



# WHY ARE WORKERS ON THE STREETS?

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Since January 6, garments workers in Mirpur, Uttara, Ashulia and Savar have been protesting on the streets (as of this issue going to print on January 9). Earlier, prior to the elections, garment workers had also protested in different industrial areas, in limited capacities. Why are workers protesting now—three months after the new minimum wage was declared? Nilima Jahan from Star Weekend spoke to five workers to understand their frustration. The workers say there is a huge disparity in pay in the new wage structure, which was to be implemented from December last year. While monthly wages for entry-level workers, i.e. minimum wage, was set at Tk 8,000 (up from Tk 5,300 previously), the 51 percent pay hike was not reflected proportionately across the board for all workers. This, say the workers, are the crux of the problem and the reason for their demonstrations.

Our owner gave us a written notice last month that all operators will get Tk 11,000 per month from this January onwards. But now they are paying us Tk 9,500 as per the new gazette. So, we are demanding that the owner must implement his previous notice, and pay us accordingly, including our yearly 5 percent increment.

That's not all. Our owner wrongfully fired 1,043 workers few days ago. Those workers were the ones who always stood up for the betterment of the workers. We had heard that a worker of a nearby factory had been murdered and we were trying to get out of our factory to see what had happened and to protest the murder. But our authorities announced that nobody had died and ordered us not to protest. They even fired tear shell towards us, while we were protesting to get out of our factory. Later, they fired over a thousand workers. Of them, 200 workers got their due salaries and benefits. We are now protesting for the reinstatement of the fired workers as well.

**M\* ALI**

OPERATOR, ABANTI COLOUR TEX LTD, NARAYANGANJ. HE HAS WORKED AT THE FACTORY FOR 8.5 YEARS.

\*Names of the workers have been changed upon their request.

I'm here for the past three days and will be here until our demands are accepted. My current gross salary is Tk 9,500 and my basic salary is Tk 4,500. But according to the new minimum wage, I will only get a 90 taka raise.

We hear that the minimum wage has been increased by 51 percent—but it doesn't apply to us! In fact, thanks to this so-called minimum wage hike, our yearly 5 percent salary raise has also been postponed. The new decision is not helping me in any way, rather I'm suffering for this. So my demand is, I also need a 51 percent increase of my current salary. It cannot be accepted that the difference between the salary of a new worker and a senior worker, employed for nine years, is only Tk 1,590!

**MSST N AKTER\***

FOLDING [WO]MAN, FINISHING SECTION, TRZ GARMENTS FACTORY AT KUSHOL CENTRE, UTTARA. SHE HAS WORKED AT THE FACTORY FOR NINE YEARS.

I have been working at this factory for the past 10 years as a packing man and my current salary is Tk 10,500. But according to the minimum wage gazette, the sewing operator, packing man, folding man and iron man will get a gross salary of Tk 9,590. So, see, my salary will actually decrease by Tk 1000 with the new minimum wage gazette. How can I accept this and be anywhere but on the streets?

**H\* MIA**

PACKING MAN, VERSATILE APPARELS LTD, AT DAKSHINKHAN, UTTARA. HE HAS WORKED AT THE FACTORY FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS.

I am a worker in Grade 4. Not only am I not getting an equal increment compared to the helpers, my overtime pay has also decreased! I used to get Tk 50 per hour as overtime, but now I get only Tk 44. This must mean our basic salary—on which our overtime is calculated—has actually decreased.

**R\* ISLAM**

SEWING OPERATOR, UNIQUE DESIGN AT BOROBARI GAZIPUR. SHE HAS WORKED AT THE FACTORY FOR THE PAST THREE MONTHS.

According to the new gazette, an entry-level helper (Grade 7) worker will get Tk 8,000 as minimum wage. But a helper who has been working for six to seven years already gets Tk 7,000 to 7,500, because of yearly increments of 5 percent. Under the current wageboard, their wages will only be increased to Tk 8000, while new workers will get that amount from the first day. Senior workers have worked for years but will now be paid the same as a new worker. All senior helpers must get a proportionate wage raise.

Besides, helpers only make up 5 percent of the total workforce. The rest 95 percent are all process operators—packing man, iron man, sewing operator, folding man. According to the new gazette, they are in Grade 3. And it's the same problem here—an operator, who has been working at a factory for 10-15 years, currently gets Tk 10,500. But the new gazette only declares Tk 5,152 as their basic, and Tk 9,590 as their gross salary. So this new gazette has actually decreased their current salary.

Another thing is, only 5 percent of the factories have a grade system. Since the new gazette has introduced grade system for all workers, factories are arbitrarily assigning Grade 6 to workers who are supposed to be in Grade 3, as they have been working for 10-15 years. A Grade 6 worker will get Tk 8,377 according to the new gazette. So, the the difference between the salary of a helper and a senior operator cannot be Tk 377 in any way. No worker will accept this.

**JOYNAL ABEDIN**

President, Greater Uttara Regional Committee of Garment Workers Trade Union Centre (GWTUC)