

Bangladesh police kill four garment workers during mass protests for higher wages

Wimal Perera

12 November 2023

Tens of thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers are continuing protests, for the third week in a row, to demand higher wages. Four workers have been killed so far in brutal attacks on by the police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

The striking workers, who are from plants in Mirpur, Narayanganj, Ashulia, Savar and Gazipur, began industrial action on October 23 after garment industry bosses only offered a 25 percent wage rise. The workers want their monthly minimum basic wage increased to 23,000 taka (\$US208) or nearly three times the current 8,000-taka minimum wage imposed in 2018.

Police have brutally assaulted protesters, including with the use of teargas and sound grenades. In the first weeks of action, two workers were killed and eighty wounded in clashes with police. Workers alleged that the police were backed by thugs from Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's Awami League.

The garment workers ended their protests last Monday under instruction from the trade unions, following a promise from the tri-partite Minimum Wage Board (MWB) that it would announce a higher wage rate. The WMB consists of representatives from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), some trade union leaders and government officials.

Garment workers, however, quickly resumed their action after the Minister for Labour and Employment Monnujan Sufian said last week the new minimum wage rate would be \$113.50 or about half the amount workers want. So far, about 500 factories have been closed by the protests.

Sufian said the new salary was fixed under the direction of Prime Minister Hasina. The government is determined to maintain its cheap-labour regime in order to compete with other garment producing countries such as Vietnam, India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and China.

Last Tuesday, about 10,000 workers walked out of their plants in Gazipur, an industrial zone about 25 kilometres from Dhaka after the MWB's salary offer.

Police attacked protests the following day, killing one female worker and wounding 10 in the Konabari area of Gazipur. Another demonstrating worker, Jalal Uddin, 42, who was shot by police, died on November 12 at the Dhaka Medical College. His brother-in-law, Rezaul Karim, told reporters he had been shot in the stomach.

The Hasina government is acutely nervous that the wage campaign will spread to all the country's 3,500 factories which employ around 4 million, mainly female workers.

Last financial year the industry earned about \$47 billion. This amounts to around 85 percent of the country's annual exports and over 10 percent of GDP. After a brief and grossly inadequate lockdown in the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladeshi government ordered the reopening of all garment factories, resulting in many workers becoming victims of the deadly virus.

Prime Minister Hasina has denounced striking garment workers, claiming that they have been incited by the right-wing Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The BNP has been demanding the immediate resignation of the Hasina government and a new election held under a caretaker administration.

According to a *New York Times* report, Hasina told a meeting in Dhaka: "Garment workers should remember that if they damage factories, they may have to return to their villages and live without employment. We are aware of who incited these protests and acts of vandalism, and we know which individuals from the BNP are involved." In June last year, Hasina threatened garment workers that their fight for higher wages would destroy jobs.

Siddiqur Rahman, one of the factory owners' representative on the MWB, told *dw.com* that the minimum wage of Bangladeshi garment workers would

be increased according to the salary “appropriate for our country.” The garment workers protests, he declared, “are more about politics than a wage hike.”

Hasina and the factory owners’ accusations are outright lies. Bangladeshi garment workers, who are simply demanding a livable wage, are the lowest paid compared to all other apparel exporting countries.

The Bangladeshi taka has been devalued by 30 percent compared to the US dollar since early last year and the current inflation rate is 10 percent, with food inflation hitting a new high of 12.56 percent last month.

While the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies estimates that workers need at least 23,000 taka per month to stay above the poverty line, the trade union bureaucracies have restricted their demands to this bare minimum.

One protesting worker, Sabina Begum, a 22-year-old seamstress, told *dw.com*, that she joined the protests because she was “struggling to provide bread and butter” for her family. The current monthly minimum wage did not cover basic needs, she said.

Bogu Gojdz, from the Netherlands-based Clean Clothes Campaign, told *dw.com* that, “Anything lower than that [a 23,000-taka monthly wage] will keep workers trapped in a cycle of poverty for another five years, therefore perpetuating malnutrition, debt, and child labor among garment worker families.”

A June 2023 report by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, an Asian labour organisation, found that garment workers were consuming fewer calories than the current poverty-level calorie standard set by the government.

A study by the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh cited in the *New Age* on June 11 also revealed that one out of four garment workers suffer gastrointestinal problems, 18.5 percent musculoskeletal issues, 15 percent ear, nose and throat infections and the remainder other health complications.

In line with the government’s demands for an end to the strikes, police have arrested scores of union leaders and workers. “Many cases have been filed against protesters. Many workers have been arrested, and some of them were labeled as political activists,” Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation president Kalpona Akter told *dw.com*.

Notwithstanding Akter’s timid complaints, the trade union bureaucracy is deeply afraid that it will lose control of garment workers’ rising anger.

Unions such as the Stalinist Bangladesh Communist

Party-led Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Centre, the Bangladesh National Garments Employees League (BNGWEL) and other garment workers’ federations have been instrumental in diverting their members into harmless appeals to the governments while offering employers a reduced wage claim.

BNGWEL president Sirajul Islam Rony, who is also a member of tripartite MWB, admitted to the *Daily Star* last week that he had sought 20,393 taka and even reduced this to 13,000 but the owners did not agree.

The direct intervention of Prime Minister Hasina in determining last week’s provocative “offer” is a response to the worsening position of the Bangladeshi garment industry, under the impact of the deepening global economic crisis.

According to *Textile Today*, Bangladeshi garment exports to the US market had decreased by 21.77 percent and to the European market by 14.5 percent in the first seven months of 2023. In September, BGMEA president Faruque Hassan said overall apparel imports into the United States and the European Union had decreased at “an alarming rate” this year. This was caused, he said, by the Russia-Ukraine war and resulting inflation, and the COVID pandemic, all of which have had “a profoundly negative impact on every sector of the global economy.”

Hasina’s determination to crush the Bangladeshi garment workers’ fight for a living wage is to defend the profit interests of Bangladeshi factory owners and in particular global giants, such as Nike, Gap, Levi’s, Adidas, H&M and PVH-Phillips Von Heusen.

To take forward their struggle for a living wage, Bangladeshi garment workers must organise independently of the trade unions and establish rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers to fight the global garment retailing giants and their local subcontractors. This also requires a turn to their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Pakistan who face the same worsening conditions and the same class enemies.



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