

Promises must be kept

After weeks of unrest in the garments industry with thousands of workers agitating for basic demands to be met, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed on June 12, 2006, by the government, garment owners and workers' leaders to endure labour rights and with the hope of restoring peace in the factories.

In spite of such a significant development, there was labour unrest in a number of factories over the issue of salary hike. At least 30 people were injured in clashes between workers and officials of Youngone Group in Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ). A number of garment factories remained closed despite the withdrawal of the worker's strike.

Youngone Group in a press release stated that a number of workers who had sparked the May 31 half-day strike had made other workers refrain from work in the factory (in DEPZ). The press release also said that the agitating workers had vandalised the factory and so the group had to close down its factories in DEPZ.

The Daily Star report said that since June 9, Friday, workers were getting agitated as the owners did not give them the full salary and also cut down May 31st half-day's salary for demonstrating for their three-point demand. The demands included wages at the current exchange rate of US dollar and transport arrangements for female workers. While workers refrained from work the factory officials hung up a notice saying that no demands of the workers will be met. Furthermore the factory authorities served warning notices to 15 factory representatives of Workers Representative Welfare Committee (WRWC) on June 10, restricting their movement inside the factory and prohibiting them from talking to one another.

Workers of several other factories left work after signing and in two factories in Mirpur and Tongi workers clashed over the workers strike. Workers in a factory from Postogala left the work place in large numbers after signing in.

Workers have become disgruntled over the discrepancies in salaries between workers. Authorities of DEPZ circulated a notice several months ago directing factory owners to pay workers salaries as per the exchange rate



of US dollar. Factories have been paying salaries according to the exchange rates of January. Factory authorities started paying salaries according to the new directive only to those employees recruited after the issuance of the notice. Thus an inconsistency between the salaries of old and newly recruited employees was created. There are allegations that workers have been sacked for taking part in the agitation movement and that some workers have not been paid their full salary for last month.

According to the recent MOU, the wage board formed on May 31 has been endorsed and a minimum wage for workers would be declared with three months of its formation. Other terms of the agreement would be implemented within one month.

The MOU promises not to sack any worker for involvement in the recent agitation and states that all cases filed against them would be withdrawn. The workers would be given appointment letters, identity cards immediately. Owners have agreed that they will not stop the formation of trade unions in any factory.

The spate of unrest that coincided with the signing of the MOU indicates that it will take time for the workers to regain trust in their employers. Only if the owners sincerely implement the terms of the MOU, and with considerable speed, will peace be restored.