

LABOUR RIGHTS

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New wage board

Following sustained pressure by the trade unions, in January 2018, the Bangladesh government finally appointed a wage board to decide new wages for the garment sector. The board consisted of representatives from the government, owners' associations and workers. To the frustration of activists and workers, the worker representative appointed, Shamsunahar Bhuiyan, was a member of the Jatiya Sramaki League, which is affiliated to the ruling Awami League. In an interview with *The Daily Star*, Bhuiyan said that as sympathetic as she might be to the workers' cause, she could not suggest a wage that "might harm the state economy and tarnish the party's political image."

After months of deliberation, in September 2018, the wage board announced that the monthly gross minimum wage for Grade 7 RMG workers—the lowest paid category of garment labourers – would increase by 51 percent, from BDT 5300 (USD 63) to BDT 8000 (USD 95). Workers and activists assumed that Grades 1 through 6 would receive wage increases of similar proportions. However, another announcement in November 2018 made it clear that the proportion of increase was lower for the higher grades.

To make matters worse, workers realised that their basic wage—the portion of their total wage which is used to calculate benefits such as overtime and a five-percent yearly increment, which was introduced in 2013—had actually decreased as a proportion of their gross wage. For some workers, once the yearly increment was accounted for, the new basic wage was either an insignificant increase or an outright decrease. For example, workers in Grade 3, who were earning BDT 4075 per month as basic wage in 2013, would anyway be entitled to BDT 5204 in basic monthly wage by

living in Bangladesh. The government's own Household Income and Expenditure Survey, conducted in 2016, stated that the average household expenditure per month was BDT 15,715 (USD 186). A 2018 CPD survey found that the average monthly expenditure for garment workers was BDT 22,435 (USD 270). It also showed that the average monthly expenditure for a garment worker increased by a whopping 86 percent from 2013 to 2018, with inflation figures hovering around six percent over these years. These findings highlight that there is no way for a worker to support his or her family on the new minimum wage, unless another member of the household also holds a job with an equal

sector after being branded as 'troublemakers'. According to IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC), the national coordinating body of affiliates of IndustriALL Global Union, biometric data linked to employment records are now being used to identify workers involved in trade-union activities and deny them employment. Active union members and vocal workers in Worker Participation Committees—which mediate grievances between workers and employers – are also being targeted through cases. The police have the option of listing 'unnamed' perpetrators in their case files, allowing law enforcement to make arbitrary arrests. Unions claim that at least half of the workers picked up were

federations—has made collective organising a dream of the past. It hasn't helped that more and more unions are embracing the 'NGO model', whereby they receive foreign funding for organising trainings, workshops and seminars. This in itself may not have been problematic if such programmes did not take precedence over radical collective action, such as the physical occupation of the streets or civil disobedience that Bangladesh witnessed in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In its pursuit of unsustainable economic growth and eagerness to facilitate capital, the state has created apparatus like the Industrial Police—whose self-described mission is



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PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

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2019, under the five-percent annual increment rule. But the new wage structure set the basic wage for Grade 3 at BDT 5160 per month, which is BDT 44 lower than it would have been without the change.

Even including the increased percentage of allowances (for food, housing, transport, etc) in the new gross wages, it is unclear on what basis these wages were calculated as they did not in any way reflect the spiralling cost of

or higher wage.

When protests began in December 2018 in response to the newly implemented wage structure, some factories retaliated with terminations, threats and violence. For instance, in Abanti Colour Tex, one of the first factories where workers demanded higher pay, the management reportedly fired 1043 workers. Workers claim that since they brought forth the demands for fairer wages to their management, they have been subjected to beatings, harassment and even threats of 'disappearances' by management and local goons, to say nothing of the disproportionate violence of the police, as evidenced from the use of rubber bullets, water cannons, tear gas and batons, on what began as peaceful protests. In other factories, the management reportedly appeased workers with the promise of reconsidering an increased pay in consultation with the government.

The factory owners argue that no 'innocent' worker needs to be afraid of retaliation. Yet, thousands of workers—who insist they did not partake in any violence but merely participated in strikes, and who urge the authorities to check CCTV footage before finding them guilty—have not only lost their jobs but are unlikely to find another one in this

not specifically mentioned in the case documents.

There are also multiple instances of workers from one factory being picked up in cases filed by another factory. In one case filed by A R Jeans Producer, for instance, union leaders of FGS Knitwear – which shares the same ownership as the former – have been charged, even though the two factories are separate entities and the case document does not cite the involvement of outsiders in the alleged vandalism that took place. Similarly, workers from Saybolt Textiles have been arbitrarily picked up in a case filed by Mahmud Fashion.

STRUGGLE AHEAD

It is no secret that most factory owners dislike trade unions. The state, too, irrespective of which party is in power, has supported the owners, be it through laws such as the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006—which makes it difficult for unions to organise within factories and facilitates arbitrary denial of union registrations—or by ignoring management's violent retaliation against trade-union activists.

Weakening of the labour movement—partly due to the fragmentation of trade unions along party lines, and partly due to an unhealthy competition among the major

to “ensure safety and security of industries” and “take necessary measures to prevent any labour unrest in the industrial area” —and continues to conflate workers with criminals and factory owners' profits with national interest. Every major workers' protest in the last decade has been met with violence, with many resulting in one or more deaths of workers. None of these deaths have ever been investigated properly.

In the aftermath of the 2018-19 strikes, a ten-member committee, with five representatives each from trade unions and factory owners, was formed on 8 January 2019 to review the wage structure. As the protests continued, less than a week later, the board decided that wages would go up by BDT 15 for workers in Grade 6, BDT 20 for those in Grade 5, BDT 102 in Grade 4, BDT 255 in Grade 3, and BDT 786 in Grade 2. Given how insufficient these increases are, it is hardly surprising that the state-business nexus has had to resort to bullying and violence to scare the workers into submission. But for how long can a disgruntled workforce be kept in check?

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