Bangladesh union bureaucracy betrays garment workers' struggles against poverty wages

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The right-wing Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) government of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman unleashed police violence to suppress strikes and protests by tens of thousands of Bangladeshi garment factory workers earlier this month. The trade union bureaucracy effectively sided with the government and called on workers to stop protesting.

According to reports, spontaneous protests began on October 31 and continued until November 5. While they grew out of a long struggle over wages, the immediate spark was the government's failure to set up a new garment Minimum Wage Board (MWB) by October, as previously promised. Garment workers in several industrial areas of Dhaka and Gazipur took to the streets, demanding an increase in the monthly minimum wage from the current Tk 12,500 ($US100) to Tk 30,000 ($US240).

These poverty wages underscore the brutal exploitation in the garment industry. In 2025, a family of four needed roughly Tk 45,000–50,000 a month just for essential expenses.

Speaking to the *Daily Star* on November 2, Mohsina Begum, a 45-year-old garment factory worker, explained: "I leave home at 7:30 a.m. and return home after 8:00 p.m. Including overtime, I earn around Tk 18,000–20,000 a month. Of that, Tk 8,000 goes straight to house rent. It is impossible to get through the month with the remaining Tk 10,000–12,000."

Workers also demanded an end to owners jointly blacklisting experienced workers, the reinstatement of dismissed workers, safe working conditions and an end to arbitrary layoffs.

Protests spread across five industrial areas—Mirpur, Gazipur-Kaliakair, Savar-Ashulia, Narayanganj and Mymensingh—blocking roads and highways. Thousands of police and Border Guard Bangladesh personnel used tear gas, stun grenades and batons, injuring at least 50 workers.

Fearing the spread of workers' struggles, on November 1, employers declared holidays at 529 factories. By November 2, about 690 had suspended production, affecting more than 1.7 million workers, according to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

According to the *Hindustan Times* on November 4, BNP activists carrying bamboo sticks took to the streets to "maintain order and resist infiltrators." The BNP had earlier alleged, without any evidence, that activists of deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's now-disbanded Awami League had infiltrated the workers' protests.

According to one worker, thugs "hired by a factory" brutally attacked demonstrators in Gazipur on November 2, seriously injuring 21-year-old worker Toufiq Sheikh while he was filming the assault. Toufiq, the sole breadwinner of the family, died from his injuries the following day. Authorities justified the violence by blaming protesters for vandalism, which workers rejected.

On November 3, police detained three labour leaders in Ashulia for allegedly inciting workers; they said action would follow "under specific sections" of the law, without naming them.

As the government unleashed violence against workers, the trade union bureaucracies, particularly those affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), distanced themselves from the protests. While making bogus claims about supporting workers' demands, the CPB-controlled Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC) secretary Sakekur Rahman Shamim said that unions were not leading the movement.

After government forces suppressed the protests, GWTUC president Montu Ghosh cynically claimed, "Workers' demand for fair wages is not a crime," and called for an "impartial investigation" into attacks on protesters and for those responsible to be held "accountable." He did not blame the government, covering up its responsibility.

The Stalinists and other union bureaucrats were stunned by workers striking outside their control, a clear indication of

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growing distrust towards the established unions.

MA Shaheen, president of the Bangladesh Garments and Sweaters Workers Trade Union Centre, also distanced his union from the protests. According to bdnews24.com, Shaheen "said workers came out suddenly after lunch without coordination or instructions, and [he] urged them to give the wage board time." IndustriALL Bangladesh Council general secretary Salauddin Swapan said it was too early to protest, and that a new wage structure could take effect in January.

On November 1, the second day of the protests, the BNP government announced a six-member Minimum Wage Board (MWB) in a desperate attempt to defuse workers' anger. *Reuters* reported that the MWB agreed on November 4 to implement a new wage structure from December, with workers set to receive their first pay under the new scale in January. However, the MWB did not say how large the increase will be.

The BNP government appointed two trade union officials, Babul Akhter, general secretary of the Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Sramik Federation (BGISF), and Anwar Hossain, president of the Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal (BJSD), which is affiliated with the ruling BNP, to the MWB. These pro-government union leaders will serve the interests of garment manufacturing companies, not workers.

The BGISF, a member of the IBC, has a notorious record of seeking to contain workers' struggles. On November 2, Akhter appealed to workers to end their demonstrations: "Please return to your factories and resume work. We will fight for your fair wages. If necessary, we will call you to join protests."

In January 2019, when Ashulia workers protested an inadequate wage rise set by a Hasina-appointed committee, Akhter defended it: "We had to accept it as the proposal came from our prime minister. How can we dishonour it?"

The other government appointee to the MWB, Hossain, appealed for workers to return to their factories, claiming that the ongoing movement was "not helping workers but undermining their legitimate demands," *Business Standard* reported on November 2.

The Stalinist-led trade unions, the BJSD and the BGISF, have repeatedly blocked garment workers' struggles. Now they have come to the rescue of the right-wing BNP government, which came to power in February 2026 through a sham election held after the Yunus interim government banned the Awami League, preventing it from contesting the election. The election was held in a war-like atmosphere, with some 900,000 security personnel deployed.

Within weeks, the BNP regime abandoned its promises, imposing IMF austerity and the burden of the Iran war's energy crisis on working people. Fearing that the garment workers' protests would encourage other low-paid workers, the government has relied on both the police and the unions to suppress them.

Employers, meanwhile, are adamantly rejecting workers' demand for a Tk 30,000 minimum wage. On November 4, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association president Mohammad Hatem argued that the increase would undermine export competitiveness and drive foreign buyers elsewhere.

Low wages and duty-free access to key Western markets helped fuel the growth of Bangladesh's garment industry, which generates more than 80 percent of the country's export earnings. The sector employs about 4 million workers and supplies major global brands, including H&M, Zara owner Inditex and Walmart. The government and employers fear that worker unrest could disrupt production schedules during the peak season for export orders.

The employment crisis is further worsening conditions. A July 15, 2026, 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 2026. Between August 2024 and June 2026, 457 garment and textile factories closed, leaving more than 240,000 workers unemployed.

IMF conditions for a proposed $4.5 to $5 billion loan—higher VAT and fuel taxes, fewer tax exemptions and energy-subsidy cuts—will further burden workers and the poor.

The garment workers' struggle must be developed by building new organisations of workers: rank-and-file committees should be established in every factory, independent of the union bureaucracy, the government and all capitalist parties. These committees must link the fight for decent wages and secure employment with the struggles of teachers, plantation workers, transport workers, health workers and other sections of the working class.

Bangladeshi workers confront the same global capitalist crisis that is driving workers and young people into struggles internationally, from France and Germany to India, Mexico and the United States. Workers of all countries must unite by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) against the multinational corporations and imperialist powers which are intensifying exploitation and driving the world into barbarism.

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