

Bangladesh government continues repression of apparel workers

By Sarath Kumara
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Bangladesh's Awami League government and employers have intensified their crackdown on apparel workers following mass walkouts over wages in December involving tens of thousands of workers.

In recent weeks, the international media, including the *New York Times*, and giant international retailers have voiced concerns about the situation in Bangladesh. Their disquiet is not out of sympathy for garment workers who labour in harsh conditions for poverty wages. They fear the eruption of industrial and political struggles that will impact on investor profits.

In 1983–84, the Bangladesh's garment industry earned \$US31.6 million or 3.9 percent of the country's total exports. Last year it earned \$28.1 billion or 82 percent of exports. Around 4.5 million workers, 80 percent of them women, are employed in over 4,500 sweatshops throughout the country. The industry is not only lucrative for Bangladesh big business. It is a major source of profit for giant retail corporations in the US and Europe, such as Wal-Mart and Marks & Spencer.

Commenting on the garment industry at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cynically declared: "We are highly committed to ensuring compliance with regard to labour rights, workplace safety and environmental standards in the industry." As Hasina made these remarks, her government was stepping up its repression against garment workers.

On December 11, a group of workers at Windy Apparels factory in Ashulia walked out on strike and were quickly joined by about 150,000 workers from more than two dozen factories. The strike continued for 10 days over 16 demands, including a wage increase to 16,000 taka (\$US200) a month, up from the current below poverty-level 5,300 taka (see: Government and employers attack striking apparel workers in

Bangladesh).

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) responded by locking out workers at 55 factories. An estimated 1,600 workers were sacked, although some reports claimed the number was much higher, at over 3,500.

Around 249 workers, including 14 local union leaders, were arrested. Many workers and union officials went into hiding to escape from house raids by security forces. Union offices have been vandalised and forcibly shut down, with membership documents burned and furniture removed.

Many of those arrested were charged under the Special Powers Act, a repressive law introduced by the Awami League in 1974 to quash so-called threats to state security.

One of those arrested, brutally beaten and threatened with death by the police was Nazmul Huda, a well-known television and print journalist. Huda has been charged with violating section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology Act, which carries a minimum sentence of seven years' jail.

On January 22, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, "Protests in Bangladesh Shake a Global Workshop for Apparel," voicing concerns now being raised in US and European capitals. The newspaper interviewed Jhorna Begum, the wife of Jahangir Alam, a local trade union president in Ashulia, one of those still imprisoned by Bangladesh authorities.

Begum told the *Times* that police raided their home looking for her husband. After he failed to return home, she hired a lawyer to track him down and discovered that he was being detained in a dark and crowded cell where he could not even see his own hands. Begum was only able to speak to him briefly. "We live hand to mouth, waiting for the pay cheque at the end of the

month,” she told the *Times* .

Following the death of garment union leader Aminul Islam, who was found tortured and murdered in April 2012, many garment workers are cautious about speaking to the media. Islam went missing near the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity office in Ashulia, where he worked as a senior organiser. His body was later dumped near the Ghatail police station, some 100 kilometres to the north.

Last Thursday, the *New York Times* published an editorial feigning concern about the ongoing repression in Bangladesh. “The brutal recent crackdown on protesting garment workers,” it declared, “is proof that clothing manufactured in Bangladesh is still exacting a terrible price from the people who make it ... The truth is that the 2013 labour-law reforms did little to improve workers’ rights.”

The editorial concluded by nervously warning that the “failure by the garment industry and Ms. Hasina’s government to adhere to its principles stains an industry and threatens the economy and stability of Bangladesh.”

The *Times* article acknowledged that the main reason for the “shockingly low wages” in Bangladesh’s garment industry was global retail corporations “exerting pressure on suppliers to drive costs even lower.”

Forbes recently reported that a Bangladeshi garment worker earns \$0.13 an hour, compared to \$7,283 an hour (pre-tax) compensation for one of the 350 top chief executive officers (CEOs) in the United States. “This would roughly equate to the hourly rates of 16,000 employees from Bangladesh combined,” the US-based magazine said.

Pennsylvania State University associate professor Mark Anner told the *Financial Times* last month that production costs and the real value of Bangladesh workers’ wages have been declining in recent years. Since 2013, he said, the dollar price for a pair of cotton trousers has dropped 9.3 percent in real terms. The ongoing expansion of the Bangladesh garment industry was “based largely on its cost competitiveness.”

BGMEA vice president Mohammed Nasir told the *Financial Times*: “The buyers go to each factory and get a detailed quote for the work ... then they take the cheapest deal offered for each part of the work and demand that factories meet that overall price ...

Factories are desperate, so they agree. It means retailers pay around \$5 for a piece of denim clothing that would sell in the west for \$60.”

Twenty major international apparel retailers, including H&M, C&A, Esprit, GAP, Li & Fung and others, have issued a statement warning Prime Minister Hasina that industrial unrest in Bangladesh may damage the country’s reputation as a reliable sourcing market. They called on the government to form a new wage board for the garment workers. At the same time, the giant retailers said they “do not condone illegal activities by workers, labour groups.”

The call for a new garment industry wage board is thoroughly bogus. The existing wage board failed to review workers’ pay last year, in contravention of existing labour laws, and some factories still refuse to grant a pay rise recommended by the wage board in 2013.

Concerned to defuse further unrest, the Swiss-based UNI Global Union (UNIGU) and IndustriALL Global Union (IAGU) have launched an online campaign demanding the Bangladesh government release garment union leaders detained in recent weeks. These organisations want the government to establish a corporatist partnership with the unions and non-government organisations to control and discipline workers.

To contact the WSWs and the
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