Widespread protests in Bangladesh against poverty wages, mass layoffs

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Workers across Bangladesh have mounted a new wave of protests in recent months against deepening attacks on wages, jobs and working conditions.

In the most recent action on July 30, hundreds of workers at Fortune Shoes Ltd. blocked the Natun Bazar Road in Barishal to demand payment of two months' overdue wages and unpaid overtime. According to the *Business Standard*, workers said when they had complained to management about the issue "they were subjected to harassment and various forms of pressure."

This is one of many recent actions that points to escalating social anger and class tensions, which the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) government has been unable to quell. The BNP came to power in February 2026 through an election held after the Yunus interim government banned the rival Awami League (AL). The AL government of Sheikh Hasina was ousted in August 2024 after mass demonstrations, fueled by pent-up anger over social inequality and the brutal killing of hundreds of protesters.

The BNP government quickly discarded its "democratic" rhetoric and continued to impose IMF-backed austerity. It has slashed public spending and raised taxes to force workers to bear the burden of soaring energy prices triggered by the US-Israeli war against Iran. Repressive state structures remain intact and foreign policy is firmly aligned with US imperialism.

The renewed upsurge is centred in the garment sector, which is in a severe crisis. Bangladesh's heavy dependence on Gulf energy—the source of approximately 95 percent of the country's oil and gas—led to power shortages, soaring fuel and transport costs and a depreciating currency. Western buyers reduced orders and refused to pay higher prices.

The *Fashion Business Journal* reported on June 30 that there are "fresh doubts about [Bangladesh's] ability to retain its position as the world's second-largest apparel exporter [after China]." It added that "production capacity at many plants has fallen by 25 to 30 percent in recent months." This has triggered layoffs, wage arrears and factory closures.

The apparel industry, the backbone of Bangladesh's economy, employs approximately 4 million workers, mostly women. An estimated 40 million people—around 25 percent of the population—depend directly or indirectly on the industry.

A July 15 report by the human rights organisation JusticeMakers Bangladesh in France found that 20,783 workers at 80 garment factories lost their jobs between January and June this year. Between August 2024 and June 2026, 457 garment and textile factories closed, leaving more than 240,000 workers unemployed.

While workers are pushed to the brink by layoffs, unpaid wages and soaring living costs, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has moved to support companies with cash incentives and low-interest loans. The *Financial Times* reported on May 16 that the central bank had announced a 600 billion taka ($5 billion) stimulus package to revive shuttered factories and support businesses amid slowing economic growth.

The BNP government's pro-business policies have emboldened employers to intensify the super-exploitation of garment workers, fueling a wave of protests. Among the most significant actions are:

• From June 27 onward, workers at Islam Garments Ltd. (Unit-2) in Gazipur demonstrated after the death of a co-worker, alleging delayed medical treatment by management.

• On June 16, about 150 Nassa Garments workers in Tejgaon blocked a road, demanding unpaid wages. Nassa Group's closure of 16 factories in 2025—one of the industry's largest single shutdowns—resulted in the layoff of more than 12,500 workers.

• On June 10, Uniform Textiles workers in Mirpur protested their factory's closure.

• Between June 6 and 10, workers blocked roads to protest factory closures and mass layoffs. Al-Muslim Group dismissed 1,868 workers across its three factories: AKM Knitwear, Pacific Blue Jeans Wear and Al-Muslim Apparels.

• On May 25, Energypac workers blocked a highway demanding unpaid wages.

• On May 21, police used tear gas and sound grenades against KSS Knit workers in Gazipur protesting over wages, overtime, and management issues.

• On May 2, Savar Sweaters and Orchid Sweater workers blocked roads over unpaid wages.

• On March 15, MU EN Textile workers in Dhamrai stopped work, demanding overdue wages and Eid-ul-Fitr allowances.

• On February 28, nearly 3,000 B Brothers workers in Rupganj protested unpaid wages, layoffs and mistreatment, clashing with police.

• On January 24, police injured more than 50 protesting Jamuna Denims workers, while Export Village and Koresh Bangladesh workers protested unpaid wages and layoffs.

Conditions for workers are unbearable. Many live in overcrowded slums and cannot afford adequate food, healthcare and education for their children. An apparel worker’s monthly wage ranges from 12,500 taka ($US103) to about 20,000 taka. A four-member family required roughly 45,000–50,000 taka ($US370–410) for essential expenses in 2025.

Job losses are plunging families deeper into destitution, often forcing them to leave cities. Samoli Khatun, a worker laid off by Coretex Apparels in Madhabpur on June 7, told the *Economist*: “It will be very hard for me to find another job, and, as a woman, my options are limited. I may have to return to my village.”

As well as garment workers, there have been numerous actions by public service employees, transport workers and industrial workers.

• Workers at the state-owned Thakurgaon Sugar Mill staged a nationwide protest and work stoppage on July 20–21, 2026, demanding permanent jobs for seasonal employees and better wages.

• Teachers from Barishal University protested in April and May over recruitment and promotions that had remained stalled for a long period.

• Construction workers affiliated with the Bangladesh Building Construction Workers Federation protested in March 2026 over unpaid wages and allowances.

• In February, Chattogram Port workers struck over the planned leasing of the New Mooring Container Terminal to the Dubai-based private operator DP World.

Farmer protests have also emerged, driven by diesel and fertilizer shortages. In May, onion growers demonstrated in Rajbari against collapsing crop prices and soaring costs. Across northern Bangladesh, farmers reported severe diesel shortages during the Boro irrigation season, while government officials denied any widespread supply crisis.

For more than four years, prices for essential goods have outstripped wage growth. Annual inflation for the year to June was 9.16 percent, while wages grew by 8.18 percent.

The trade union bureaucracy has assisted in driving down wages by suppressing resistance from workers, negotiating sellout agreements behind closed doors, and promoting the dead-end perspective of “pressuring” capitalist governments and parties. Workers are deeply alienated from these organisations, which serve as instruments of the corporations and the state. According to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, only 11.35 percent of workers are union members. Although Bangladesh officially has about 4,000 apparel factories, only 30 percent have registered trade unions.

The Bangladeshi workers’ and farmers’ upsurge is part of a broader strike wave in South Asia and internationally. This year, Indian gig workers held nationwide protests, West Bengal tea plantation workers struck over poverty wages, and Pakistani public sector employees protested against austerity. French rail workers have brought the state-owned French National Railway Company to a near standstill, Belgian rail workers conducted a five-day strike, dockworkers shut ports across Europe, and Nigerian health workers held a nationwide strike.

This global strike wave must become a conscious and organized rebellion against the capitalist system, which offers only poverty, war, and dictatorship.

For this, the working class requires new organisations that workers themselves control. Bangladeshi workers must form their own rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracies, to coordinate and link-up workers’ struggles across all sectors of the economy. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, they must unite with workers across South Asia and internationally in the fight to put an end to capitalist exploitation.