

Protests intensify in Bangladesh after police kill two garment workers

By Sarath Kumara
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Tens of thousands of Bangladesh garment workers in the Ashulia and Gazipur industrial zones demonstrated yesterday to express their outrage over the killing of two colleagues by police on Monday. At least 30 protesters were injured in yesterday's clashes with police, who used rubber bullets, batons and tear gas.

On Monday in the Ashulia district, police fired on protesting workers, killing Badsha Mia, 25, and Ruma Aktar, 22. Police denied shooting the workers, yet provided no details of their deaths. An official from the Enam medical college in Savar, however, declared that Badsha Mia had a bullet wound to the head. Another six of the some 200 injured also had bullet wounds and were sent to Dhaka medical college for treatment.

Bangladeshi garment workers have been protesting since October over a demand for an increase in their monthly wage to 8,000 taka (\$US104). They are currently paid around 3,200 taka—the lowest wage for garment workers worldwide, except in Burma. In a failed bid to end the protests, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government announced a wage increase to 5,300 taka.

The government rejected the 8,000 taka demand, fearing it would lead to an exodus by garment companies. International retailers in the US and EU, such as Walmart, Marks and Spencer, Hennes and Mauritz, demand low-cost production in order to reap high profits.

After Labour and Employment Minister Rajiuddin Ahmed Raju announced the lower offer on Thursday, workers expressed their opposition by shutting down more than 200 factories. One protester told reporters: "We will continue protesting until we realise our demand."

Like Hasina's government, Bangladesh big business is concerned about any wage increase. Apparel

employers only reluctantly agreed to the government-appointed wage board proposal for the smaller increase. After meeting with Hasina last Thursday, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) president Atiqul Islam said: "In the greater interest of our garment sector, we agreed to it. But many small factories cannot afford the rise."

BGMEA vice-president Shahidullah Azim told the *Financial Express*: "A number of buyers have already abandoned us, and if such street violence continues, we may face a severe slump in our trade." He said Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia had started to attract orders due to the frequent protests in Bangladesh since the beginning of the year.

Putting pressure on the government to crack down on workers, Abdus Salam Murshedy, president of Exporters Association of Bangladesh, said: "We are very frustrated. It seems that we have to fold our business, hand over the factory keys to the government and go home."

Determined to protect business interests, the Hasina government has mobilised security forces, including border guards, in the country's industrial zones. The government's main foreign exchange earner is garment exports. By exploiting cheap labour, Bangladesh apparel manufacturing has developed into a \$19 billion industry, up by 50 percent from 2010.

Workers' anger is fuelled by the appalling conditions in the apparel sector. In April, more than 1,100 workers were killed when the nine-story Rana Plaza building, which housed five factories, collapsed. Last November, 112 workers were burned to death when Tazreen Fashions was gutted by fire.

The government and big business are relying not only on security forces, but the trade unions to contain

and suppress the opposition of workers. The *Financial Express*, the country's main business paper, proposed in an editorial on Monday that a new union mechanism be developed to assist in halting strikes.

“Introduction of TU rights in all garment units might help create an apex TU body for representation at the national level,” it stated. “Had there been such a representative organisation at the national level, the government or the apparel industry owners, possibly, would not have faced so much trouble in resolving disputes.”

The reactionary US trade union conglomerate, the AFL-CIO, has been promoting trade unions in Bangladesh as a useful safety valve for some time. After the Rana Plaza collapse graphically exposed the exploitative conditions in the garment sector, the Hasina government amended the labour laws to facilitate the establishment of unions in garment sector.

With general elections due to be held in coming months, the discredited Awami League government hoped to win the sympathy of the 4.2 million-strong workforce by announcing the limited wage rise. However, the move has backfired.

It is no surprise that workers oppose the inadequate wage deal. Even though wages have stagnated since 2010, consumer prices have increased by 28 percent. According to the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) think tank, a basic diet for a family of three costs around \$US67 per month. Taking living costs into account, Professor Doug Miller, who worked with CPD, told AFP that the minimum wage of garment workers should be at least 8,200 taka.

Social conditions in Bangladesh are worsening. The government-run public health system is deteriorating, and only 60 percent of the urban population and 75 percent of the rural population have access to basic healthcare. The official unemployment rate has increased to 3.71 percent, but the actual number of unemployed and under-employed is far higher—over 30 percent according to one estimate.

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