

# CRUSHING THE SPIRIT

The false cases filed against garment workers and leaders after the wage protests in 2016 have had a chilling effect on organising in the sector

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The minimum wage of garments workers has been declared at Tk 8,000 per month—and it seems, at this point, it is a signed and sealed deal. City life is going as is. There are no mass protests racking the city, disrupting our roads, our lives. Save for the lone rally here and there, there is really nothing to suggest that over four million workers have gotten only half the minimum wage they were fighting for.

Anyone who has observed the decade-long activism by RMG workers knows just how unnatural this is. Movements for minimum wage have been fought by workers on the streets, whether in 2013 or 2010. The demand for a minimum wage of Tk 16,000 itself gained momentum in such a movement in December 2016, when masses of garments workers swelled onto the streets of Ashulia. Demonstrations lasted for days, and 60 factories were shut down. The police met them with brute force: tear shell, rubber bullets, hot-water cannons. At least 1,600 workers lost their jobs *The Daily Star* reported, quoting the police.

The long history of workers occupying the streets to make themselves heard raises the question: why are workers silent this time?

"It was difficult to get workers to come to demonstration programmes because they have been threatened by factory administrations and law enforcers," claims Taslima Akhter, President of Bangladesh Garments Sramik Samhati, one of the handful of organisations bringing out protest rallies denouncing the new minimum wage. Akhter's organisation belongs to a platform of 12 organisations that brought out a few programmes before and after the minimum wage declaration. None of those programmes saw the kind of worker attendance as the 2016 protests.

"We recently tried to organise in front of Rana Plaza but the workers were getting so many calls from the law enforcers that we had to downsize the programme completely," adds Akhter.

What is concerning is that this "pressure" does not only manifest in the form of arbitrary threats—workers and trade union leaders are at actual risk of being

picked up.

The 2016 protests saw cases lodged against hundreds of workers and over a dozen trade union leaders prosecuted.

"When workers raised their voices in a peaceful manner in December 2016, the government and factory workers brought 14 different criminal charges against them," describes Kalpana Akhter, executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity.

"During the crackdown, 39 worker union and federation leaders were arrested, of whom 32 were in prison for two and a half months, and they are still facing those charges."

The labour rights leader further goes on to explain how this has affected the workers' will to protest.

"This crackdown has pushed us back by at least two years. Top that off with the fact that this is the election year, and any protest can be coloured as having been instigated by the opposition political party," describes Kalpana.

S\* Begum is one of those workers who cannot afford to get picked up again. The sewing operator claims to have been

booked under a case for doing "anti-state" activities in 2016. Begum had actively participated in the Ashulia protests.

"I spent seven months in hiding, running away from the police, after they filed a case against me. I can't anymore," she says, when asked why more workers are not protesting.

"If I get arrested, who will look after my daughter? She's all the family I have," says Begum.

After the case, she lost her job, and accrued over Tk 70,000 in debt. "I could only get another job as a sewing operator after hiding my identity. No factory wanted to take me in because the police case against me is such that they can come and arrest me any time they want."

That does not mean she is not enraged by the fact that the minimum wage is barely a cut above their current wages.

"I am unable to accept this. Not only is the increase barely anything but we are already facing the consequences of demanding higher wages. The wages have not even been implemented

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The effects of the police crackdown on the RMG worker protests of December 2016 are far-reaching and still impact the movements today