Bangladesh government tables new “essential services” anti-strike laws

Wimal Perera
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On April 6, the Bangladeshi government tabled a modified Essential Services Bill, allowing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s regime to declare any sector an essential service and outlaw all industrial action. The repressive measure was introduced amid rising anger among workers and the poor over soaring inflation and worsening living conditions.

The bill was submitted to a parliamentary standing committee which will report back with suggested changes within 30 days. If passed, the new law will allow the government to declare any service “essential” that it deems necessary, banning strikes and imposing punishments of up six months jail and 50,000 takas ($US470) fines on anyone involved in “illegal strikes.”

The bill is an extension of the already existing Essential Services Act and yet another move to widen the government’s autocratic powers. In 2018, the Hasina government passed the Digital Security Act, which curbs freedom of expression and has been used to suppress protests over the jailing of leaders of Bangladeshi opposition parties.

The current Essential Services Act already bans strikes by workers in power generation and distribution-related activities, post and telecommunications, e-commerce, internet and digital services, as well as in the railways and all transportation of goods and passengers by water, road and air.

According to media reports, the new bill covers information and communication technology; port or port-related services; and any armed forces-related services and businesses. Other sectors include government-owned or controlled conservation systems, water supply or sewage systems and related health services, such as hospitals, clinics, health centres and dispensaries.

Extension of the Essential Services Act is driven by concerns in the Bangladeshi ruling class about an explosion of working-class struggles against deteriorating social conditions that have been worsened by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia.

Last August, nationwide protests by workers, students and the poor erupted against the government in response to unprecedented fuel price increases—the highest in Bangladeshi history.

In January, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) granted a $4.7 billion loan to the Hasina government, conditional on it implementing a series of harsh austerity measures. According to the *Business Standard*, this included “dynamic adjustment of fuel prices—which means increase of oil prices, bringing down the domestic default loan of state-owned banks to 10 percent, setting up asset management companies to recover defaulted loans, and leaving the exchange rate to the market—that is subjecting the exchange rate to market forces.”

Even before the IMF loan was approved, the government hiked gas and electricity tariffs to comply with the bank’s demands for reductions in government subsidies.

On December 10, tens of thousands of people attended protests called by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to demand resignation of the government and for new elections over inflation, fuel increases and violent police attacks.

On February 5, garment workers in Dhaka demonstrated demanding an increase in the minimum monthly wage from 8,000 taka ($US75) to 23,000 takas ($215) to compensate for increased house rents and drastic cuts in living standards.

While Bangladeshi trade union leaders have criticised the government’s new essential services bill, they oppose any independent mobilisation of workers against the government's increasingly repressive measures.

The Bangladesh Noujan Sramik Federation, a water transport workers union, issued a statement criticising the government for not holding any discussion with "stakeholders before placing the bill in the parliament"—i.e., the union bureaucracy—and made a vague threat of future protests.

Physicians and nurses had held protests over "very valid" demands. "Banning the basic right to protest in the name of maintaining essential services should not be allowed," the union stated. It threatened legal action against the legislation, which violated the constitutional right to protest.

Similar statements and harmless protests called by the unions against previous iterations of the government's draconian measures have proved futile.

In October 2022, the Hasina government passed its previous version of the Essential Services Act, ignoring protests by the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (United Front of Workers and Employees), the country's largest union federation. Rather than mobilise workers to bring down the government, the federation appealed for cancellation of the Bill, advising the government that there was "a scope to regulate strikes in the existing law."

Bangladesh now faces mounting financial problems with its much praised "economic progress" on the wane. The World Bank has lowered the country's growth rate from 6.7 percent to 5.2 percent for the 2022–23 fiscal year, while in March inflation hit 9.33 percent and foreign exchange reserves dropped to $31.14 billion, a six-year low.

Voicing concerns about growing social inequality in Bangladesh, an April 10 editorial of the *New Age* wrote: "In the past, the ultra-rich population grew faster in Bangladesh than any other countries" but warning that 35 million Bangladeshis or around 20 percent of the population currently live below the poverty line.

The escalating impact of the global economic crisis on Bangladesh, now facing falling foreign reserves and rising social tensions, has parallels with Sri Lanka where financial collapse and the eruption of a mass anti-government protests and strikes last year forced the resignation of President Rajapakse and his regime.

The Hasina government is replicating the same sort of repressive essential service anti-strikes bans and other anti-democratic attacks being implemented by the Wickremesinghe regime as it imposes the "brutal experiment" dictated by the IMF. It is no doubt nervously watching the explosive situation in France, where millions of workers and youth are continuing their three-month struggle against President Macron's attacks on old-age pensions.