



## Bangladesh: Escalation in Campaign to Silence Garment Workers

### Silencing Garment Workers

#### April 2012

Murder of organizer Aminul Islam; case still unsolved

#### November 2012

110+ workers killed in Tazreen Fashions fire

#### April 2013

1,100+ killed, 2,500+ injured in Rana Plaza collapse

#### July 2013

Bangladesh amends Labour Act, adding requirements for unions

#### February 2014

Four organizers attacked and beaten

#### April 2014 onward

Solidarity Center federation allies discuss possible corruption, negligence of JDL

#### May 2014

24+ union leaders beaten, flee homes

#### May 2014

Federation president kidnapped and beaten in broad daylight, his home and federation office ransacked

Although widespread protests over low wages and unsafe working conditions at Bangladesh garment factories are not unusual, the response by the government of Bangladesh (GoB) to demonstrations in December is extremely troublesome and represents a significant escalation of the government efforts to close space for civil society and destroy the ability of workers to form unions to improve their lives.

On December 11, workers not represented by a union walked off the job for higher wages at a garment factory in Ashulia, an industrial suburb of Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka. The Ashulia factory was the same one where, in October, a young woman died on the factory floor after repeatedly being denied sick leave by her supervisor. The walk-out quickly gained momentum in other units, and factory owners responded by suspending operations in 59 factories to quell the protest. Hundreds of police deployed to the area. On December 20, the GoB and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) ordered owners to reopen and resume operations. Upon their return to work, more than 1,600 workers were fired due to alleged involvement in the walkout. Labor leaders and activists demanded reinstatement of all workers but received no response.

The Solidarity Center believes that what happened next is an escalation of a campaign by both the GoB and BGMEA to suppress and, ultimately, eliminate worker voices in the garment industry through the **criminalization of labor organizing**. For example, following the walk-out, management from five factories filed complaints against hundreds of unnamed workers. Police arrested and imprisoned more than 15 union leaders and detained an unknown number of rank-and-file workers and activists, many of whom were not involved in the Ashulia protest. The Solidarity Center is concerned that the Ashulia protests provided an opportunity to target activists. Additionally, many were charged under the Special Powers Act of 1974, which provides police with sweeping authority to detain individuals. The government has wielded the act to suppress political opposition and peaceful demonstrations, as well as to retaliate against individuals who cross people in positions of authority.

To stop the suppression of worker voices, the Solidarity Center joins others in calling on the GoB and BGMEA to:

1. **Stop intimidating, harassing, terminating and arresting workers**
2. **Respect workers' legal right to unionize and bargain with employers**
3. **Negotiate with real unions**
4. **Raise the garment sector minimum wage**

### **September 2014**

A union leader and her husband brutally beaten

### **May–November 2015**

A major garment group closes several unionized factories, keeps open its non-unionized

### **November 2014**

Union leaders attacked and beaten

### **February 2015**

Factory managers beat pro-union workers in presence of Accord representatives

### **April 2015**

Managers at a factory organize anti-union workers to beat union workers

### **October 2015**

Union leaders and workers hold a rally, sit-in and press conference on JDL corruption

### **April 2016**

ILO High-Level Tripartite Mission to Bangladesh notes “numerous allegations of anti-union discrimination and harassment of workers, including harassment by the industrial police and local musclemen, dismissals, blacklisting, transfers, arrests, detention, threats, and false criminal charges....”

### **December 2016**

15+ union organizers and activists arrested, two beaten, some under Special Powers Act

## **Stop intimidating, harassing, terminating and arresting workers**

The government’s response to the workers’ walk-out in Ashulia is the most recent attempt by the GoB and BGMEA to silence workers and end organizing in the garment sector. Since 2012, the Solidarity Center has recorded hundreds of cases of unfair labor practices, including physical attacks on union leaders, organizers and pro-union workers (and/or their families); kidnappings; threats of death and/or rape; false criminal charges; mass termination; stolen personal property; coercion; harassment; forced signing of “white papers,” in which workers increase production targets; and withholding access to factory facilities and property (e.g., toilet, elevator). Several examples are found at left.

## **Respect workers’ legal right to unionize and bargain with employers**

Since the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013, garment workers have organized and registered nearly 400 unions. However, the Joint Directorate of Labour (JDL), is rejecting more and more union registrations, discouraging new applications.

In Ashulia, employers are well-known for resisting workers’ efforts to form unions. Only about 20 unions exist, and many are inactive. Spurred by harsh economic realities and no seat at the bargaining table, garment workers in the area resort to the streets to voice demands.

## **Negotiate with genuine unions**

The GoB and BGMEA must recognize the pressing need for unions. In the last three years, approximately 10 trade union federations have helped workers form unions that are genuinely representative and can collectively bargain with their employers. Despite their organizational inexperience and limited financial resources, they have worked to train and mentor their leaders and members. These are the union federations that the GoB and BGMEA must engage with in a genuine process of industrial relations. In contrast, many of the 20 Ashulia unions are management-created and have little interest in workers’ needs.

## **Raise the garment sector minimum wage**

In 2013, Bangladesh raised the minimum wage for garment workers to \$68 a month, the lowest among garment workers in the region. For example, in China it is \$265/month; Indonesia, \$220; Vietnam, \$131; India, \$128; and Cambodia, \$100. Dhaka is the 71st costliest city in the world, in line with Montreal, Canada.

Ashulia’s mass walk-out was grounded in the demand for a living wage of \$191/month. The rising cost of living and inflation has made it nearly impossible for workers to pay for rent and other essentials. Garment workers spend an average of \$64/month on rent and food. Landlords in the area admit to telling tenants that they will raise rent in January 2017 in response to tariffs enforced by the government.

Because the GoB does not engage union federations, the unions have not been able to convey these realities.