

Bangladesh: The People Who Make Your Clothes Demand a Living Wage

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September 27, 2010

“Made in Bangladesh”. Many of the clothes we wear carry this label. 3.5 million people, 80 percent of them women, are employed in Bangladesh's garment industry. The country has the lowest wages in the world for industrial workers producing for the global market: 36 US cents (19 UK pence) an hour, as compared with \$1.66 (£1.06) in China. When their already low standard of living was eroded by a steep rise in rents and food prices, garment workers responded with a mass strike for a living wage.

In July, following months of protest, the government announced a new minimum monthly wage of 3,000 taka (\$43, £27), up from 1,660 taka. This concession appears to have boosted the workers' confidence without satisfying their demands. Holding out for 5,000 taka, thousands took to the streets of the capital Dhaka, blocking highways and pelting garment factories with stones.

Sheikh Hasina Wajed the prime minister, said: “The wage the workers are paid, I will say, is not only insufficient but also inhumane. The workers cannot even stay in Dhaka with the peanuts they get in wages”. While addressing words of criticism to the employers, the government deployed the Rapid Action Battalion to suppress the protests. Dressed in black uniforms, with black bandanas on their heads and dark glasses, the RAB are an elite unit with a ferocious reputation. Originally formed to combat terrorists and armed criminal gangs, they are increasingly used as strike-breakers.

The state has conducted a broad sweep of repression against strikers, unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and parties of the Left. Beatings of persons in police custody are a common occurrence, so there is serious concern for the physical safety of those arrested.

One organisation that has felt this repression is the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). In June, the government cancelled its registration as an NGO, confiscating its property and freezing its bank account. On 16 June, Aminul Islam, a BCWS organiser, was detained and beaten by National Security Intelligence officers. On 13 August, two leaders of the BCWS, Ms. Kalpona Akter and Mr. Babul Ahkter were arrested. After a month in detention, they were released on bail, following calls for their release by the AFL-CIO and other labour organisations. Kalpona

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Akter was formerly a child worker in the garment industry. At the time of writing, the two are on bail but still facing prosecution.

Also arrested was Montu Ghosh, an official of the Garment Trade Union Centre and a leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh.

Workers Uniting, an alliance of the UK union Unite and the United Steelworkers in USA and Canada, placed a full-page advertisement in a Bangladesh newspaper, the *Daily Ittefaq*, supporting the garment workers' demand for a living wage and the right to organise in unions. The Textile Garment Workers Federation distributed copies of the advert in Dhaka and Chittagong.

49% of Bangladesh's ready-made garment exports go to Europe, 33% to the USA and the remaining 18% to other countries. Buyers include such well-known retail chains as Wal-Mart, J C Penney, H&M, Cintas Corporation, K-Mart and VF Corporation in the USA; Asda, Tesco, M&S and Zara in the UK and Carrefour in France. Many of these companies have adopted ethical codes of practice and have corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments, charged with ensuring that their suppliers meet certain labour standards. These include no forced labour or debt bondage, no child labour (under 14 years of age); safe working conditions; equal opportunities and the right to organise in trade unions.

It appears that conditions have improved in recent years, at least in the larger, more modern factories. However, there is a contradiction between the upward pressure applied by the buyer's CSR departments, and the downward pressure exerted by the same companies' demands for lower prices and shorter lead times.

Union rights are most often denied in practice. Unions are legal in Bangladesh; indeed, there are a bewilderingly large number of them, some of which are linked to political parties. But few if any factories recognise a union as a negotiating body or permit union activities in the workplace. Some have participation committees, but these consist of workers appointed by management.

Ending child labour is an important goal, but it is vital that families receive sufficient income to keep their children in school; otherwise they will be displaced into worse occupations like brick breaking or prostitution.

The majority of workers in the garment industry are women (although the proportion of men is reportedly increasing). Traditionally, working women come from extended families living together in the same house or compound. On marriage, a woman leaves her own family to join her husband's. Purdah, the seclusion of women within the family space, is a traditional ideal, though rarely fully observed. Among educated professionals it is normal for women to go to university and have careers, while in poorer families it is a recognised necessity for women to seek paid employment outside the home. The public space remains masculine territory; shopkeepers, market traders and hawkers are virtually all men, as are most of their customers. Women who show too much independence (for instance, by seeking to marry without the family's approval) risk violent

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punishment by male relatives who believe the family honour is at stake. At present, both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition are women; however, one of them is the daughter and the other the widow of former male leaders who were assassinated.

While the garment industry is huge and Dhaka and other cities are expanding fast, three-quarters of the population still live in rural villages. Most urban workers are rural-born and identify with the villages where their families live. With 1090 people per square kilometre, Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world (except for a few small city-states). Moreover, this low-lying country is vulnerable to floods and cyclones. Living standards have risen significantly in the four decades since independence, but Bangladesh remains one of the world's poorest countries.

International solidarity with Bangladeshi workers has so far concentrated on the export-oriented garment sector. As the ultimate consumers of this industry, those in the industrially more developed world can bring some pressure to bear upon it. We must not neglect the workers outside this sector, where pay and conditions are even worse. In the garment industry, the worst conditions are found in older, smaller factories, which produce for the domestic market or do occasional sub-contracting work for the larger firms. Many Bangladeshis rely on unpredictable seasonal work in agriculture. In a land where stone is a scarce resource, people are employed all over the country to break up bricks by smashing them with hammers. The fragments are used instead of stones to make concrete.

In 2005, Unicef estimated the number of working children at 4.9 million, the majority in agriculture, some in textile factories, others working as domestic workers, garage assistants and porters. Some are employed as brick makers, others as brick breakers.

Poverty drives many young women into prostitution. Many are bonded workers, whose families have received an advance payment from the brothel owners, and who have to do sex work for two or three years to pay off the debt. The women are commonly made to take the drug Oradexon, which gives them a healthy appearance, while actually damaging their health.

For many years, critics of capitalist globalisation have warned of a “race to the bottom”, in which corporations keep moving production to countries with low wages and a lack of effective, independent unions. Now a new pattern of opposition seems to be emerging, in which workers' movements in the producer countries are supported by campaigns in the consumer countries. Significantly, workers' movements are arising simultaneously in different countries. A recent front cover of the *Economist* carried the headline “The rising power of China's workers”. In both the consumer countries and the producer countries, there are loose, informal alliances of unions, NGOs and campaign groups. At last, there is some prospect of shifting the global balance of power between labour and capital in favour of labour.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/bangladesh-the-people-who-make-your-clothes-demand-a-living-wage-by-richard-abernethy/>