to use them. The drain adjacent to their accommodation was seen overflowing with human waste and emitting a rancid smell.”

The S. Alam Group, a Bangladeshi construction conglomerate, is building the \$US2.4 billion power plant for China's Shandong Teijun Electric Power Engineering. The project employs about 3,500 Bangladeshis and 853 Chinese workers. Most of the local workers are hired through various subcontracting companies.

The killings further highlight the government's authoritarian response to rising militancy by workers. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has given police a free hand to the police to suppress workers struggles and her political opponents.

An editorial in *Daily Star* stated: “Firearms in the hands of police are more common these days than batons or truncheons. And the police are regrettably becoming too ready to shoot in these situations.” Five years ago, in April 2016, the police shot dead four villagers protesting the forcible acquisition of their lands for the project.

As outrage erupted over the murderous attack on the construction workers, police began concocting stories about the protest.

Questioned by a *Daily Star* journalist, Chittagong District's Superintendent of Police falsely claimed that protesters, “tried to attack the Chinese workers on the project. They even assaulted their fellow workers and police personnel and set several project properties on fire.” A police case statement has even claimed that the workers “opened fire at the police.”

Contrary to these fabricated claims, one investigating police officer has admitted that no police officer was

shot during the clash and or any Chinese worker harmed.

Two bogus cases have been filed against the construction workers—one by the Banshkhali police and the other by the chief coordinator of the project. The first case claims that between 2,000 and 2,500 unidentified people attacked the police. The other case alleges that 22 named individuals and up 1,050 unidentified people vandalised and looted the plant.

Labour hire companies have reported that the police assault was so severe that workers were resigning because they fear being arrested. Belal Hossain, an electrician who suffered bullet wounds to his right leg, told the *New Age* that he would never work there again.

The Chittagong District Administration has formed a four-member committee and the police established a three-member committee, to “investigate” the incident. These committees will be used to cover up what happened and protect those responsible for the murderous police assault.

Confronted with rising outrage over the brutal attack, the trade unions and opposition political parties, including the Stalinist-controlled organisations, have organised protests to dissipate the anger.

On April 17, the Socialist Students Front demonstrated at the Dhaka University over the attack. Two days later, the Bangladesh Trade Union Centre, controlled by Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), rallied outside the National Press Club in Dhaka demanding the arrest of police responsible for the killings and adequate compensation for affected families.

Garment sector unions, such as Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad and Garments Sramik Odhikar Parishad, which collaborate with garment factory owners, held separate protests last Wednesday to demand a judicial inquiry.

The Left Democratic Alliance, a coalition of eight so-called left parties, including the CPB, rallied in Jashore on Sunday. Alliance coordinator Rashid Firoz demanded the government establish a judicial inquiry committee.

Ain O Salish Kendra, a leading human rights organisation, has called on the government to take legal action against those involved in the shootings and the withdrawal of the frameup cases against the construction workers.

Notwithstanding these protests, the Bangladeshi unions and the Stalinist parties have adapted themselves to Hasina’s increasingly authoritarian methods and suppressed workers’ struggles for their rights. The Stalinist Workers Party is currently a partner in Hasina’s Awami League-led regime.

The Hasina government is confronting a wave of protests by workers across a range of sectors, including the jute and garment industries, in response to low wages and rising COVID-19 infections.

Last July, Bangladeshi courts jailed two jute mill union activists amid rising demonstrations by workers following the closure of all 25 state-owned jute plants and the retrenchment of 50,000 workers.

In February, hundreds of household waste collection workers from the Dhaka North City Corporation, demonstrated in defence of threatened jobs. On April 17, about 500 rickshaw pullers marched in Barishal city to demand food rations, a \$US59 monthly cash payment and free treatment for coronavirus victims.

Bangladesh is currently in lockdown—from April 14 to April 28—in response to rising coronavirus infections. The country now has more 730,000 cases and 10,600 deaths.

The Bangladeshi government’s response to the pandemic resulted in 14.7 percent or 24.5 million of the country’s “vulnerable non-poor people” slipping into poverty, according to a recent survey by the Power and Participation Research Centre and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development.

Last week Prime Minister Hasina responded by announcing that her government would only provide \$1.24 million in financial assistance for 3.6 million of the poorest families hit by the pandemic.



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