

# Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh

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**Red Marriott analyses the strikes, riots and fires of the garment workers of Bangladesh for [libcom.org/news](#).**

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In late May and through June this year, there has been a wave of fierce class struggle in the Bangladesh garment industry. To illustrate the scale of events: around 4000 factories in Dhaka went on wildcat strike, 16 factories were burnt down by strikers and hundreds more ransacked and looted, pitched battles were fought with cops and private security forces in workplaces and workers' neighbourhoods, main roads were blocked. Casualties include 3 workers shot dead, thousands injured, several thousand jailed. The Government eventually felt compelled to bring in the Army to restore 'order'. It was a working class revolt that spread beyond the workplace and generalised to involve the wider working class community. At present (early July) the struggle continues in the garment zones on a lesser scale. (Note; figures quoted from different sources vary - I have generally taken the most commonly quoted.)

## The Dhaka explosion

The revolt began on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May in Sripur in the Gazipur district of Dhaka. 1,000 garment workers gathered at FS Sweater Factory, refusing to work until 3 arrested fellow workers were released from custody. The factory bosses locked the striking workers in the factory, cutting the power and water supplies. Eventually, the sweltering heat proved too much and by 11 am the workers fought their way out, then gathered on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. Now joined by locals, they barricaded the highway for 6 hours and fought pitched battles with the cops. [1] One person was killed and 70 others, including cops and journalists, were injured.

On the morning of Monday, 22 May at Savar Export Processing Zone (EPZ), a suburb of Dhaka, workers at Universal Garments Limited gathered in front of the factory to demand payment of 3 months owed back wages. They were attacked by factory security staff. In response the workers went to neighboring factories and called out other garment workers for support. The growing group of workers then went from factory to factory calling on other workers to join them; 20,000 workers are reported to have joined this angry procession. By the afternoon hundreds of other factories in Savar EPZ and New EPZ had joined the strikes. Two factories were torched and 100s more ransacked, over 300 hundred company and management vehicles wrecked. The main roads going through Dhaka were blocked. Eventually the clashes with police escalated and the cops responded

with bullets. The news of the escalation spread among the workplaces and drew out most other workers into participating.

*"The day the 'riot' broke out I had been on my way to office. Its not new these agitations here in my locality (lot of RMG [Ready Made Garment] factories are situated here)... I have been witnessing this from a year or more....What struck me most was how this sort of happening readily unified street vendors, rickshawallas in one single angry 'mob', which was throwing stones, crashing cars, setting fire on big VOLVO buses. If its sort of an anarchy, I am for it with some fears inside....." [2]*

By Tuesday (23<sup>rd</sup>) the revolt spread to more factories as more workers were picketed out and the industrial areas of Dhaka were shut down by a generalised strike. Workers took the revolt from the industrial suburbs, where factories were now being looted, into the capital city itself, destroying cars and attacking commercial buildings. Mass demonstrations demanded an end to repression, release of arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay for extra work, public holidays, payment of wages due etc. (All these demands have since been agreed to.) Press photographers were attacked, roads were blocked and clashes with security forces continued. Thousands of strikers descended on factories, torching 4 and ransacking hundreds more. The Bangladesh Rifles were recalled from their normal duties as Border Control and deployed across the areas of unrest. By the evening 3,000 soldiers and armed cops were in occupation.

The garment industry bosses were now urging the government to protect all factories with troops. The garment owners also staged their own quite pathetic little demonstration, lying down in the road in protest at the attacks on their business. [3]

On Wednesday (24<sup>th</sup>) things calmed down in face of the massive police/army presence. The bosses were showing signs of being willing to make some concessions, though still refusing to allow the right to organise trade unions. It is at present difficult to know if this is a demand voiced by the unions or if it has much support among workers themselves. Union leaders were brought in to negotiate a deal with the bosses. This was a breach of the garment bosses' longstanding opposition to union recognition; also a recognition of unions' useful potential role in containing struggle.

Throughout June, clashes in the garment producing areas have continued, the main issues being victimisation of militants, back pay, non-implementation of previously agreed concessions. Strikes continually break out at individual factories, workers nearby stop work to join in the spontaneous demonstrations. Clashes with police, army and factory security continue, as do attacks on company property. Bosses have also sometimes locked out workers from factories when the breakdown in workplace discipline has become too explosive. At times whole EPZ areas are closed off by troops. This is made easier, once the workers have been driven out, as these industrial zones are fenced off and have their own checkpoints - complete with customs posts - due to their exceptional economic and tax status. The garment owners are dragging their feet in implementing the concessions, so workers remain continually in conflict with the bosses.

The garment bosses have estimated their losses from the revolt so far at \$70 million (and rising!) in a compensation claim submitted to the government. They have criticised the government's indecisiveness in dealing with the revolt. The BGMEA have demanded that a permanent industrial police force be set up to protect factory property in the event of future unrest. At present the Rapid Action Battalion, an armed police/paramilitary grouping is fulfilling this role. As the strikes at individual factories continue and often spread to neighbouring workplaces, the RAB are rushed in to attempt to disperse the angry crowds. But this does not encourage a return to work and invites sympathy and similar action from neighbouring workers.

A recent report states:

*"The owners declared suspension of work at the apparel manufacturing units at Jamgorah, Zirabo and Ashulia in Savar on Tuesday amid an escalating labour unrest that left at least 100 people injured and 20 vehicles damaged.*

The crisis came to a head as workers of Irish Fashion started a furious demonstration in front of the garment factory over a rumoured murder of a co-worker on Monday night and closure of the factory for indefinite period since Tuesday morning.

The angry workers went on the rampage, clashed with police and damaged about 20 vehicles, including two staff buses of a factory, during the mayhem.... Witnesses said following the Monday night's violence at Irish Fashion, hundreds of workers of the factory came to work at around 7:00am. But, they found a notice hung on the main gate saying the factory was closed for indefinite period.

Enraged, the nearly 6,000 workers of the seven-storey factory immediately tore the notice into pieces, went on the warpath and started demonstrating.

Fearing attack, police stationed inside the factory remained silent and did not come out to disperse the agitating workers.

The mob pelted brickbats at and forced some other factories to close, and chanted slogans, urging workers of those plants to join forces with it.

Most of the factories in the areas declared closure of work. Within a few minutes, the majority of workers of those factories joined hands with their agitating fellows and brought out a procession....

Fearing further vandalism, the authorities announced closure of over 50 factories located in the areas adjoining to the Dhaka Export Processing Zone for indefinite period..... A tense situation is prevailing in the areas, with many contingents of police, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles and the Rapid Action Battalion deployed in front of the DEPZ and at others key points." [4]

*"The government agreed to release arrested workers and union officials, and to drop the cases against them. It also promised to set up a"minimum wage board for the garment sector and take steps to meet the demands of garment workers," and — in a bow to the manufacturers — to investigate the causes of the riots." [5]*

*"Following the unrest in the garment sector, the factory owners at a tripartite meeting late last month accepted almost all demands of the garment workers, including the right to form trade unions, weekly holiday, maternity leave and issuance of appointment letter and identity card (these letters and cards are proof of employment and are often withheld to prevent workers later claiming back pay when they are dismissed). The meeting formed a minimum wage board comprising representatives from the government, the garment factory owners and SKOP[workers' representatives] as the workers demanded increase of minimum salary from Tk 940 [£7. 59/Eur10. 97/\$14. 03] to Tk 3,000 [£22. 24/Eur 35. 03/\$44. 79] because of the unprecedented price hikes of essentials." [6]*

So far, as unrest in the factories continues, the bosses are resisting agreeing to a minimum wage of Tk 3,000 - an average 30% wage rise.

## **The globalised sweatshop**

Below we will briefly describe general working conditions and some background to the revolt:

"Bangladesh is endowed with abundant and cheap labour force that is easily trainable and convertible into semi-skilled and skilled work force. Price, heavily weighted by the labour cost, is one of the main determinants of comparative advantage in the labour-intensive garment industry. The price of labour in our country is lower compared to some of our neighbouring countries as well as some other garment producing countries in South-East Asia and East Europe. Obviously, existence of such cheap but easily trainable labour is one of the advantages that Bangladesh enjoys and will be enjoying over a considerable period in the context of international trade on clothing." [7]

*"The garment workers of Bangladesh may be the most deprived labor force in the world. Most are paid between US\$14 to US\$16 per month, the lowest salary in the world".* [8]

*"I get Tk 900 [£7. 27/Eur10. 50/\$13. 43] for a month of hard labour which is not enough to even cover my food bills,' said a worker at Tejgaon. 'Can you show me one worker who runs his family without a hitch with the money he gets?"* [9]

*"Bangladesh's apparel sector now employ 2.5 million in more than 5,000 factories and the largest industrial sector contribute more than 75 per cent to the country's export earnings."* [10] [2.5 million is the highest and most recently quoted figure for workers - most sources say 1.5 -1.8million.]

*" In February 2005, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation found that the [official] monthly minimum wage for Bangladesh's garment workers was some \$33 ten years ago, but that came down to \$16 in real value due to devaluation of Bangladesh Taka against dollar.*

The Brussels-based organisation shows that in India and Pakistan, an apparel worker gets at least 20 cents per hour, in China 23 cents, in Sri Lanka 40 cents while in Thailand the worker is paid 78 cents. " [11]

The 2 million or so workers in the Bangladesh garment industry work for little more than starvation wages, under conditions closer to those endured by European workers 150-200 years ago. 90% are young girls and women from 12 years upwards: physical and sexual abuse in the workplace is common. Average rates of pay in the EPZs are \$20 a month, less than half the supposed official minimum wage, overtime is often compulsory and wages are sometimes withheld for months. Outside the EPZs, where over 80% of garment workers labour, conditions are worse. "Some of these garment workers earn as as little as eight cents an hour, while the top wage for an experienced sewer is just 18 cents. ...

Helpers earn: 8 cents an hour; \$3.64 a week/ \$15.77 a month/ \$189.28 a year.

Senior Sewing Operators earn: 18 cents an hour/ \$8.40 a week/ \$36.40 a month/ \$436.80 a year." [12]"The bourgeois media reports that the industry currently owes \$US300,000 in back pay, a staggering amount considering the miserly wages." There are no guaranteed weekly days off, no holidays, no guaranteed maternity leave, no annual leave. Employment is also often insecure; workers change jobs frequently due to wage arrears, lay-offs, ill health or harassment from the bosses and their security guards.

The workplace is a highly dangerous place in this industry: in February and March this year 2 fires killed over 100 workers and injured hundreds more, provoking strikes. As is common, most exit doors were locked, increasing casualties greatly. Also in February, a multi-storey factory collapsed: originally built as a 2 storey building, then over-extended, 19 workers were killed and around 50 injured. Thousands of workers have died from employers' neglect of safety procedures.

In the generally stagnant economy of Bangladesh, the ready made garment sector is the only significant economic force. This sector is entirely export oriented and is composed of over 5000 units

- most working for international buyers, some owned by international companies. Most of the garment units are clustered in industrial areas and EPZs in and around Dhaka - Ghazipur, Savar, Ashulia, Mirpur, Tejgaon, Mohakhali, Uttara, Wari and Tongi etc.

This is the modern face of 'Globalisation'. Capital goes where there is surplus labour to be had cheapest, installs its plant machinery and begins to extract profits. Equally, local capital sees an opportunity to utilise cheap local labour for the global market. In 1978 the Bangladesh government set up Export Processing Zones (EPZs) to attract foreign capital and earn export dollars. (100% foreign ownership, 65%; joint venture, 13%; 100% local venture, 22%.) In 1993 the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) was set up and a blanket ban on trade union activity imposed. An attractive investment location for investors, also including tax breaks and other incentives. The EPZs now employ 70,000 workers, mostly in the garment and shoe-making industries (though most of the garment industry exists outside the EPZs). National labour laws do not apply in the EPZs, leaving BEPZA in full control over work conditions, wages and benefits. The garment industry is the life blood of the Bangladesh economy. Garment factories in Bangladesh provide employment to 40 percent of industrial workers. More than three-quarters of the \$7.8 billion of Bangladesh's export earnings comes from exporting garments. Despite falling prices, export volume has grown, and business is booming at present as the Bangladesh garment industry takes advantage of comparatively cheaper labour costs and World Trade Organization restrictions put on China, the world's largest Ready Made Garment (RMG) exporter. Bangladesh RMG imports to the US have increased 25% this year so far. [