

Worker killed as Bangladesh police attack striking garment workers

By Wimal Perera
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Thousands of striking Bangladesh garment workers continued demonstrations for a fourth day on Wednesday in the face of increasingly violent police attacks. The workers, who are among the lowest paid garment employees in the world, have long been fighting for decent wages to compensate for price increases in food and other basic necessities.

On Tuesday, Sumon Mia, a 22-year-old garment worker, was killed and more than 50 others injured when police assaulted protesting workers. Sumon, who worked in the cutting section of the Anlima Textile factory in Savar's Kornopara area, was not involved in the demonstrations but was returning home from work.

Nadid, Sumon's work colleague, told the Bangladesh's *Daily Star* newspaper that he and Sumon were walking along a road in Hemayetpur where some workers were protesting. Police suddenly arrived and began breaking up the demonstration. While the two young men were running away Sumon was hit in the chest by police gunshots and died. He was married just a year ago.

According to the *Daily Star*, police left the area, leaving Sumon dead on the ground. When Sumon's co-workers took his body to the Anlima Textile plant and began protesting over his death, police opened fire with rubber bullets and baton-charged the workers. Witnesses told the newspaper that at least 11 workers were injured, including two who were hit with rubber bullets.

Yesterday police and Border Guard Bangladesh officers again used rubber bullets, as well as water cannons and tear gas, against an estimated 10,000 workers blocking a major highway at several places in the Savar industrial district, north of the capital, Dhaka.

Strikes and demonstrations also erupted at Ashulia, Gazipur, Uttara and Mirpur yesterday with at least

50,000 workers walking out of their factories in the morning to demand higher wages. Scores of workers were injured in police attacks on the protesting workers.

The industrial action and protest rallies began on Sunday when workers at the TCL 2 and Standard Group factories in Savar complained to management about low wages and discrepancies in recent pay increases. Factory authorities responded by calling the police who beat up the workers. Angered by this response, workers took to the streets and the next day were joined by others from Savar, as well as workers from Ashulia and Gazipur.

Police have also begun violent raids on workers' homes. Imdadul Haque, a worker from the Standard Group in Savar, told the media this week: "Although we did not join the demonstrations, police came to our house and asked to see our professional identity cards. Upon seeing our ID cards, they started beating us. At one stage, police fired rubber bullets at my leg and my colleague's leg."

Bangladesh garment workers have been fighting since 2016 for their monthly minimum wage to be increased to 16,000 taka (\$US190). In December that year about 150,000, garment workers in Ashulia demonstrated for 10 days for the pay rise.

Employers, backed by the Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, responded with sackings, victimisations and political frame-ups. At least 1,600 workers have been dismissed and around 1,500 accused of "inciting" industrial action, "trespass," "vandalism" and "theft." Most of these workers have been black-listed and are thus barred from employment at other factories.

When garment workers resumed protests last September, the Hasina government, fearful that any

industrial action would rapidly escalate, announced that the minimum monthly wage would be increased on December 1 to 8,000 taka (\$96), up from 5,300 taka.

The recommended pay increase, however, has only been paid to grade seven (entry-level) employees, who only constitute about 10 percent on the industry's total workforce, with a far smaller rise for senior workers. Workers in most other grades only received a 500 taka increase.

Early last month workers began strike action again for minimum pay of 16,000 taka, with walkouts at 20 factories in Mirpur, Gazipur and adjoining districts. In line with government demands, the garment workers' unions ordered an end to all action in the lead up to the December national elections.

Garment workers temporarily ended their agitation, but following Hasina's "victory" in the blatantly rigged national ballot, have resumed demonstrations and industrial action. The Awami League won 288 of the 300 elected positions in the parliament.

On Tuesday, the Hasina government announced the establishment of a tripartite committee consisting of ten representatives from government, garment owners and union officials. The committee immediately held "an emergency meeting" and called on workers to present their "grievances" on the new pay structure within a month. It denounced the protesting workers as "toughs and vandals" and called for "stern action." The meeting was presided over by State Minister for Labour Monnujan Sufian and also involved Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi.

Munshi declared that "those engaged in vandalism are not friends of the RMG [ready-made garment] trade and the lawmen have been instructed to take a tough line on the troublemakers."

Bangladesh has about 4.5 million garment workers who produce about 80 percent or \$30 billion of the country's annual foreign exchange earnings. With garment exports as the "main pillar" of economic growth, big business and the government are determined to keep garment workers' wages at poverty level and boost its share of the international market. Giant retailers in the US and Europe, such as H&M, Inditex, C&A, M&S, Wal-Mart, Tesco, GAP, and JC Penny, reap massive profits from Bangladesh's low-wage regime.

The escalating police violence and ongoing

government and employer attacks on garment workers is another indication that the Awami League regime is turning towards dictatorial methods, which will be used against all sections of the Bangladesh working class.

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