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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

16 January 2019

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18.01.2019

Bangladesh government oversees police attacks on protesting garment workers

Thousands of garment workers in the Ashulia district on the outskirts of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, protested on Monday to express their opposition to a meagre wage rise announced by a government-appointed committee the day before. Heavily armed police backed by Bangladesh Border Guard troops dispersed the workers.

Monday's demonstrations, which were accompanied by strikes, were the eighth consecutive day of protests by garment workers who have launched a renewed struggle against their poverty-level wages and onerous conditions.

On Sunday, a tripartite committee composed of ten representatives from the Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, along with factory owners and union officials, outlined a revised pay deal aimed at diffusing the protests.

The latest offer follows Hasina's introduction last September of a minimum monthly wage of 8,000 taka (\$US95). Workers, however, had called for double that amount. Workers on mid-level wage grades did not receive any pay rise as a result of the government increase.

The committee asserted that its Sunday announcement would result in a rise for those workers who had not experienced one in September.

Workers rejected this claim and condemned the committee for failing to meet their demands. They have stated that wage disparities are increasing and that pay for long-term and mid-level employees is either stagnating or declining. Some have said that companies are shifting workers from one pay grade to another to ensure that they do not receive any, even minimal, rise.

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The government appointed the tripartite committee early last week after workers in the Ashulia and Savar districts resumed their protracted campaign for improved wages on January 6.

On January 7, thousands of workers from five factories in the Ashulia industrial belt took to the streets, blockading the Abdullahpur-Baipayl highway. Police attacked the demonstrators with batons, tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring around 100 workers. One protester, Sumon Mia, who was employed at the Anlima Textile factory in Savar's Kornopara area, was shot dead by police.

When workers rejected Sunday's wage announcement and continued to protest, Siddiquir Rahman, President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) threatened to impose a lockout. He told workers that if they did not end their struggle, "you will not be paid any wages and we will shut down factories for an indefinite period."

Yesterday, having attacked Monday's demonstrations, the government mobilised armed police and Border Guard Bangladesh troops inside and outside factory premises. The *Daily Star* reported that police repeated Rahman's threats, using loudspeakers to warn: "If you do not join work you will not be paid."

Many of the protesting garment employees returned to their factories. The *Star* reported that on Tuesday workers were met by "additional police forces... outside most of the factories," and that "security was beefed up inside the factories as well."

The government, police and factory owners are also unleashing a witch-hunt against workers. Sana Shaminur Rahman, the superintendent of industrial police in Dhaka, told the media yesterday that his department was "investigating people who are acting as instigators of the unrest in the sector."

Rahman added: "For instigating unrest in the RMG sector some perpetrators have been detained and we will take action against them." Police have already filed cases against some of those involved in the protests.

The unions have also made plain their role as an industrial police force for the companies and the government, joining Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the major industrial associations in demanding that workers end their protests.

Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation President Babul Akter told the media this week: "We had to accept it as the proposal came from our prime minister. How can we dishonour it? We urged all workers to resume work. We hope the prime minister will ensure our proper wages in the near future."

There are signs of intense hostility among workers towards the unions. Montoo, an operator at a garment factory in Ashulia, told the *Daily Star*, “We don’t have any trust in the union leaders.” He added that many workers had stopped paying any attention to the statements of union officials.

Garment workers in Bangladesh are among the lowest paid in the global industry. The government’s changes to pay rates are aimed at entrenching the super-exploitation that prevails throughout the sector.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue published a paper this month comparing wage levels between September 2013 and 2018. He noted that as a proportion of the total gross pay that garment workers earn, the guaranteed basic wage had declined, compared with allowances that can be easily eliminated or cutback by the corporations.

According to the study, in 2013, the gross monthly wage for a grade seven worker was 5,300 taka. The basic wage accounted for 3,000 taka, or 56.6 percent of that sum. Last year, after the minimum gross wage increase to 8,000 taka, the basic wage accounted for 4,200 taka, or 52.5 percent of the pay for a grade worker.

Moazzem noted that the declines in the basic wage could be used to lower various allowances, which are often set as a proportion of the guaranteed pay of a worker.

The struggle for a 16,000 taka monthly wage began in December 2016, when some 150,000 workers in the Ashulia industrial belt staged demonstrations for 10 days. The government brutally suppressed the movement, overseeing the sacking of at least 1,600 workers. Around 1,500 were charged with various offences including “inciting” the agitation, “trespassing,” “vandalism” and “theft.” Most of those targeted were blacklisted, preventing them from finding work in the industry.

The Hasina government and the corporate elite, along with the unions and the entire political establishment, are preparing similar repression. They are terrified that the current dispute could be the spark for a mass movement of the Bangladeshi working class. Garment workers in the country number 4.5 million.

The struggles in Bangladesh are part of a resurgence of the international working class. They coincide with a two-day general strike by more than 150 million Indian workers last week, a walkout by more than 33,000 teachers in Los Angeles in the United States and weeks-long demonstrations by “yellow vest” protesters in France.