

Bangladeshi prime minister threatens protesting garment workers

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Earlier this month, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a series of threats against garment workers, declaring that their protests for higher wages would lead to job losses. She also warned the Bangladeshi masses to prepare for new austerity measures as the international economic crisis further impacts on the country.

The Hasina government, and the Bangladeshi garment manufacturers for whom it speaks, are fearful that the country's 4.1 million workers in more than 3,500 garment factories will take unified action to demand higher wages. About 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings come from supplying cheap, ready-made garments to US and European retail giants.

Hasina made the provocative remarks while addressing a June 7 meeting commemorating the 56th anniversary of the Awami League-led movement for greater autonomy of East Pakistan in 1966, which culminated in the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971.

According to *bdnews24*, Hasina said: “[Garment factory workers] are protesting for a pay rise and many other demands. If exports stop, the garment factories will shut. We’ll lose everything... In that case, wages won’t rise, but rather they’ll [the workers] lose jobs and have to return home. What’ll they do then?”

Foreign buyers were losing purchasing power, she continued, because “the situation is worsening in the US and Europe with the prices rising. Many people are skipping meals there.” Promoting nationalist exceptionalism, she claimed Bangladeshis were “in a better position compared with them.”

Hasina's statements were a response to increasing unrest among low-paid garment workers over inflation and wages. Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers

have held three separate demonstrations since June 4 in several parts of Dhaka to demand a pay rise. Police have baton-charged and fired tear gas shells at demonstrators, injuring many workers. Those involved in the protests included workers from the Apex, MBM Garments Ltd, Saroj, VISION, IDS Group, Kolka, Jokky and Dmox factories.

Referring to escalating food prices, Saroj, a protesting worker in Dhaka, told the media: “An egg costs 15 taka (\$US16 cents) now, but the factory owners are not raising pay, I don’t know what to do.” Faysal, from the Kolka factory, asked, “How can a person manage” on a monthly wage of 8,000 taka (\$US94)?

On June 11, thousands of garment workers rallied in Dhaka, this time in protest against the police attacks the previous week.

Bangladeshi garment workers have been demonstrating, however, not just for pay rises. On April 14, about 100 apparel workers from several factories in Ashulia protested to demand long-pending salaries, the religious festival bonus and full payment of their wages. On April 16, fifty-nine workers from the Yong Jin International factory in Ashulia demonstrated against a 50 percent pay cut. Factory authorities slashed pay, claiming the workers had ignored a directive to not wear the hijab or burqa during work on safety grounds.

During her speech Hasina boasted that under her tenure, beginning in 2008, garment workers' wages had increased several times, from 1,600 taka (\$US74) to between 8,000 and 10,000 taka (\$US94 and \$US112) in 2018. Notwithstanding these claims, Bangladesh, according to *Statistia* website data, still has lower wages than Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia.

Garment workers have been involved in strikes and protests since 2016 to demand their below-poverty

wages be increased to a 16,000-taka minimum. This was refused by then Minister for Labour Mujibul Haque who, with the backing of the trade unions, imposed an 8,000-taka minimum wage, which is barely enough for basic needs, including food and for rent in slum areas that lack basic facilities.

Hasina's June 7 speech is clear: Garment workers must suffer the burden of rising inflation in order to maintain cheap garment exports and massive profits for Bangladeshi companies and global retail giants. Hasina and previous Bangladeshi governments also have allowed garment manufacturers to maximise their profits with criminal violations of basic industrial safety, resulting in thousands of workers being killed and injured in industrial accidents.

Speaking on behalf of garment exporters, Hasina complained that shipping costs had tripled, adding, "The purchasing power of the people [in the USA and Europe] is declining in the export markets of Bangladeshi clothes... [W]e'll lose everything if someone disturbs the peace."

In a clear indication that the government is going to step up its police attacks on protesting garment workers, Hasina called on the authorities to find out who were "instigating the workers' leaders" and claimed, "there have been efforts to topple our government."

It appears, however, that recent protests by garment workers erupted spontaneously. According to a *New Age* report on June 6, trade union leaders said they were not behind the demonstrations and were unaware of who had initiated them.

In fact, the unions have aligned themselves with garment factory owners. A *Business Standard* report on June 6 stated that, "a section of factory owners and labour leaders are smelling a conspiracy behind the sudden labour unrest demanding a pay raise."

In an attempt to contain the garment workers anger over low pay, the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh-controlled Garment Workers' Trade Union Centre and the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati are calling on the Hasina government to establish a wages board and increase the monthly minimum wage to 20,000 taka.

These unions, which backed the Hasina government's meagre minimum monthly wage in 2018, are seeking to divert workers into drawn out state-

sponsored discussions in order to make another rotten deal with the government and betray workers' demands.

Hasina's speech, however, was not just directed against garment workers but other sections of the working class and the poor. "The high inflation and price hike of goods across the world due to the Russia-Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic" meant that Bangladeshis would face austerity measures.

"We all have to be economical. We'll have to pay attention to control wastage of food," she declared. "Yes, it is true that prices of goods have shot up to some extent... Rather we've been able to keep these under control at least to some extent. We've been trying our best."

Although Bangladesh's average inflation rate has remained steady at about 5.5 percent in the previous five years, the year-on-year rate for January climbed to 5.86 percent and in April hit 6.29 percent, indicating that it will continue climbing throughout the year.

This month's protests for higher pay by Bangladeshi garment workers are part of a growing movement by workers in Asia and elsewhere. In Puducherry, India workers from the state-run Swadeshi and Bharathi textile mills protested on May 17 against the government's plan to close them. In Tamil Nadu, workers at Karur textile units walked out on strike on May 16 and 17 to demand that the government control rising prices of cotton and cotton yarn.



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