

Bangladesh : Seeking solution - Garment workers continue to stage demonstrations, protesting disparity in their wage structure

Tuesday 15 January 2019, by [AKASH Aklakur Rahman](#), [MIRDHA ULLAH Refayet](#), [The Daily Star](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2019).

With no let-up in RMG unrest, govt may announce basic pay rise in grade 3, 4 and 5.

The government is expected to announce today a revised wage structure for apparel workers of grades 3, 4 and 5, in efforts to quell the labour unrest that has affected production in the country's largest forex-earning sector.

At an emergency meeting yesterday, the 20-member crisis management committee formed to resolve the matter agreed in principle to increase the basic pay in those grades.

The decision came four days after the tripartite committee was formed, as the protest entered its seventh day after Friday's holiday break.

Garment workers continue to stage demonstrations, protesting disparity in their wage structure. Police use water cannon to disperse workers in Ashulia's Jamgora area around 10am yesterday.

Photo: Amran Hossain, Palash Khan

"I hope the government will announce the adjustment of the basic pay in grades 3, 4 and 5 tomorrow [today] as agreed by all stakeholders in principle," FBCCI President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin told reporters after the meeting at the labour and employment ministry.

Ministry Secretary Afroza Khan chaired the meeting, also attended by the commerce secretary, union leaders and law enforcers.

However, Mohiuddin declined to provide details of the adjustments to the wage structure.

There were major problems in grades 3, 4 and 5 out of the seven grades. But now, workers will not get less gross salary as the issue has been "properly addressed," he said.

Asked, the FBCCI chief said a fresh gazette notification was not necessary for the adjustment to take effect.

"We sought adequate security from the government so that owners can open their factories without fear," he said.

After the meeting, two representatives from the owner's association said their biggest worry was possible cancellation of work orders and the high cost of air shipment.

More than 100 factories have been affected so far by the unrest, said Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

In some factories, production fell due to the weeklong protest. This needs to be resolved immediately, he said.

“We have been demanding a review of the basic pay for all grades. But the committee agreed to adjust only the pay for grades 3, 4 and 5 as major “mistakes” occurred in those while fixing the wages,” said Amirul Haque Amin, president of the National Garment Workers Federation, who is also on the government-formed committee.

He feared that today’s announcement may not bring complete normalcy in the sector.

“We have been asking the workers to go back to their workplaces as the government assured us of reviewing the wage in those grades, but they are not listening,” Amin said.

Asked if it was due to the weakness of the union leadership, he said there were indeed some problems in the leadership. “We cannot say that we have control everywhere in labour leadership. There are some problems in our organisations.”

Sirajul Islam Rony, a union leader and a former workers’ representative to the wage board, echoed Amin’s view.

“In many factories, workers returned to work. But in many places, they are still protesting. There are some misunderstandings among workers and labour leaders. The workers are going beyond our control,” he told The Daily Star by phone.

Montu Ghosh, president of Garment Workers Trade Union Centre, said they requested the committee to increase the basic pay for all grades keeping in mind the expectation of the workers.

PROTESTS ON

Workers continued their demonstration yesterday, vandalising at least 20 vehicles and 25 garment factories in different areas.

They also blocked different roads in the capital, Ashulia and Gazipur for hours causing traffic gridlock.

The protest began on January 6 over the wage gap.

In September last year, the government raised the minimum monthly wage for RMG workers by around 51 percent to Tk 8,000 from Tk 5,300. The new wage took effect in December.

But when workers drew their pay in January, they found a huge disparity, triggering the agitation.

On the third day of the protest, the government assured the workers of addressing the discrimination in a month. The workers, however, refused to leave the streets.

“We don’t believe in assurances. We want implementation,” said Momin Miah, who works at Alfa Knitting Wear at the capital’s Shewrapara, while demonstrating in the area yesterday.

In Ashulia, workers vandalised at least 20 vehicles while demonstrating at different points of Dhaka-Tangail highway for about three hours since 9:00am.

At least 15 workers were hurt as police charged batons and used water cannons to disperse them.

A number of passengers were also injured when workers threw brick chunks randomly at vehicles.

Workers of at least 35 factories in Savar and Ashulia joined yesterday's protest, said Sana Shaminur Rahman, superintendent of Dhaka Industrial Police-1.

Eight platoons of Border Guard Bangladesh were deployed in the areas.

In the capital, workers vandalised at least five garment factories at north Ibrahimpur, Mirpur-14 and Kochukhet in the morning.

Workers also blocked roads at Technical Intersection near Bangla College, Mirpur-14 and Shewrapara.

In Tongi, workers vandalised at least nine factories in the morning. Five people were detained in this connection, said a Rab official.

Meanwhile, Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia yesterday warned against creating anarchy centring on the protests.

"No one will be allowed to create anarchy over protests. Anyone or any quarter trying to capitalise on the situation will be brought to book," he said, adding that intelligence agencies have already been asked to look into it.

Star Report

• Daily Star, 12:00 AM, January 13, 2019 / LAST MODIFIED: 10:32 AM, January 13, 2019:
<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/rmg-unrest-govt-set-announce-basic-pay-rise-1686799>

Readymade Garment Sector: Revised wage sees protests subside

The weeklong protests in the apparel hub in Gazipur, Ashulia, Savar and Mirpur ebbed away yesterday, a day after the government announced revised wages in six grades for garment workers.

Apart from one or two incidents in Ashulia, where a few thousand workers took to the streets before being driven away by the police, the situation was normal elsewhere. Apparently, the unrest in the country's largest foreign export earning sector has been resolved.

But industry insiders say weaknesses in trade unions in the sector have been exposed by the way things have been handled from the start of negotiations for the 2018 wage board to the lead-up to the protests. The sector has suffered frequent demonstrations in recent months.

Any crisis in the industry should be resolved through a joint effort from union leaders, factory management and the government and the workers are to be conveyed the message. It helps quell any unrest in a healthy garment sector.

However, the latest spell of protests against disparity in wages was not guided by the union leaders and it was evident when the demonstrating workers refused to return to work despite repeated calls from the leaders.

A couple of union leaders, who were part of the tripartite committee formed to handle the situation, admitted that the protesters were not paying any heed to them.

The workers openly said they did not trust their top leadership. Some even branded the leaders as “promoters” of the owners.

They said their “true leaders” had been on the run since December 2016 when unrest hit the sector as workers began protests demanding a new wage board with a minimum pay of Tk 16,000.

As a result, agitating workers over the last week did not follow the directives of the union leaders who engaged in negotiations with the government and the owners for revision of the wage structure sitting in Dhaka.

Following the labour unrest at Ashulia and Savar in December 2016, many local union leaders were arrested. On their release, some of them started working either for factory management or the government, the workers alleged, adding those who wanted to work in favour of the workers had to flee as cases were filed against them.

REVISED INCREASE IN WAGE (IN TKA)						
GRADE	BASE WAGE (2016 RATE)	REVISED BASE WAGE	INCR IN MONTHLY WAGE	MONTHLY WAGE (2016)	REVISED MONTHLY WAGE	INCR IN GROSS WAGE
7	4,180	4,180	None	8,008	8,800	None
6	4,320	4,380	60	8,496	8,410	15
5	4,620	4,680	60	8,856	8,875	20
4	4,920	4,980	60	9,216	9,247	100
3	5,160	5,380	220	9,576	9,845	255
2	8,520	9,040	520	14,620	15,418	798
1	10,440	10,810	370	17,530	18,257	727

Talking to The Daily Star, Montoo, an operator at a garment factory in Ashulia, said many of the workers did not listen to their union leaders during the recent protests. “We don’t have any trust in the union leaders.”

Echoing Montoo’s view, many of the workers, who participated in the protest, said the union leaders did not guide them properly.

Khairul Mamun Mintoo, organising secretary of the Garment Workers Trade Union Kendra, said the government and the owners did not allow any mainstream union activities in Ashulia and Savar areas over the last two years.

As a result, the gap between the unions and the workers widened and during the peak of the latest unrest, the leaders failed to play any part in resolving the situation.

Amirul Haque Amin, president of the National Garment Workers Federation, agreed that trade unions have weaknesses in terms of leadership as most of the unions are not organised.

He said there are many reasons for the weaknesses. For instance, the number of active union leaders in more than 4,500 garment factories stood at 750 after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013.

But the number of such active unions is around 350 now.

Around 350 unions for more than 4,500 active garment factories are too scanty, said Amin, who led union leaders in the negotiation of wage structure. The factory managements also do not encourage formation of unions, he said.

So the cordial industrial relations which were supposed to be in place had not established in the sector even 40 years after garment trade began in the country, he added. Currently, the number of federations of unions in the garment sector is 60.

In almost every factory, the elected participation committees are present for the sake of compliance, he said. In most of the cases those participation committees are inactive and only exist on papers under pressure from buyers, he said.

Police chasing off agitating garments workers in Ashulia. Photo: Star

“The government and International Labour Organisation have recently been advocating for social dialogues for resolving the conflicts in the sector. But still I believe there is no alternative to trade unions in lowering the conflicts,” he said, adding, “Healthy practice of trade unionism can resolve 90 percent of the conflicts.”

“If workers want, they are allowed to have unions as per the labour law. Even they can apply for unionism through online applications,” said Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

The government relaxed the minimum participation requirement of workers in formation of union to 20 percent from the previous 30 percent to encourage it, Siddiqur added.

Meanwhile, the ILO Country Office in Bangladesh in a statement welcomed the decision to revise the wages.

“We acknowledge the genuine efforts of all parties, led by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, to work towards setting minimum wages at an appropriate level and to reach a consensus. Through this tripartite process of dialogue confidence is being built and we call upon all parties to help the industry resume its activities,” says Tuomo Poutiainen, ILO country director for Bangladesh.

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