

Bangladesh government continues repression against garment workers

By Sarath Kumara
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Last week, the Bangladesh government released some of the labour activists arrested on trumped-up charges after a strike of garment workers demanding higher pay in Ashulia industrial district near Dhaka. Several workers remain in custody and the police are continuing to pursue charges against all those arrested.

The release on bail of several arrested activists followed an agreement between the IndustriALL Global Union (IAGU), the Swiss-based UNI Global Union (UNIGU), the Labour Ministry and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). The Unions have not reported the exact number of released workers or explained why others were not bailed out. At least 35 workers remain in custody.

The IAGU and UNIGU have been lobbying Western retailers since the arrest of workers in December to press the Dhaka government to release them and for companies to recognise the trade unions. In response, five retail giants—H&M, Inditex, C&A, Next and Tchibo—announced that they had pulled out of last month's annual Dhaka Apparel Summit (DAS) organized by the BGMEA to promote apparel exports.

The repression began after some 150,000 workers from more than two dozen factories went on strike for 10 days in December. The workers advanced 16 demands, including a wage rise to 16,000 taka (\$200) a month from the current wage of 5,300 taka. The Bangladesh government and the companies reacted ruthlessly, locking out workers at 85 factories and arresting scores of strikers, including local union leaders.

Factories reopened at the end of December after the firing of at least 1,600 workers. These workers have been black-listed by the companies, making it impossible for them to find new jobs. The owners of

eight factories in Ashulia have filed charges with the police accusing arrested activists of vandalism, looting and assault.

The unions and human right groups say these charges have been laid without any evidence. Three workers and a journalist have been charged under the draconian Special Powers Act for political violence unrelated to the strike. Some workers are hiding to avoid arrest.

Since the crackdown, fearing that major struggles could erupt, the government has mobilised police and paramilitary forces near factories not only in Ashulia but throughout the country to intimidate workers.

Apparel companies decided to pull out of the Dhaka Summit not out of concern for the rights of the workers, but for fear that the explosion of labour struggles would impact their imports and profits. The US and European companies are reaping massive profits from low-cost brands imported from Bangladesh.

IAGU General Secretary Walter Sanches said the release of workers was “an important victory for the garment workers in Bangladesh, sending a strong message to the country's industry to enter into constructive dialogue with trade unions.” The UNIGU general secretary praised “international solidarity,” by which he meant the “support” of some Western retailers and trade unions.

Global unions are keen to establish trade unions in all factories and have “dialogue” with company bosses, hoping they can be enlisted to help discipline the workers. In Europe and America, these unions are working with corporations, including retailers, to slash the wages and benefits of their members.

No sooner had the release on bail of the detained workers been announced than the IAGU and UNIGU informed the companies that they could participate in

the Dhaka Apparel summit.

However, the frame-up charges have not been withdrawn, the crackdown on the unions continues, and wages have not been increased. In December, the companies refused to negotiate wages until 2019. But according to earlier agreement reached in 2013, wages had to be increased last year.

The Ashulia strike was a spontaneous action. None of the global unions or their affiliates in Bangladesh were involved in calling it.

Western capital is attracted to Bangladesh because of the low production costs, which are based on the appalling conditions of the workers. Promises were made by the government, the garment companies and Western retailers to improve the conditions of workers after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013, which housed eight garment factories. This, among the world's worst industrial disasters, killed more than 1,100 workers and maimed many others.

Still, Bangladesh garment workers are among the lowest paid in the world, working conditions are brutal and unsafe, and intimidation and repression continue unabated.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina inaugurated the Dhaka Apparel Summit on February 25, but did not utter a word about the repression going on under her government in Ashulia. Hasina said as many as 3,869 factories had been inspected but only 39 closed down due to poor conditions. In the same breath, she said huge funds were needed to improve factory conditions and appealed to Western buyers to help.

Her speech focussed on increasing future garment export targets. She urged producers not to be "stuck in the traditional destinations," and to "roll up your sleeves and find new markets." Europe and America are the main markets for Bangladesh garment exports.

Hasina said she was hoping for duty- and quota-free access of Bangladesh products to the European Union so that her country could improve its share, currently 5.1 percent, of the international garment export market. She lamented that because of the absence of such facilities in the US, Bangladesh companies have to pay \$850 million in taxes annually for \$3 billion of exports.

The Bangladesh garment industry is the country's main foreign exchange earner, accounting for 82 percent of all exports. A massive work force of 4 million is toiling in these factories. In an environment

of cut-throat competition for market share, the Hasina government is determined to maintain cheap-labour conditions. This drives her government's ruthless repression of workers.

The US-based organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a detailed report this month on the ongoing repression since December. It noted that "10 criminal complaints" were filed in December "implicating about 150 named workers and over 1,600 'unknown' people for crimes" during the strike.

Though the number of those arrested is reported to be around 44, the real number is not known, as police have not provided a full list. Nor have the police revealed where jailed strikers are being held. A journalist from the local news channel ETV was also arrested for reporting on the strikes.

The report noted that many workers suddenly "vanished," but "more than 24 hours later" were brought before a court. This means the police abducted them.

Police intimidation includes the use of criminal complaints against large numbers, threats of arrest, repeated re-arrest of detainees, withholding of bail, forced confessions through torture, and other forms of degrading treatment.

The government continues to defend the repression. Mohammad Haque, junior minister at the Ministry of Labour, said the December protests were illegal and law-and-order measures had to be taken. BGMEA President Mohammad Siddiqur Rahman said the protests were "chaos and lawlessness created by an unruly section of workers." He praised law-enforcement agencies for detaining "some people who created obstacles to production in the factories."

Sitting on a socially explosive situation, the Hasina government is increasingly resorting to authoritarian methods of rule, of which the repression of garment workers is a major part.

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