

Tens of thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers continue protests

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14 November 2024

Bangladesh's Interim Government (IG) is suppressing garment workers engaged in protests over a series of demands, including wage increases and improved social conditions.

The class struggle is occurring under conditions of intense political upheaval. Mass student protests, which developed into a broader uprising in July-August, forced the ouster of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina, who fled the country.

The IG was installed by the military on August 8 and is headed by Chief Adviser Muhammed Yunus, a banker with close ties to American imperialism. Yunus' claims to be overseeing a transition to "true democracy," aimed at realising "social justice" after the increasingly authoritarian rule of Hasina, are belied by the brutal attacks on garment workers.

In response to protests that have continued since September, the new government has overseen a police crackdown involving regular officers, industrial cops, the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and army personnel.

So far, these state forces have gunned down one protester, injured scores, carried out mass arrests and filed cases against over a thousand workers.

A key demand of the workers is for a major pay increase, from the current monthly minimum wage of 8,000 taka (\$US67) to 22,000-25,000 taka (\$184-209). They are also calling for an increase to the monthly attendance bonus, the granting of annual leave, night shift pay and an extension of maternity leave for female workers.

Other demands include the reopening of closed factories, the reinstatement of previously terminated employees, an end to harassment by management and government officials and improved workplace safety and conditions.

From last Saturday until Tuesday, garment workers at over a dozen factories in Gazipur shut down production.

Workers from five factories under the TNZ Group struck for unpaid salaries, as did staff at Swadhin Garments and the Beximco Industrial Park. Workers at MM Knitwear and Mamun Knitwear stopped work, demanding the

reinstatement of recently sacked colleagues.

Workers at other factories have also taken action. On November 2, staff at Islam Group and Tushka Group factories in Gazipur walked off over a host of demands, including an increase to their salary, the removal of managers accused of misconduct, a night shift allowance and other benefits.

From October 27 to 31, garment workers of Centex Fashions in Dhaka, TNZ Group in Gazipur and Apex in Gazipur staged protests including strikes. In addition to the industry-wide demands, the Centex workers were demonstrating against the slated closure of their factory.

When the wave of strikes broke out, the immediate response of the Yunus government was repression. On September 30, police opened fire on protesting workers from Mango Tex in Ashulia, killing one and injuring thirty. Police used live fire against the Centex Fashions workers on October 31, injuring two.

The violence has been accompanied by a witch hunt. *New Age* reported that eleven workers from Centex were arrested and jailed on allegations of setting fire to an army jeep and police van during clashes. Two cases were filed against 1,110 workers accused of obstructing the duties of law enforcement agencies.

Late last month, a US National Public Radio report carried the comments of Ayesha Begum, a 26-year-old sewing machine operator at Beximco in Gazipur, one of the largest garment factories with 23,000 workers. Begum explained "I can't get by on what I earn [\$134 a month]. I have to pay for my son's schooling. I have to pay rent. I have to look after my mother and my parents-in-law. It's just not enough."

Yunus has identified himself closely with the military, declaring in his first public address in August that "The army, police, Border Guard Bangladesh, and RAB... are the pride of the country."

As stoppages developed in September, Home Affairs Adviser Jahangir Alam Chowdhury proclaimed, "I want to see all industrial units operating," and warned workers not to "take the law into your own hands."

The trade union bureaucracies have sought to suppress the struggles. Several of them, including the Stalinist Communist Party-led Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (BGWTUC), signed a “tripartite agreement” with four advisers of the government and officials of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) on September 24.

A joint statement declared that workers’ demands would immediately be met and that strikes should thus end. The agreement was rapidly breached by the factory owners, provoking the subsequent protests.

The continuing struggles are an expression of seething anger over dire conditions for workers in the sector enforced by successive regimes, including the Hasina government and now the IG.

In November 2023, Hasina recommended a monthly minimum wage of 12,500 taka for garment workers in a maneuver to diffuse a weeks-long strike involving tens of thousands.

The workers continued their actions, insisting on a rise to 22,000-25,000 taka. Hasina oversaw a brutal crackdown that killed four workers and wounded over 100. Still, even this meagre 12,500 taka has not been paid by many factory owners.

The ruling class’ fears that unrest will disrupt exports, under conditions where Bangladesh hosts the second-largest garment industry in the world. Last financial year the sector earned about \$47 billion, amounting to 85 percent of annual exports and over 10 percent of GDP.

The garment workers’ strikes show that the IG cannot resolve any of the social problems of the masses and that the new administration is in a deepening crisis.

Yunus is increasingly acting as a quasi-dictator, resting on global financiers and the military. He is entrenching his unelected advisory council, which was expanded to 24 members on Sunday with the appointment of three new advisors.

Yunus is going beyond its purported duty of preparing national elections within three months of his installation, signaling that the IG will remain in office until 2026. An October article in the *Hindu* reported Yunus stating that “an election cannot be held before reforms are completed,” a reference to austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In another repressive move, the Yunus regime banned the Chhatra League, the youth wing of Hasina’s Awami League on October 23, accusing it of involvement in criminal activities. The IG is seeking Interpol’s assistance in repatriating Hasina and her aids from India to face trial for alleged crimes against humanity.

While exploiting widespread popular anger over Hasina’s

crimes, the IG is seeking to entrench its own authoritarian rule against the working class, to pursue the same big business agenda of the previous regime.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, one of the country’s two main parties alongside the Awami League, is assisting, calling on its followers to be “patient” and to give the IG time.

Despite the repression and political machinations, workers will continue to enter into struggle against the dire conditions they confront. They are coming up against the attempts of the corporatist union bureaucracies to preserve industrial peace and prevent a political struggle against the IG.

Workers need to form their own action committees, independent of the bourgeois parties and the unions, to take forward the fight for their fundamental social and democratic rights. A key component of this struggle is establishing unity with their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia and internationally, who face the same basic issues.

The Bangladeshi working class must draw political lessons from the July-August mass uprising. Chief among them is the need for the working class to develop its own independent political movement, in opposition to all the bourgeois parties and factions. The lack of such a movement paved the way for the intervention of the military and the installation of an IG committed to the same agenda as Hasina.

What is required to defeat authoritarianism and meet the needs of the masses is a fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, committed to socialist policies, as part of the struggle for a federation of socialist republics in South Asia and internationally.



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