

Faire entendre la voix des travailleurs pendant une crise industrielle: les luttes des ouvrières de l'industrie du vêtement au Bangladesh

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Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur des recherches fondamentales pour examiner l'intensification récente du conflit industriel au sein de l'industrie du vêtement au Bangladesh. En accédant à l'indépendance, le Bangladesh a cherché à développer une économie autonome par une industrialisation rapide. L'État s'est associé à des institutions financières internationales qui, par le biais d'accords d'aide et de financement, ont imposé un modèle industriel fondé sur un nouveau régime d'accumulation et de recours aux Zones franches d'importation. L'exigence d'optimisation des profits par des multinationales, intégrale à ce modèle, entraîne une exploitation accrue de la main d'œuvre et la neutralisation des organisations de travailleurs. Cette situation s'applique particulièrement au secteur du vêtement au Bangladesh, qui emploie 40 per cent des ouvriers industriels et produit 80 per cent des recettes d'exportation. Pourtant, la main d'œuvre est en majorité féminine. Leurs salaires sont parmi les plus bas au monde et elles travaillent dans des conditions déplorables. Les syndicats et les associations de travailleurs sont confrontés à des situations brutales où les règlements sur le travail sont ouvertement bafoués. La récente escalade des conflits industriels reflète l'amertume croissante des ouvrières, qui se tournent vers la syndicalisation spontanée et d'autres formes de lutte.

Cet article examine le mouvement de syndicalisation émergeant et les moyens employés par les ouvrières pour obtenir justice dans une conjoncture politique et économique défavorable. L'auteur explore le contexte créé par les conditions de travail actuelles, le cadre juridique, et les réactions de l'État, des propriétaires d'usines et du capital mondial.

Making Labour Voices Heard During an Industrial Crisis: Workers' struggles in the Bangladesh garment industry

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Abstract

This paper draws on primary research in an examination of the recent escalation of industrial conflict in Bangladesh's garment sector. At independence, Bangladesh sought to develop an independent economy via rapid industrialization. It engaged with International Financial Institutions who, through financial and aid agreements, imposed an industrial model based on a new regime of accumulation and the use of Export Processing Zones (EPZs). Integral to this is the requirement for profit maximization by multinational corporations requiring greater labour exploitation and the disarmament of worker organisations. This is especially true in Bangladesh's garment sector that employs forty percent of industrial workers and earns eighty percent of export revenue. Yet the majority of workers are women. They earn among the lowest wages in the world and work in appalling conditions. Trade unions and associations face brutal conditions as labour regulations are openly flouted. The recent rise in industrial conflict reflects workers' growing resentment as they turn to spontaneous unionization and other forms of struggle.

This paper examines this emerging labour movement and the means workers use to seek redress in an unfavourable political and economic context. It explores the context created by current working conditions, the legal framework as well as responses by the state, factory owners and global capital.

Introduction

Bangladesh became independent in 1971 on the eve of neo-liberal globalization, financialization which refers to “the increasing importance of financial markets financial motives, financial institutions, and financial elites in the operation of the economy and its governing institutions, both at the national and international level” (Epstein 2001, p.1), and Post-Fordism. While the initial policy

of the new state favoured state-led “socialist” industrialization, this began to change in 1973. The strong trade union movement that had emerged in the 1960s and played an important part in the independence struggles, came under severe pressure due to growing unemployment, legal restrictions on unions, the co-optation of union leaders into political parties and the government, the introduction of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and policies biased towards local and foreign investors compliant with International Financial Institutions’ (IFIs) models. Workers became increasingly vulnerable, and highly exploited. The Ready Made Garment (RMG) that started to dominate Bangladesh’s manufacturing in the late 1970’s was marked by extremely low wages and high levels of repression. Workers responded with demonstrations, campaigns and vandalism.

There have been severe labour conflicts since the 1980s. Focusing on the RMG sector, this paper examines workers’ conditions and struggles in the context of a changing political economy and critically analyzes workers’ responses to discern the essential characteristics of the rising garment workers’ movement.

Neo-liberalism and the Emergence of the Ready Made Garment (RMG) Sector

At independence, industry in Bangladesh was centred on jute, sugar, textiles and steel. Many facilities previously owned by Pakistani industrialists and by the East Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation lay abandoned. The new state aimed at a “socialist” economic order, nationalized around 77 per cent of industry (Hossain, Ahmed and Akte, 2010: 2-3). The state sector became the mainstay of industrial development in Bangladesh and trade unions grew, playing an important role in labour relations. This built upon their substantial role in the 1960s and in the independence struggle. The key unions were linked to political parties. The three national centres were the Jatiyo Sramik League (linked to the Awami League), the Trade Union Kendra (linked to the Communist Party of Bangladesh, or CPB) and the Jatyabadi Sramik Dal (linked to the Samajvadi Dal, formerly the Revolutionary Socialist Party).

The early 1970s saw a gradual policy shift due to worsening economic conditions, changes in government and global changes. The Awami League ruled from 1971 to 1975. In 1973 the Awami League modified its hostile stance towards the United States as well as its position on private entrepreneurship. In 1975 several military

coups took place and General Ziaur Rahman emerged as the Head of the State. The drive towards a liberal economy accelerated with the state viewing private investment and expertise as essential to building a strong and independent economy. Significantly, these changes took place in the 1970s context of global economic restructuring which included flexible specialization; the outsourcing of elements of manufacturing to cheap labour sites; and the central role of IFIs, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, in promoting economic liberalization. The shift to a free market economy in Bangladesh continued under the elected Rahman presidency (1978 to 1981), the regime of Lieutenant General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990), and, finally, under the civilian and “caretaker” governments that followed.

Bangladesh has become a major site of manufacturing in the contemporary third world. Economic liberalization and incentives to investors have ensured the entry of high levels of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The previous dependence on commodities like textiles and jute has been sharply reduced, while the RMG sector has become the backbone of the economy. Most of the state industrial sector has been privatized. According to economist Anu Mohammed, General Secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources Power and Ports, “due to privatisation, there was a growth in native individual propertied capitalists who took to the garments business in the late 1970s” (Author interview, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, January 2011). The liberalization of international trade, notably through the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), gave Bangladesh and other poor countries access to European and American markets. Investors shifted production and sourcing to these poor countries in order to hop quota restrictions. Bangladesh became a major site of RMG production for the global market, starting with a 1978 joint venture between South Korean and Bangladeshi firms. However, while FDI played a major role in establishing the RMG industry, Bangladeshi investors quickly expanded their stake. The industry is now dominated by domestically-owned firms with just 83 (under 2 per cent) of an estimated 4,330 firms at the end of 2006 wholly or partially foreign-owned (Mohiuddin, 2008: 6-7).

Integral to these processes was the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs). A September 1976 meeting between then- World Bank President Robert McNamara and General

Rahman provided the momentum for EPZs as a means of attracting investment (Hossain, 2005). EPZs became a state policy designed to attract capital investment, technology and expertise; earn foreign exchange; accelerate industrialization; and generate employment. EPZ firms are centred on export-oriented manufacturing activities with minimal state interference. State support is, however, provided in the form of incentives like bonded warehouses, reduced taxes, liberal quotas, GSP facilities and reduced duty access to key buyer countries. Such incentives are partly intended to develop local entrepreneurs through institutional support, infrastructure facilities, and financial assistance.

The Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) was created in 1980 and was entrusted with the responsibility for establishing and managing EPZs. The first EPZ became operational in 1983 under the BEPZA at Chittagong. A second was set up in Savar near the capital city of Dhaka in 1993. Encouraged by the success of these EPZs, the government set up four more EPZs in industrially backward regions. Two more EPZs were established in the developed regions near Chittagong and Dhaka. Two of these are currently at the implementation stage.

In terms of types of manufacturing, 179 (64.9 per cent) of EPZ units make garments, textiles and related products, and account for 74.8 per cent of investment and 86 per cent of employment. Of the 119 registered garment enterprises in EPZs, fully foreign-owned companies account for 53.8 per cent, followed by local firms at 27.7 per cent, and joint ventures at 18.5 per cent (Murayama and Yokoma, 2009: 76-78). There are more than 6,000 RMG firms in Bangladesh, although over 95 per cent are located outside the EPZs (Gonzales, 2002). Thus, while the EPZs attract a substantial amount of FDI, the RMG industry as a whole is Bangladeshi national dominated.

Bangladesh's RMG industry is well established today as a globally competitive source servicing international markets. It accounts for nearly 80 per cent of the country's total exports, with an annual turnover of USD\$9 billion and employing 3.5 million workers. More than 80 per cent of the workers are women, with these women accounting for about 70 per cent of the total female employment in manufacturing (Bhattacharya and Rahman, 2000: 4). Thus, the RMG is the backbone of the economy in a situation in which, according to the World Bank, "you either export or die" (Custers, 1997: Ch. 6).

The Union Movement in Bangladesh

Unions have a long history in Bangladesh and, along with peasant movements, were a major pressure group in the 1960s. There were major struggles in 1968 and 1969 by peasants, workers and students, including clashes with the (then-Pakistani) authorities. Furthermore, blockades preventing officials and employers from leaving their premises until demands are met, known as gherao tactics, were also used. In these struggles demands for better conditions became intertwined with demands for provincial autonomy and, later, for independence. However, the Left presence in these struggles was weakened when the communist Left split along pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing lines. This weakened Trade Union Kendra and a pro-Beijing split away from what became the CPB. The CPB managed nonetheless to retain close ties to the Awami League which was the main party in the 1971 war of independence.

The union movement was historically weakened by its division into multiple federations, each aligned to a different political party as its labour front. Besides making it difficult to achieve labour unity, this “politicization” of unions also led to a continual co-optation of skilled unionists into the parties and into government, and a consequent distrust of union leaders by union members. Unions are also highly divided at industry and plant level. At present Bangladesh has a three-tier trade union structure: there are 5,242 “basic” unions at the enterprise level, 103 “industrial” federations incorporating 928 basic unions, plus 32 national federations which comprise 6,967 unions with 2,156,307 members (ILO, 2010: 8). The largest federation, the Jatiyabadi Sramik Dal, has 375 affiliated unions (Jahan, 2011). Therefore, while there is quite a high rate of unionization, union unity is very difficult to achieve, as are long-term settlements with employers.

In this situation, union fortunes are often closely tied to the fortunes of the political parties to which they are allied. For example, the Awami League’s labour federation, the Jatiyo Sramik League, was dominant whilst the Awami League ruled in the early 1970s. The subsequent Rahman government established its own labour front, the Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal, which quickly emerged as the chief national federation. A major reason for this pattern is that unions struggle to pursue their objectives through the normal industrial relations, partly because of their divisions, and partly because of a ‘hostile labour relations’ situation. This breeds dependence on political parties,

which in turn continually fosters a plurality of unions due to the plurality of political parties (Monem, 2002: 7-11). While it might be supposed that large federations linked to major political parties can compensate for their weakness by influencing government policies through their party allies, the reality is otherwise. At present, the majority of the country's 300 parliamentarians are themselves owners of garment and other factories.

Further problems were created for unions by the 1970s economic restructuring. State industries were privatized, or closed, peaking in 2002 with the closure of the world's largest jute enterprise - the Adamjee Jute Mill. Lieutenant General Ershad's regime introduced a Global Handshake Scheme (GHS), through which a significant number of state sector employees were pushed into voluntary retirement by incentive packages. According to an estimate by the Ministry of Industries, 54,633 jobs were lost in the jute and textile industries from 1985-1995 (Government of Bangladesh, 1996).

The situation created heightened insecurity among state sector workers, resulting in constant labour trouble. Unions opposed the GHS as the "first phase of [the] complete relinquishing process of the public sector", in the words of Ruhul Amin, Secretary of the Bangladesh Garment Trade Union Center (Author interview, Union office, Dhaka, January 2011). With the imposition of martial law in 1982, trade union rights were frozen, but workers continued to organize and struggle. In 1983 there was the establishment of a new Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress as well as the formation of the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) - a united front of the major union federations to fight for union rights, higher minimum wages, and against retrenchments and privatization. Workers and unions from across the country, including many not affiliated with SKOP, held rallies and organized industrial actions.

The Ershad government responded with a combination of repression, reforms and co-optation. SKOP was termed an illegal organization but eventually forced the regime to an agreement in mid-1984. This included the re-establishment of union rights, reforms in wages and conditions, and measures protecting workers against dismissals. However, many components of the agreement were not, in fact, implemented which led unions and workers to threaten direct action (Monem, 2002: 25-26). Then, in March 1985 the government banned strikes and protests and arrested various SKOP leaders with

a number co-opted into the government.

The political links of the unions also weakened the working class. In 1986, a dispute over parliamentary elections called by Ershad created deep divisions in SKOP, corresponding to the different positions taken by rival parties. Outside of SKOP, some unions in jute and textiles announced a 48-hour countrywide strike demanding government's step-down, supported by the Awami League as well as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The government responded to this call by offering to negotiate bilaterally with the lower levels in the unions, thus by-passing the central leadership. This further divided the unions and led many to withdraw support from the strike call (Monem, 2002: 27-28).

Finally, the various labour factions managed to reunite and secured a meeting with government and private employers in 1987. The government delayed on granting wage demands, leading SKOP to threaten a 24-hour nation-wide strike program. This was averted but in late 1987, SKOP and workers managed a 48-hour strike, supported by jute and textile workers' unions but with mixed results. Meanwhile, under Ershad, many Leftist party and union leaders were co-opted into the government. This generated immense mistrust amongst the workers for their leaders resulting in a gradual weakening of the trade union movement in Bangladesh. All of these factors led to a severe decline in union strength by the end of the 1980s.

Conditions in the RMG Sector

The RMG industry should be differentiated into a number of segments, with somewhat different conditions for workers. There are the "first tier" factories at the formal end of the industry and are found in the EPZs. These have direct links with international buyers, modern equipment, better quality assurance, and a relatively skilled and educated workforce with generally better working conditions. The "second tier" is outside the EPZs but also have a direct, and often long-term, relationship with their buyers, and thus some stability in their orders. The firms in this tier vary in size from large to medium. They also tend to observe minimum labour standards. Similar to first tier factories, this is partly due to their dealings with international buyers. The "third tier" merges imperceptibly into the informal economy and as a result, its size is unknown. This tier comprises small, low-grade factories with no direct relationship to the buyers.

Based in small rented premises with 100 to 200 machines, they rely mainly on subcontracted orders from larger factories that have excess orders or a tight deadline (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004: 144-145).

The garment workers' movement arose in the context of an unstable political regime of restrictive labour policies and of growing union weakness. While Bangladesh's RMG sector is a USD\$12 billion dollar industry, it features the lowest wage scale for this sector in the world. A World Bank survey found that the per hour average wage in the garment industry was USD\$2.44 in Turkey, USD\$2.17 in Mexico, USD\$1.44 – 1.88 in China, USD\$0.51 in India, USD\$0.38 in Vietnam, USD\$0.33 in Cambodia and USD\$0.31 in Bangladesh (Gereffi and Frederick, 2010). Workers routinely lacked letters of appointment or contracts. They were usually recruited directly on a casual "hire-and-fire" basis, and easily retrenched. Their standard working hours were from 9-12 hours daily, although in peak times this extended to 12-16 hours, typically without overtime pay.

While the conditions of the workers are, in key respects, the same in EPZ and non-EPZ firms, the former are under some pressure to adhere to stricter regulations as a result of their direct links to international buyers. Against this, however, it must be stressed that union activity and collective bargaining is heavily restricted in EPZs (ICFTU, 2006: 5-6). From 1989, EPZs were exempted from the three major labour laws: the Factories Act (the basis of all labour and industrial laws); the Industrial Dispute Act (which enables the establishment of industrial tribunals by the state); and the Employment of Labour Act (which governs conditions of service of workers, and workers' rights vis-à-vis employers). Instead, the EPZs operate under two government "instructions" on conditions and wages that are not legally enforceable. In mid-2004 a new EPZ Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act made some provision for workers representation through committees but this too has fallen short of genuine union rights (see below). Furthermore, while firms outside of the EPZs are nominally subject to the core labour laws, in practice, employers generally ignore regulations and evade unions where possible. Penalties that exist for such abuses are rarely enforced, and even when enforced, are usually only nominal. Moreover, while the state set a minimum wage of USD\$24 a month (950 taka) plus benefits in the state sector, with wages in the private RMG sector at 930 taka per month for unskilled workers and 2300 taka for skilled workers, these wage levels were rarely implemented

in the garment sector (see also ILO, 2000).

The RMG sector is highly feminized and marked by substantial gender inequalities and discrimination; it is a sector that has built upon the bedrock of inexpensive female labour. This feminization has increased over time: 25 per cent of female workers entering the labour market in the early 1990's were working in garment manufacturing. By 1995 this rose to 39 per cent and by 2000 to 60 per cent. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the urban female labour force grew by 33 per cent annually, compared to an annual growth of 9 per cent for males (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004: 147-48). Bhattacharya (1998) found that the female workers were mainly production workers, and greatly under-represented in better paying, more secure and more empowered technical and salaried employment.

A core reason for the preponderance of women in production is that RMG is a labour intensive industry reliant on cheap and compliant workers. CPB General-Secretary Montu Ghosh notes that most women who joined the industry were young, unmarried, migrant or divorced women from landless families in rural areas, who sought jobs either to assist their families or to achieve economic independence (Author interview, Communist Party of Bangladesh office, Dhaka, February 2011). Capitalist development has shaken traditional, conservative, Islamic gender relations, as women have been able to venture outside the domestic sphere and earn an independent living, however modest. But at the same time, RMG factories also use traditional gender relations to control female labour; it is secluded from public view, strictly monitored and controlled, and segregated from men.

Owners know that these women have few labour market options, since working in the RMG sector is considered far safer and more respectable than work in construction, or as domestic labour. Yet, despite the predominance of women in the RMG sector, there are almost no crèche facilities, nor facilities for breast-feeding mothers. Women are fired for delaying production due to ill-health. They face harassment by the owners which includes verbal, physical and sexual abuse and the use of swear words are also very common. Workplace safety is limited, with no fire exits and malfunctioning machines in many plants. Most accidents go unreported or the victim is given little compensation besides basic First Aid. Child labour is also widely utilized in the form of "helpers" in production

where children work long hours for around 100-200 taka monthly (employer penalties for child labour violations are nominal at 228 to 570 taka in recent years).

Revolts against Injustice: the RMG Workers' Movement

These conditions formed the basis of unrest within the factories and on the streets. Workers in the RMG industry are today organised in four main unions: the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF), the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Federation (BGWF), the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Employees' Federation (BGWEF) and the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union (BIGUF); there are also around ten unregistered garment workers' federations (Bhattacharya, 1998: 53). There are also two employer associations, namely the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA).

Low wages and appalling working conditions were the main reasons for an unprecedented number of struggles in the RMG sector in the 1990s. Frustration with the unions and distrust of union leaders meant that there was a substantial amount of spontaneous labour organizing. According to Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), this initial stage of worker organizing was spontaneous, with no assistance from major groups (Author interview, BILS office, Dhaka, February 2011). He further notes that there was “nascent...organising” by a minor political party, the Janmukti Party (the Peoples Freedom Party), which was “organising individual garment workers”, and roles were also played by other small parties like the “Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal” (the National Socialist Party) which “organised slum dwellers working in garment factories” (Author interview, BILS office, Dhaka, February 2011).

A key event was a horrific fire at the Saraka factory located on the outskirts of Dhaka on December 27, 1990. At least 25 women and children were killed, and many others were injured. This triggered spontaneous protests by the factory's workers, who demanded proper compensation for the victims, and who were joined by workers from other factories, and by political activists (Custer, 1997: Ch 6).

The fall of the Ershad regime in 1990 was followed by a “caretaker” government and, in 1991, by moves to return to parliamentary governance; elections were declared and the ban on unions lifted. Again, the major groups played little role in the workplace struggles. In order not to destabilize the situation, the main Left forces organized no campaigns that could undermine the caretaker government. This absence was reinforced by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union which shook the pro-Soviet CPB.

However, struggles were renewed as workers pushed from below for revised minimum wages from 1993 to 1994. A strike call in 1994 led to a tripartite committee being formed. Headed by the Labour Minister, it included three representatives each from workers, employers and the state. The functions of the committee were to review the demands of garments workers and to monitor violation of labour laws.

While the collapse of the Soviet Union weakened the Left, other developments abroad had a more positive impact on workers’ struggles in Bangladesh. In 1991, the United States granted Bangladesh duty-free access to its markets via a GSP. However, under pressure from the American Federation of Labour - Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the United States demanded unions be allowed to operate in EPZs (Murayama and Yokota, 2009: 77-78). Then, 1993 Harkins Bill in the United States Congress sought to ban imports made by child labour, which also placed pressure on Bangladeshi RMG firms. Meanwhile, international civil society and foreign unions began to bring pressure to bear against child labour in low-wage countries and EPZs.

These international campaigns inspired garment workers’ unions like the NGWF to adopt new methods for organizing labour. They organized public campaigns and publicity around the workers’ demands while also building strikes in the factories. According to Amiral Haque Ruhul Amin, General Secretary, NGWF, in November 1995, the rising RMG workers’ movement launched a sustained campaign under the slogan “No more labour slavery: total leave on Friday is a must” (Author interview, NGWF secretariat, Dhaka, January 2011)

Owners now took a very hard line. Employer associations, unlike the unions, were allowed to function freely to the chagrin of workers. Further, Amin notes that, more than 500 workers were fired for involvement in union activities; others were dismissed without

any reason cited Ten factories were closed down, with the workers not paid outstanding wages and overtime. Another 100 factories withheld wages or overtime payments owed for up to four months (Author interview, NGWF secretariat, Dhaka, January 2011).

Despite this employer offensive, workers faced ongoing inflation in food prices, rents, and the price of other essentials, leading to further unrest. Minimum wage regulations in Bangladesh stipulated that wages had to be adjusted every three years, but these were not implemented. Eventually, worker unrest led to the 1997 formation of a bipartite committee, consisting of representatives from the Grand Alliances of Workers (which brought together seven trade unions) and the employers' BGMEA. This was formed to resolve wages at the factory level as well as to deal other issues between unions and industry managements (Faruque, 2009: 22-23). The government also adjusted the minimum wage to 1550 taka per month (around USD\$34 at the time) for unskilled workers; the other grades were also adjusted.

However, the private sector, including garment factory owners, did not recognize this adjustment, leading to severe agitation (Rahman, 2006). Meanwhile, 15,000 workers from the Savar EPZ went on strike that year, demanding full union rights in the EPZs, as well as job security. In May 2000, there were further protests in this EPZ as garment workers and their supporters peacefully protested a sudden wage cut. The management of the Ring Shine factory called in the police who attacked the 1,500 strong gathering: two people were shot dead and 200 injured. Outraged workers then ransacked the factory.

In 2000 the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments confirmed that there were 24 types of violations of labour laws in the garment industry. It recommended 24 changes in November 2000, aimed at maintaining a congenial working environment and at preventing labour unrest (Hasan, 2006). This was rejected by owners. In July 2001, the government raised minimum wages in the private sector again but the employers rejected the proposal. They took the matter to the High Court and the High Court declared the government order illegal on technical grounds (Hasan, 2006).

Further pressures for reform came from abroad at this time. In 2001, Bangladesh was granted a three-year extension of the GSP on the understanding that it would allow unions to operate in

EPZs from 2004. This agreement was strongly opposed by major foreign investors, notably Japanese and South Korean firms. The Bangladesh state therefore failed to implement these commitments, leading the AFL-CIO to call upon the United States trade secretariat to withdraw the GSP benefits.

Caught between pressure from below and pressure from abroad, the Bangladesh government finally reformed EPZ labour law, with the July 2004 EPZ Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act. This had two measures. First, workers would be allowed to form Workers Representation and Welfare Committees (WRWC) with elected representatives, which would interact with management. Second, the WRWCs would cease to exist once union-like Workers' Associations were formed. The main difference between the WRWCs and Workers' Associations was that the latter could negotiate with management on wages, hours of work, and other terms and conditions of employment (FIDH, 2008: 5-9). However, many WRWCs reportedly acted as "spies" for the government and the owners (Author interview with Ratan Razekuzzaman, Socialist Party of Bangladesh, Dhaka, January 2011). While workers' representatives to these structures were formally elected, the choice of representatives was often pre-determined by the owners.

In 2005, unions, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the women's wing of the British Council pressured the government to raise minimum wages, forming a coalition to push for this demand. A series of serious accidents at this time also galvanized the workers into militant actions: a fire at Shaan Knitting and Processing in Narayanganj on 6 January 2005 claimed 23 lives; on 11 April 2005, a nine-story garment factory at Savar collapsed with more than 100 workers killed and another 100 workers missing; in 2006, fires broke out at the KTS factory and the Spectrum factory in Chittagong, and at Saiem Fashions and elsewhere.

These incidents led to massive workers' demonstrations. Human rights organizations joined the call for an end to the miserable working conditions of garment workers (Muhammad, 2011: 24-25). The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies became a forum for workers' organizations and unions to put forth demands. A series of workshops were held with unions to develop a common platform irrespective of political affiliations. A ten-point platform was finally formulated in 2006. Its demands included that workers should not be charged or arrested for protests and strikes; that piece-rate

workers would be informed about the piece rates and their salaries adjusted accordingly; that workers must have Fridays off; that medical facilities must be provided; and that the minimum wage for unskilled workers would be raised to 3,000 taka (around USD\$45 at the time) and the wages of other grades also being adjusted. The wage demand was arguably the most important demand in the eyes of those who adhered to this platform.

But just before the ten demands were announced, there was unrest at the FS Sweater factory, where workers were protesting against the arrest of three workers. Then, May 2006 saw an explosion of strikes and demonstrations in and around Dhaka, in which a large number of RMG factories and vehicles were damaged. Incidents of violence occurred in areas like Uttara, Mirpur, Mohakhali, and Tejgaon; the capital appeared to be in the middle of a siege. A total of 300 factories were attacked; scores were set on fire along with factory vehicles and private cars, which were also destroyed. Workers demanded an end to repression, the release of all arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay, public holidays, payment of wages due, and assurance of safety provisions. Women formed the backbone of this movement.

Faced with this revolt, the government ruled that minimum wages for the unskilled should be set at 3,000 taka. However, garment factory owners not only refused to increase wages but also held existing wages back. This led to another fierce conflict between owners and workers. In early June 2006, 4,000 factories went on a wildcat strike, 16 were burnt down and hundreds of smaller ones ransacked. In this near-revolutionary revolt, the garment workers were joined by other sectors like textiles and cement (Author interview with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, BILS, Dhaka, February 2011).

This severe unrest led to signing of a Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between employers, workers and the government's Labour and Employment Ministries in June 2006. The ten agreements in the deal seemingly included massive gains for workers: an immediate end to unrest in return for the withdrawal of cases filed against workers in Gazipur, Ashulia and Savar; the release of arrested workers; no retrenchments; the immediate reopening of closed factories; the issue of appointment letters and identity/ factory cards to all workers; reasonable unionism and collective bargaining; one day off a week for workers plus application of other holidays

mentioned in the existing labour law; overtime pay as per labour law; maternity leave with pay as per labour law; and formation of a Wage Board to fix wages. Meanwhile, the 1965 Factory Act was scrapped and was replaced by a revised Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006.

The victories, however, proved short-lived. In October 2006, the Wage Board set the minimum wage for unskilled workers at 1,662.50 taka per month (around USD\$24 at the time). This was far from the 3,000 taka demanded. Then in 2007 a state of emergency was declared with all forms of worker organizing banned. EPZ workers responded by working through the Workers' Associations, organizing 69 industrial units in the Dhaka and Chittagong EPZs by March 2008. The state then quickly approved the EPZ Workers Association and Industry Relations (Amendment) Bill 2009, which changed these Associations into "Workers Welfare Societies" (bdnews24.com, 2009).

Huge protests revived later in 2008. At the end of December, a linking operator employed by SQ Sweaters Ltd died at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Although ill, she had been denied exit from the factory and had worked until she died at her station. Workers demanded immediate compliance with basic safety regulations as well as a trial. Instead, they were met with a lockout and mass dismissals. This sparked further protests with workers demanding safety compliance, an end to mandatory night work, eight hour shifts, the payment of overtime and bonus monies, and the withdrawal of cases against workers. Then, in 2009, six workers were killed during demonstrations over unpaid wages.

In June 2010 there was an uprising by tens of thousands of workers in the Ashulia industrial area. This began with a demonstration by 7,000 workers at Nassa factory demanding a 5,000 taka (around USD\$70 at the time) minimum wage for unskilled workers. A three hour street battle ensued with workers burning tires and scraps of wood to create blockades, while police fired rubber bullets, tear gas shells and water cannons. The following day, police filed charges against 3,000 workers. The unrest quickly spread to other areas and factories. With the exception of the garment factory owners, almost all sections of society supported the garment workers' demands. Yet repression escalated; Montu Ghosh, a prominent labour activist from the CPB and Supreme Court Lawyer, Moshrefa Mishu, President of Garment Workers' Unity Forum, and other labour leaders, were

arrested. Fabricated charges were levied against these leaders, such as being directly engaged in vandalism, stirring workers to engage in violent acts, and working with the banned Islamist party, the Jammata-E-Islami. As Ghosh said:

“It is surprising to see how the state perversely involves itself in torture of leaders who raise their voices against existent state policy. On 22nd July, I was taken into custody and tortured by the police for two and half months, with no apparent reason, barring the fact that I was considered to be the one who provoked the labourers to start the resistance and finally labelled to be the sole responsible person to be held accountable for all the problems of law and order, occurring as a resultant of the campaign” (Author interview, Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 15th, 2011).

Table 1: The Minimum Wages for the Garment Sector,²

Grades	Monthly Basic Wage	House Rent (40% of basic)	Medical Allowance	Gross Monthly Wage
I	6500	2600	200	9300
II	5000	2000	200	7200
III	2870	1148	200	4281
IV	2615	1046	200	3861
V	2395	958	200	3553
VI	2230	892	200	3322
VII	2000	800	200	3000
Trainees				2500

Finally, in July 2010, because of growing pressure for change, the owners and government agreed on a new wage structure for the garment industry: for unskilled workers the minimum wage was to be 2,000 taka, plus 800 taka for rent, plus 200 taka as a medical allowance. This fell short of the 5,000 taka demanded and the workers were most unsatisfied. Wages in the upper grades were not adjusted proportionately and the Wage Board failed to mention the minimum wages for the sweater, knitwear, and piece-rate workers. Moreover, it announced that the new structure would be only become effective from November 1, which was unusual as

wage changes were usually rolled out earlier (For more details, see Table 1). Rather than pacify the workers, the new wage rates led to a mass uprising in which 30 factories were ransacked.

On the 31 October 2010 a special industrial police force was formed to maintain law and order within industry, suppressing struggles to maintain an investor–friendly climate; in effect, this was a new weapon in the hands of the owners (Staff Correspondent, The Daily Star, 2010). The police arrested and detained many labour leaders including Moshrefa Mishu, Tuhin Chowdhury and Bahrane Sultan, and they were held and tortured for days. However, the cases filed against them could not stand and they were finally released on bail.

Similar Demands, Conflicting Interests in the Working Class

The working class movement in Bangladesh and the RMG workers movement in particular, displayed a number of striking characteristics. While international political upheavals weakened the working class movement by way of creating an ideological crisis, international pressure for labour reforms in Bangladesh also assisted the movement. Divisions between unions, and a mistrust of union leaders, fostered a sporadic and spontaneous pattern of worker mobilization and organization.

Struggles were centred on basic wage and working condition demands and were largely led by reformist forces in the working class movement. The movement does not question the basic class relations between the worker and the owner but demands reforms within the existing structure. Yet protests for these demands often have a highly militant character, seen in acts of vandalism, gheraos, strikes, demonstrations and the rapid generalization of incidents at particular factories into widespread uprisings. The state and employers were consistently repressive with arrests, dismissals and fabricated charges designed to crush worker mobilization.

The working class of Bangladesh is both archaic and modern. It is archaic in that its dismal working conditions match those observed by Frederick Engels in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, yet modern in that it is integrated into today's global economy as an integral part of the production of export-quality finished goods for international markets (Marriot, 2010). Nor is the working class of Bangladesh homogenous. It is striking that skill training is not raised as a demand given that wages are tightly linked to grades which

are tied to skills. As the RMG movement emerged, multi-layered conflicts have also emerged not just between the owners of larger enterprises and the petty owners, but also between skilled workers and non-skilled workers, between workers on time rates and those on piece rates, and between men and women workers.

A major problem has been that unskilled workers' wages have grown far more rapidly than those of the more skilled; wage increases were not proportional across grades and skilled workers made relatively limited gains. This was a highly contentious issue, which caused conflict among the workers, fragmenting and weakening their movement. Women workers, who suffer appalling conditions, and are readily replaceable, are also often not unionized. Perhaps two thirds play no role in union activities, although each union federation has a women's division (ILO, 2010). There are also few women leaders in the unions and unions lack the finances to hire more women officials. However, women's groups like Nari Uddyog Kendra, Karamjibi Nari, and Women for Alternative Policy Development and women unionists have started to address this issue.

Workers are also divided by the tiers in the RMG sector. For example, petty owners (often in the third tier) insist that they are unable to afford a more worker-friendly labour regime, or finance more welfare for workers (Author interview with anonymous owner, Hotel, Dhaka, January 2011). In their view, only the bigger factories in the upper tiers can afford such measures. Since many petty owners have diversified holdings (the same respondent claimed that 80 per cent of his total income came from outside his RMG factory), they are often willing and able to shutdown their factories if workers' demands become too costly. Such owners are also confident of state support for their actions as the state will act to ensure the survival of an industry that forms the backbone of the economy. Faced with such choices, workers are often divided by the RMG tier system.

Conclusion

The dramatic changes that have taken place in Bangladesh over the past three decades have helped generate a range of new movements, among them the RMG workers' movement, the environmentalist movement and the human rights sector. Such movements are a response to the negative effects of capitalist

development, as well as to state repression, and have increasingly co-operated to change society.

Yet there are a great many challenges to overcome. While Bangladesh has ratified the International Labour Organization's codes on forced labour, freedom of association and the right to organize and bargain collectively, the removal of discrimination and the elimination of worst forms of child labour, the reality is very different. The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 was passed without full consultation with labour, and violates many ILO conventions (cf. ILO 2001). Strikes are heavily restricted; employers can retrench workers without cause; only employees at a given plant may engage in union activity at that plant; and government authorities may appeal against court verdicts in labour-related cases. Nor does the Act apply the principle of equal wages for equal work, or prohibit gender discrimination in employment as provided by ILO conventions. Recent proposals to revise the Labour Act in line with ILO conventions (Dunn and Mondal, 2011: 5) have been met with scepticism.

Workers face a range of other problems. Employers still routinely fail to provide workers with contracts and employment letters, although this is required by law. Contracts are prepared in the absence of the workers and the copies are retained by owners and buyers. No identity/factory cards are provided, further informalizing relations, and no pay slips are provided. Most workers are dismissed without the mandatory notice period of 120 days for permanent employees and 60 days for contract workers. The eight-hour day and overtime pay rules are largely ignored. Workers are entitled to days off but are usually penalized for taking these days. Maternity leave is now possible but is not paid as mandated. Child labour remains commonly used. New entrants to jobs are often kept on low-wage "trainee" status for excessive periods. Women receive lower wages than men for the same work and men dominate higher paying jobs like quality control and floor supervision.

Health and safety conditions also remain poor in the RMG sector. Inadequate toilets are provided vis-à-vis the number of workers. Safe drinking water is often not available. Workers suffer numerous injuries, poor ventilation, bad lighting, high temperatures and high humidity. As numerous accidents have shown, fire exits are often not provided, or, where provided, are locked. Few RMG firms have provident funds and other insurance facilities. State monitoring

and inspection of workplaces hardly takes place and in the rare case it does, discussions are carried out mostly with employers.

Union activity remains subject to high levels of repression. It is heavily restricted by law in the EPZs and workers outside the EPZs fear joining unions. Outside the EPZs, unions are now entitled to send representatives to Collective Bargaining Authority (CBA) committees, but struggle to use such structures effectively due to their fragmentation. Instead, informal mediators are often used to bargain with employers. The right to strike is widely unrecognized in practice. A legal strike is only possible after securing (through secret ballot) the support of three-four of the members of a CBA-affiliated union. This time consuming process provides employers ample time to intimidate workers and to undermine bargaining. Despite the existence of various tripartite institutions at the national level – namely the Labour Court, the Tripartite Consultative Council, the Wage Board, the Tripartite Productivity Committee and the National Council for Skill Development and Training –social dialogue is extremely difficult to carry out.

The garment workers of today are more assertive and militant than their parents, owing to greater class consciousness and the development of a culture of solidarity. However, the need of the hour is for unions to take account of this power and to develop an organizational culture that can strengthen trade union movement in Bangladesh. The unions are divided in terms of their capacity, leadership and ideology, and lack a real common platform. It is not only the state that weakens the unions, but vested interests in the political parties that run unions as party labour fronts and vested interests in the union leaderships themselves.

New approaches influenced by NGOs and international civil society and labour, stressing publicity and advocacy, show great promise. However, at the same time, grants by funders also force union agendas to align to donor profile, reproducing the symptom of dependence that the party system had developed. It is essential to the Bangladesh union movement that it tackles these problems, developing a strong, unified and independent labour movement. Such a movement should also address the deeper issues accounting for the problems of the workers, which lie in the logic of capitalism itself.

Endnote

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