

Three dead in garment workers' clashes - unions promised new role



The latest clashes in the highly charged arena of the Bangladeshi garment industry...

Tongi, an industrial city located 15 miles (24 km) north of Dhaka; early last Saturday morning (31st Oct) several hundred workers turned up at the gates of the Nippon Garment Factory at Ershad Nagar - expecting to work and to receive wage arrears owed them. Instead they found police blocking the entrance - and posted on the gates a note informing them that the factory was shut from October 31 to November 29 because of "global recession and some unwanted incidents". The notice also asked workers to collect their overdue wages from the factory office on November 10 - though the arrears were 3 months late and workers had been promised payment would be made that day.

Infuriated, the mainly female workers then tried to force their way into the factory - leading to scuffles and, eventually, baton charges by police. (Expecting trouble, the factory bosses had requested police be stationed inside the premises on Friday night.)

As more workers and locals from the surrounding slum areas joined the protest the crowd grew to several thousand and moved to block the main Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway. The road remained blocked for the next 5 hours as the area became a battleground. A bus was set alight, several other vehicles burned and as the fighting intensified hundreds of police and para-military law enforcement personnel poured into the area. Police began firing gunshots and teargas shells while workers responded with bricks and barricades.

"The law-enforcers had to fire rubber bullets from shotguns to disperse the workers who hurled stones and bricks at our officers," Inspector Shafiqul Alam said. Three people were shot dead by cops, with 100 others injured, several with bullet wounds. Included in the casualties were 16 policemen (one in a critical condition). News footage shows police shooting indiscriminately into buildings. Workers and locals reported that police ransacked homes and small shops in the area. By 11.30am an increased security presence reduced the disturbances - but periodic clashes continued into the afternoon as news of

the deaths spread alongside claims by workers of seeing police hiding and removing other corpses.

Nine of the injured were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, clinic official Abdul Baten told AFP.

"All of the injured have wounds caused by live ammunition and some are in serious condition," he said.

Police insisted, however, they used only rubber bullets to quell the unrest. (*World News Australia* - 1 Nov 09)

Despite the deaths at police hands it has been reported that "...the police had lodged cases not only against thousands of people, including workers and some residents of the adjacent areas, but also against those who have died in police firing..." (New Age - Nov 3 09) So perhaps the dead will be prosecuted along with the living.

A police chief said on the day; "The situation was totally unexpected. If the owner of the garment factory had a discussion with the workers before closing it, this incident might have been avoided." But the next day he oddly claimed that many protesters wore lungi (a skirt-like garment more suitable than trousers in warmer climates) so they must be outside agitators, even though the lungi is a commonly worn garment for Bangladeshi men (but news footage anyway contradicts his claim). He added "I've never heard of garment workers using [Molotov] cocktails and firearms in clashes. It seems to me that outsiders instigated it." (*ATN News, Bangladesh*). If Molotovs and firearms really were used by workers it might indeed be a sign of a sharp escalation/upping the stakes of their struggles. But the police chief is the only source to claim this and no cops were shot, so this dubious claim is probably an attempt to justify the police shootings. The claim that "The situation was totally unexpected" is also false - cops were already deployed in and around the factory on the previous evening.

Similarly, the claims of unrest being organised by "outsiders" are routine statements always wheeled out on such occasions - both to try and downplay the self-organising abilities of workers and to justify greater resources and repressive powers for the cops to hunt down the supposed conspirators. Despite being referenced and blamed for decades, none

of these outside agitators have ever been caught or proved to exist. Such claims are also often thinly veiled nationalistic references playing on fears of big brother neighbour India, or refer to native Islamic fundamentalists desiring to destabilise a state too secular for their liking, or to the main opposition BNP party. Some political rivals of the ruling party may indeed be happy to see the disturbances embarrass their opponents, but they certainly don't control them.

That the police knew well enough that trouble was brewing is further illustrated by a leaked intelligence report; an intelligence agency alerted the government a week previously; The Special Branch of police in its report submitted to the home ministry put forward a four-point recommendation to avert the unrest.

The recommendations were facilitating reopening of the factories and reinstating the sacked workers. Moreover, ensuring payment of salaries and wages of the workers from BGMEA funds and deploying adequate police force as well as increasing intelligence vigilance were also recommended.

The report stated that fear of unrest was looming at the entire RMG sector due to "tyranny" and "non-cooperation" by some factory owners. It added owners of three factories did not become sympathetic to their workers even after the latter staged demonstrations and formed human chains to press home their demands.

As their salary and wages were not paid, these workers were passing a miserable life without paying their house rents and dues at grocery shops, said the report. It added already different labour unions were keeping close contacts with those workers.

The intelligence agency also mentioned that more than 2,000 workers of three factories who were sacked by the authorities have been demanding their salary, wages and arrears for the last few weeks.

These three RMG factories have shut their offices without paying wages, salaries and arrears of the workers, said the report.

It was suspected that the sacked and unemployed workers along with their colleagues at different factories at the instigation of some labour leaders might launch a massive demonstration any time, the report gave the alert. (*Daily Star* - 1 Nov 09).

Futures

Fazlul Haque, head of the 1,300-member Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said the global slowdown had forced many factories in the country to lay off workers or shut down.

"Western retailers who are our top buyers have cut orders and squeezed prices. The big factories have somehow coped, but most of the small- and medium-sized factories are facing very tough times," he said.

In the first two months of the financial year to August 2010, overseas shipments fell by three percent.

Unions said factories have cut wages to compete for orders with other apparel-producers, such as Vietnam, China and India. (*World News Australia* - 1 Nov 09) This is only the latest in a series of violent clashes in the garment sector. It was a decline in orders that prompted the

Nippon Garment bosses in this case to refuse payment to workers; as the recession and intensified market competition has hit employers they have been even more reluctant than usual to pay workers on time. This leaves workers and their dependents in dire straits, unable to pay rent or pay off debts at local grocery shops who advance credit to workers. For garment workers - many of whom are permanently malnourished - a missed wage packet is often a short step away from real hunger.

Garment industries thrive in poorer countries due largely to low labour costs and low start-up costs. But now those larger firms who are weathering the financial crisis better and with sufficient capital reserves have begun switching to more automated production systems, using computer technology to increase efficiency in cutting, knitting, dyeing and finishing;

Viyellatex Group is the country's first garments factory that has implemented the expensive Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solution from SAP Germany, said Group Chairman KM Rezaul Hasanat.

Some multinationals and other local business houses now adopt the ERP solution, but in the garments sector Viyellatex Group is using it, Hasanat pointed out.

"Viyellatex Group is one of the leading factories worldwide which is using ERP from SAP. The group implemented the ERP in its Gazipur based factory in December last year at a cost of \$2million," Hasanat added.

"I save time and wastage in my factory in almost all the sections. I can know the on-time production by one click alone," the Viyellatex boss said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Shahadat Hossain Kiron, managing director of Dekko Group, one of the leading apparel makers, said he plans to install the SAP software to bring efficiency at all levels. He said currently almost all modern factories are setting aside their traditional methods and adopting automated systems. "Efficiency in cutting, knitting, dyeing and finishing has been attained because of the application of these technologies," Kiron said. (*Daily Star* - May 7 2009)

These innovations are necessary to maintain competition with Asian RMG competitors such as Vietnam, Cambodia, China and India. But in the present climate this trend may be another factor increasing unemployment levels. (A recent report optimistically sees the growth of a domestic Asian consumer market as a way out of recession for Asian garment producers, based largely on the increasing consumption of the new middle classes that have emerged as a result of industrial development in Asia. But this market is, for the foreseeable future, not even close to being able to compensate for or replace the global export markets.[1])

Enter the unions?

"The government will not tolerate anarchism in garment sector as this is the main source of foreign currency." - Prime Minister Hasina. (*Daily Star* - Nov 3 09)

The Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector employs around 3 million workers directly - at least 80% female - and 2 million in its subsidiary industries (transport, supplies etc.). Some 7 million people are dependent on the earnings of