

Bangladesh power project workers face witch-hunt after police killings

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A Bangladeshi high court last week ordered the S. Alam group, a major Bangladeshi conglomerate, to pay compensation to the family of workers killed when police brutally attacked a protest at the SS Power Plant construction site at Banshkhali in Chittagong. The Chinese-funded project is being built by S. Alam.

On April 17, local police opened fire on 2,000 protesting workers at the site, killing five young workers on the spot and injuring at least 21 others, some critically. Another worker succumbed to his injuries on the same day and one more four days later. Human rights groups have said about 50 people were injured in the police attack.

According to the media, those killed were Shuvo (23), Rahat (24), Ahmad Reza (19), Raihan (17), Rony Hussain (22), Shimul Ahmed (19), Rajeul Islam (25). They are among the hundreds of thousands of young workers who have migrated from rural areas to urban centres where they are harshly exploited in the construction, garment and other industries.

Police violence against workers and the poor in Bangladesh is escalating under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian government.

Yesterday evening, the Bangladeshi media reported that police shot and injured eight garment workers at Ha-Meem Group in Gazipur near Dhaka who were demonstrating to demand a 10-day Ramadan holiday.

Last week's ruling against the S. Alam Group was made after the high court heard two petitions from human rights groups. It ordered the conglomerate to pay 500,000 taka (\$US5,900) compensation within 45 days to each of the families of the seven dead workers.

While the court declared that \$3,600 offered by the S. Alam was inadequate, the amount it ordered was also grossly inadequate. The human rights groups petitioning the court had called for \$353,000

compensation to each of the families of the deceased. They also demanded the punishment of the police killers and the withdrawal of all cases filed against the workers.

The high court, however, simply asked for all reports on the incident to be forwarded to the committees now investigating the incident and ordered the state to respond within six weeks. One committee is headed by the police and other is being conducted by the local administration.

The SS Power Plant construction workers were protesting over unpaid wages, unscheduled cuts in their working hours and for a Ramadan holiday and reduced hours during the religious festival. Some reports indicated that workers have not been paid for about three months in a situation.

Company management, the regional administration and the police are now conducting a witch-hunt against construction workers involved in the protest.

Two separate cases have been lodged with Banshkhali police station falsely accusing more 3,500 workers over the demonstration. The regional administration has also filed separate cases. Subcontracting companies that hire the construction workers have told the media and human rights groups that their employees, fearing more police harassment, have gone into hiding.

Living conditions for workers at the power plant site are inhumane, with accommodation overcrowded and unhealthy, toilets unhygienic and adjacent drains overflowing with human waste.

Construction worker Abdul Gani explained to the media how employees are exploited by the subcontracting companies. "A syndicate takes 5,000 taka (\$59) in advance for the worker's job, 2,000 taka for clothing and 10 percent of the monthly salary of

each worker...

“Before the [COVID-19] lockdown, we worked for 12 hours without any overtime and the salary was 18,000 taka for two shifts. After lockdown work hours were reduced to 10 hours, but no overtime [paid].”

Speaking to the media, villagers living near the massive building site have denounced previous cover-ups of police assaults in the area. In April 2016, four villagers were killed by police and another in February 2017 after they protested against the forcible acquisition of their land for the 3,000-acre project.

Two family members—one who lost two of his brothers and another who lost her husband—previously filed murder cases against the police. But as a New Age editorial noted on April 30, “The police investigation, conducted over more than three years, could not identify any of the killers.”

The mass demonstration at the SS Power Plant project erupted amid rising anger amongst Bangladeshi workers over the worsening COVID-19 pandemic. The grossly understated official death toll from the coronavirus is nearing 12,000 with the total number reported infections surpassing 775,000 as of Monday.

While the Hasina government has declared a limited lockdown, starting on April 5 and until May 16, all big businesses are still operating, putting profits ahead of human life.

The *Daily Star* noted on April 23, that police intelligence and other state authorities are expecting strikes and demonstrations. It reported that in Chittagong alone, “two government regulatory bodies have apprehended that 67 garment factories may face labour unrest over payment of salaries and [religious] festival bonuses.”

Police told the newspaper that they were “coordinating” with companies and workers to avoid the unrest. The brutal crackdown yesterday on protesting Ha-Meem Group garment workers in Gazipur makes clear how the state and big business will deal with the “unrest.”

The reaction of the Bangladeshi Stalinists and the trade unions to the bloody police attack on protesting construction workers last month has further exposed the treacherous role of these organisations.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh-led “left” party alliance, the unions they control and several garment workers unions initially demonstrated against the police

shooting, calling for a judicial inquiry and compensation to the victims.

These protests were designed to dissipate workers’ anger and foster illusions that the government could be pressured to defend basic democratic rights. Almost four weeks since the SS Power Plant construction site killings, the Stalinists and the unions are now silent.



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