Bangladesh garment workers continue protests for higher wages

Wimal Perera
16 November 2026

Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers have continued their protests for higher wages for more than two weeks, despite factory shutdowns and violent attacks by the state.

On Monday, police and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel fired tear gas and sound grenades to disperse protesting workers in Gazipur's Konabari area. Employers' associations reported over the weekend that 147 factories employing approximately 300,000 workers across Savar, Ashulia and Gazipur were unable to operate amid the unrest.

On November 16 the BBC quoted Police Superintendent Mohammad Amjad Hossain saying that officers shut factories in Gazipur after workers walked out: Factories were closed on Saturday night and 16 were closed the next day.

Employers have invoked Section 13(1) of the Bangladesh Labour Act, commonly described as the "no work, no pay" provision, as a lockout weapon that permits factory closures and the withholding of wages in response to an "illegal" strike.

The spontaneous garment workers' protests that began on October 31 grew out of a prolonged struggle over wages. The immediate trigger was the government's failure to establish a new garment Minimum Wage Board (MWB) by October, as previously promised. Workers in five industrial areas took to the streets demanding an increase in the monthly minimum wage. The last minimum wage increase for garment workers was announced in November 2023, raising the minimum monthly pay from Tk 8,000 to Tk 12,500 ($US240).

In a desperate attempt to defuse workers' anger, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government announced a six-member MWB on November 1, the second day of the protests. On November 4, it agreed to implement a new wage structure from December, with workers set to receive their first pay under the new scale in January. But the government will not say what the increase will be.

As the vague arrangement failed to halt the protests, Babul Akhter, general secretary of the Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Sramik Federation (BGISF), proposed a minimum monthly wage of Tk 32,000 at the second meeting of the Minimum Wage Board (MWB). Employers failed to present a counterproposal, according to the *Dhaka Tribune*, leaving the matter for the third meeting scheduled for November 16. That meeting, however, was postponed, with the MWB chair citing the sudden illness of one of the board members.

Employers have openly opposed any wage increase, declaring that such a step would undermine export competitiveness and drive foreign buyers elsewhere. The *Diplomat* reported on November 5 that factory owners warned that higher wages would raise production costs and push buyers to Vietnam, India or Cambodia. One employer said the Tk 30,000 demand had "no logical or mathematical basis."

The *Financial Times* of London, in a November 15, 2023 report, quoted Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), arguing that higher wages were impossible unless Western brands paid Bangladeshi factories more. "They are not doing ethical sourcing in Bangladesh," Hassan said. "The cost of [financing] has gone up, the cost of production has gone up, the cost of gas has gone up. Now the wages have gone up."

Western brands, including H&M, Inditex (the parent company of Zara) and Walmart, reap enormous profits from the super-exploitation of Bangladesh's four million garment workers. Hassan's lament, however, was aimed primarily at justifying the low-wage regime in the industry.

The garment sector accounts for 85 percent of Bangladesh's exports, valued at around US$38 billion

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last year, according to industry data. The repression unleashed by the right-wing BNP government reflects its fear that the protests could spread throughout the entire working class, which is suffering due to IMF-dictated austerity measures.

Police have been backed by BNP thugs ostensibly to "maintain order and resist infiltrators." The BNP had earlier alleged, without providing any evidence, that activists of deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's disbanded Awami League had infiltrated the workers' protests.

Two workers have been killed during the protests. Toufiq Sheikh, a 21-year-old employee of Layla Styles Limited in Gazipur, was brutally attacked by thugs reportedly "hired by a factory" while filming an assault on demonstrators on November 2. Mohammad Selim, a 23-year-old junior operator at Trent Shoes Ltd in the Aoukpara area of Savar, died on Monday after spending 12 days in hospital with critical injuries sustained in police attacks, according to *New Age*.

The AFP news agency reported at least 57 arrests by November 2, while IndustriALL subsequently reported the arrest of at least ten union leaders.

The state's repression was reinforced by repeated appeals by the trade union bureaucracy for workers to end their protests. Like the ruling elite, the union leadership fears that workers' resistance will develop outside their control.

At a joint press conference held by five trade union alliances on November 12, Montu Ghosh, president of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Centre, which is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), urged workers not to give factory owners grounds to file cases against them and have them arrested. "Some workers are throwing brick chips towards factories—we do not want it," he said, according to the *Daily Star*.

Ghosh made no mention of factory owners hiring thugs to attack protesting workers and then blaming the workers for sabotage. Such provocations provide the pretext for police to launch witch hunts against workers.

At the press conference, union leaders called on the government to release detained workers and provide medical treatment to those injured, without denouncing the police or the BNP government for the repression. The union bureaucrats did not disclose how many workers had been detained or how many had been charged in criminal cases.

At the same time, the union leaders accepted the government's right to punish workers. Mir Abul Kalam Azad, president of the Shadhin Bangla Garments Sramik-Karmachari Federation, declared: "If anyone is found to have been involved in vandalising factories, the government should take appropriate action." Seeking to placate workers, he added that "we believe no workers were involved [in vandalising]." Such cowardly statements do nothing to protect workers from police harassment, and in fact help to legitimize the frame-ups against workers.

At the same press conference, the union leaders echoed the garment owners' threats, urging workers to ensure uninterrupted production during the busy November and December months. "Any disruption during this period would cause losses to the industry, ultimately affecting workers' livelihoods. The future of 40 lakh [4 million] workers depends on this sector," Azad said.

Such statements expose the union bureaucracy as an appendage of big business and the state. Its role is to police the working class and ensure that the extraction of profit is not disrupted.

To defend and expand their struggle, garment workers must rebel against the union apparatus and the build new organisations. Rank-and-file committees, democratically elected by workers in every factory and independent of the union officials and capitalist parties. These committees must link the garment workers with other sections of the working class and rural poor, in Bangladesh and other countries, in a common struggle against the brutal levels of exploitation being imposed on billions of workers.

This fight must be guided by a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at unifying workers across Asia and internationally to put an end to the source of mass poverty, inequality and dictatorship: the capitalist system.

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