

Government and Employers Repress Striking Garment Workers in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the world's second largest exporter of ready-made garments after China. Bangladesh exports billions of dollars worth of clothes each year and it is one of the top supplier of clothing to global brands like HM&GAP, Inditex of Spain-Zara brand, P.V.H of Tomphy Hill finger brand etc.

Many of the garments manufacturing factories are situated in the Ashulia region in the out-skirts of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. In the garment sector lakhs of workers are employed and most of them are women workers.

The ready-made garment companies that have been earning millions of dollars of profit; have been keeping their workers in worst working conditions and exploiting the labour power of the workers inhumanly. The workers are made to work in buildings that lack minimum ventilation of air and light, even without any provision for drinking water and with inhuman restrictions disallowing the workers even to go to toilets. The workers are forcibly made to work 16 hrs a day in work-places lacking any security arrangements or measures from fire accidents, killing workers in the work-place fire accidents. Fire accidents have become common phenomena in Bangladesh garment units killing workers. The incident of collapse of Rama plaza building in 2013, killing 1,129 workers highlights the callous attitude of the garment company employers towards the security of garment workers in Bangladesh. Again the incidents of fire accident in 2012, in Tazarene garment company killing 112 workers and injuring 150 workers, speaks about the unsafety conditions in which the garment workers are forced to work in Bangladesh.

It is not only the worst working conditions, but even the lowest payment of wages to these garment workers speak volumes about the plight of these workers. After prolonged protests, agitations and struggles the hourly wages being paid to them is mere 32 cents. Monthly wages to a worker is 5,300 takas; the lowest ever paid wages in the global garment sector.

The Bangladesh government, whose income and economy is mainly dependant on export manufactured ready-made garments, has never tried to take steps for the improvement of the deplorable working and living conditions of the garment sector. On the contrary it stood in support of the employer-companies, by unleashing the policy of repression against the workers by deploying army and police forces against the garment workers whose conditions have inevitably forced them to resort for protests, agitations and struggles with their just demands for improving working and living conditions. Despite the inhuman repression used against them, the garment sector workers have been entering in to protests and agitations to better their conditions braving the repressive attacks of the government and employers on them. As is the case with the leadership of the established and traditional trade unions throughout the world, even in Bangladesh the leadership of established and traditional trade unions ignores the just demands of the workers, but supports the anti-worker policies of the government, and makes every effort to dilute the fighting spirit of garment workers and their militancy. But even in these disadvantageous conditions, the garment workers continue their protests, agitations and struggles to achieve their just demands of improving their working and living conditions. They are resorting to strikes to resolve their just demands.

As a part of these agitations protests and strikes, the garment workers of Bangladesh resorted to massive agitation action, demanding the increase of their minimum wages. Previous to their agitation, due to many agitations of workers in 2013, the government had made an agreement with the trade unions, deciding 5,300 takas as the minimum wage for workers in garments sector. But much management of garment factories are even not paying this government decided minimum wages to workers. On the other hand due to increase of inflation every year, the living expenses of workers too are increasing. For the last 10 yrs, the wages of workers have been increased only twice. According to the beuro of statistics, every year the rate of increase in inflation is 10%. Even then, the workers are being paid only with

the wages decided in 2013. Neither the managements nor the government have even attempted to revise the wages of workers on par with the increase in inflationary rates.

Under these circumstances workers of M.D.group garment manufacturing factories of Ashulia region, in the out-skirts of Dhaka, demanding the revision of minimum wages went in to strike from Dec-11 (2016). This sparked agitations in the other factories also demanding a raise in minimum wages. Workers belonging to 25 other garment factories also went in to strike with 16 demands including betterment of their working conditions, increase of the minimum wages from 5,300 takas to 16,000 Takas. More than 1,50,000 workers participated in the strike that continued for 10 days. As a reaction to the strike the managements united and with the support of the government have illegally locked out 85 garment factories. Government had unleashed police forces and boarder security forces on the workers to repress the striking workers and their protests.

The association of employers have announced the strike as illegal and misconduct. On the other hand the Bangladesh government had announced that the strike was a conspiracy hatched by outsiders.

With these announcements, inhuman repression was started on garment workers. Police brutally lathi charged the protesting workers injuring hundreds of them. Many workers were arrested. Police attacks were conducted on the trade union offices of garment workers and ransacked them. 1600 workers were arrested and implicated in to false charges as if they were inciting workers in to struggles; as if they had trespassed in to premises of factories, as if they had vandalised, as if they had committed thefts. Many workers were not only sacked from their jobs but were implicated in to false police cases. Invoking the special powers act, a military act, Bangladesh government used repression on workers. 30 trade union leaders were arrested and incarcerated. A ground was prepared to implicate thousands of agitating workers. Many arrest warrants were issued. Some of the arrested workers and T.U.leaders were implicated in to false cases as if they had participated in the incidents of political violence occurred in 2015. Thus the Bangladesh government is terrorising the garment workers.

Utilising this situation of terrorising workers, some managements of garment industry are forcing their workers to work overtime without any extra payment, threatening them otherwise they would make them arrested; and forcibly making them to work extra hours of work.

This is how a brutal repression in continued on garment workers of Bangladesh.

Certain International garment brand companies like GAP, the importers of Bangladesh garments, have written a letter to the prime minister of Bangladesh urging to stop repression on workers and revise their minimum wages. But the Bangladesh government had shown no positive reaction to such a request.

Until some NGOs like Labour rights group have exposed about the repression used on garments workers in Bangladesh, in an article in the New York Times, this has not come in to light.

According to the labour rights groups “government (Bangladesh) is trying to scare workers in to silence by detaining innocent people” and “the factory managements are using this state repression to intimidate workers in order to intensify their exploitation” and “the Bangladesh government has historically repressed workers efforts to organise and fight for better conditions”.

This experience of garment workers of Bangladesh exposes the falsity of the propaganda that the imperialist globalisation would bring about all-round economic development and affluence in to the lives of people. But at the same time it clearly points out the price to have to be borne by the workers and working class for the advancement of imperialist globalisation.

‘CLASS STRUGGLE’ condemns the state repression of Bangladesh on garment sector workers, in support of employers!

‘CLASS STRUGGLE’ expresses its whole hearted solidarity with the garment workers of Bangladesh who have chosen the path of struggle for the betterment of their working and living conditions!!
