

Mass working class revolt has been raging in Bangladesh for several months: garment workers fighting for improved wages and conditions... Farmers fighting destruction of their livelihoods by open cast mining... Mass insurrection against power cuts... This pamphlet attempts to cut through the dominant media chatter of 'clash of civilizations/cultures' and 'religious resurgence/fundamentalism' and to show instead the real substance of social conflict, where the exploited begin to actively control their struggles rather than just being pawns manipulated by various political or religious factions.

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# Strike, Riot and Fire Among the Garment Workers



a working class revolt  
in Bangladesh

## Bangladeshi Tremors...

### AMONG THE GARMENT WORKERS

The class struggle in Bangladesh is now affecting British capitalism directly. Asia Energy, a UK company, has invested millions in an opencast mining project in Phulbari in the north-west that would make up to 100,000 homeless and destroy the local environment. In August 2006 the company was forced by massive violent opposition to abandon its plans (for the moment, at least). 30,000 people took over the town and ransacked the company offices. Globalisation means moving production from countries where structures of resistance have developed in the workplace to poorer countries where the poor are quickly driven by necessity into the factories. Lower wages, higher profits. But with this export of production new forms of struggle emerge.

The present pamphlet attempts to cut through the dominant media chatter of 'clash of civilizations/cultures' and 'religious resurgence/fundamentalism' and to show instead the real substance of social conflict, where the exploited begin to actively control their struggles rather than just being pawns manipulated by various political or religious factions. The Bengali workers, attempting to live on some of the lowest wages in the world, have begun to challenge their exploiters in the garment and mining industries. Significantly, these workplace acts of rebellion are unifying with neighbourhood revolts. Just as importantly, it seems that trade union bureaucrats are having a hard time taming the spontaneous anger of the self-organising working class. And Muslim fundamentalists are dismayed to see this militancy in a workforce that is 90% female. Predictably, the government's response to escalating strikes, demonstrations and riots has been more severe repression when possible - or, otherwise, attempted political manipulation.

Living, as we do, in the global marketplace, we can see the ever-closer relationships between diverse struggles across the world. The lousy living wages we get from our exploiters here we pay to buy clothes made in places like Bangladesh, by people who often earn less than a living wage. One in three T-shirts sold in Europe are made by Bangladeshi workers, for example. The bosses may have different names on the labels, but

everywhere they treat us like objects to squeeze the profits from our labour and our consumption.

We are not in a position to either predict the outcome of this wave of struggle in Bangladesh nor to judge its long term effect on neighbouring countries such as Nepal and India. We distribute this pamphlet in the hope of publicising an interesting example of struggle which is being deliberately ignored by the media. We are also aware of the family connections between Bangladeshi proletarians and their British-born relatives. We hope those with closer channels of communication will correct any shortcomings in the present work. We can all learn from recent events in Bangladesh. We need to open up a serious dialogue with those elements fighting autonomously within Bangladesh. They will be learning that those trade union leaders and politicians who claim to step in, represent and lead independent struggles - by taking initiative away from those organising themselves - are obstacles to be overcome. This is something it is just as necessary to challenge here in the UK. We would do well to consider ways in which we could aid their efforts against capitalism - in our own lives as much as theirs. And, hopefully, to also learn from, be influenced by and encouraged by them.

It is sometimes hard to measure from this distance the exact meaning of strikes and other events in Bangladesh; some strikes are called by opposition parties simply as a means to damage their political rivals in power, with little motive to advance workers' conditions. But the sheer scale and explosive spontaneity of recent events such as the garment workers' and Phulbari revolts suggest a strong autonomous current of class struggle emerging among workers earning some of the lowest wages in the world.

## **STRIKE, RIOT AND FIRE AMONG THE GARMENT WORKERS**

In late May and through June this year, there has been a wave of fierce class struggle in the Bangladesh garment industry. To illustrate the scale of events: around 4000 factories in Dhaka went on wildcat strike, 16 factories were burnt down by strikers and hundreds more ransacked and looted, pitched battles were fought with cops and private security forces in workplaces and workers' neighbourhoods, main roads were blocked. Casualties include 3 workers shot dead, thousands injured, several thousand jailed. The Government eventually felt compelled to bring in the Army to restore 'order'. It was a working class revolt that spread beyond the workplace and generalised to involve the wider working class community. At present the struggle continues in the garment zones on a lesser scale.

*[Note; figures quoted from different sources vary - I have generally taken the most commonly quoted.]*

### **The Dhaka Explosion**

The revolt began on **Saturday 20th May** in Sripur in the Gazipur district of Dhaka. 1,000 garment workers gathered at FS Sweater Factory, refusing to work until 3 arrested fellow workers were released from custody. The factory bosses locked the striking workers in the factory, cutting the power and water supplies. Eventually, the sweltering heat proved too much and by 11 am the workers fought their way out, then they gathered on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. Now joined by locals, they barricaded the highway for 6 hours and fought pitched battles with the cops.[1] One person was killed and 70 others, including cops and journalists, were injured.

On the morning of **Monday, 22 May** at Savar Export Processing Zone (EPZ), a suburb of Dhaka, workers at Universal Garments Limited gathered in front of the factory to demand payment of 3 months owed back wages. They were attacked by factory security staff. In response the workers went to neighboring factories and called out other garment workers for



support. The growing group of workers then went from factory to factory calling on other workers to join them; 20,000 workers are reported to have joined this angry procession. By the afternoon hundreds of other factories in Savar EPZ and New EPZ had joined the strikes. Two factories were torched and 100s more ransacked, over 300 hundred company and

management vehicles wrecked. The main roads going through Dhaka were blocked. Eventually the clashes with police escalated and the cops responded with bullets. The news of the escalation spread among the workplaces and drew out most other workers into participating.

*"The day the 'riot' broke out I had been on my way to office. Its not new these agitations here in my locality [lot of RMG [Ready Made Garment] factories are situated here]... I have been witnessing this from a year or more. What struck me most was how this sort of happening readily unified street vendors, rickshawwallas in one single angry 'mob', which was throwing stones, crashing cars, setting fire on big VOLVO buses. If its sort of an anarchy, I am for it with some fears inside..." - eyewitness, 26/May/06*

By **Tuesday (23rd)** the revolt spread to more factories as more workers were picketed out and the industrial areas of Dhaka were shut down by a generalised strike. Workers took the revolt from the industrial suburbs, where factories were now being looted, into the capital city itself, destroying cars and attacking commercial buildings. Mass demonstrations

demanding an end to repression, release of arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay for extra work, public holidays, payment of wages due etc. [All these demands have since been agreed to.] Press photographers were attacked, roads were blocked and clashes with security forces continued. Thousands of strikers descended on factories, torching 4 and ransacking hundreds more. The Bangladesh Rifles were recalled from their normal duties as Border Control and deployed across the areas of unrest. By the evening 3,000 soldiers and armed cops were in occupation.

The garment industry bosses were now urging the government to protect all factories with troops. The garment owners also staged their own quite pathetic little demonstration, lying down in the road in protest at the attacks on their business. For news footage of the revolt and meetings of panicked bosses, see;



<http://www.shuchinta.com/2006/05/25/some-clips-from-the-atn-news-on-the-attack-on-garments-industries/>

On **Wednesday (24th)** things calmed down in face of the massive police/army presence. The bosses were showing signs of being willing to make some concessions, though still refusing to allow the right to organise trade unions. It is at present difficult to know if this is a demand voiced by the unions or if it has much support among workers themselves. Union leaders were brought in to negotiate a deal with the bosses. This was a breach of the garment bosses' longstanding opposition to union recognition; also a recognition of the unions' useful potential role in containing struggle.

Throughout **June and up to the present**, clashes in the garment producing areas continue, the main issues being victimisation of militants, back pay and non-implementation of previously agreed concessions. Strikes continually break out at individual factories, workers nearby stop work to join in the spontaneous demonstrations. Clashes with police, army and factory security continue, as do attacks on company property. Bosses have also sometimes locked out workers from factories when the breakdown in workplace discipline has become too explosive. At times whole EPZ areas are closed off by troops. This is made easier, once the workers have been driven out, as these industrial zones are fenced off and have their own checkpoints - complete with customs posts - due to their exceptional economic and tax status. The garment owners are dragging their feet in implementing the concessions, so workers remain continually in conflict with the bosses.

The garment bosses have estimated their losses from the revolt so far at \$70 million (and rising!) in a compensation claim submitted to the government. They have criticised the government's indecisiveness in dealing with the revolt. The BGMEA have demanded that a permanent industrial police force be set up to protect factory property in the event of future unrest. At present the Rapid Action Battalion, an armed police/paramilitary grouping is fulfilling this role. As the strikes at individual factories continue and often spread to neighbouring workplaces, the RAB are rushed in to attempt to disperse the angry crowds. But this does not

encourage a return to work and invites sympathy and similar action from neighbouring workers.

A July report stated; *"The owners declared suspension of work at the apparel manufacturing units at Jamgorah, Zirabo and Ashulia in Savar on Tuesday amid an escalating labour unrest that left at least 100 people injured and 20 vehicles damaged.*

*The crisis came to a head as workers of Irish Fashion started a furious demonstration in front of the garment factory over a rumoured murder of a co-worker on Monday night and closure of the factory for indefinite period since Tuesday morning.*

*The angry workers went on the rampage, clashed with police and damaged about 20 vehicles, including two staff buses of a factory, during the mayhem.... Witnesses said following the Monday night's violence at Irish Fashion, hundreds of workers of the factory came to work at around 7:00am. But, they found a notice hung on the main gate saying the factory was closed for indefinite period.*



*Enraged, the nearly 6,000 workers of the seven-storey factory immediately tore the notice into pieces, went on the warpath and started demonstrating.*

Fearing attack, police stationed inside the factory remained silent and did not come out to disperse the agitating workers.

The mob pelted brickbats at and forced some other factories to close, and chanted slogans, urging workers of those plants to join forces with it.

Most of the factories in the areas declared closure of work. Within a few minutes, the majority of workers of those factories joined hands with their agitating fellows and brought out a procession....

Fearing further vandalism, the authorities announced closure of over 50 factories located in the areas adjoining to the Dhaka Export Processing Zone for indefinite period.... A tense situation is prevailing in the areas, with many contingents of police, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles and the Rapid Action Battalion deployed in front of the DEPZ and at others key points." (New Age, 5/July/06)

"The government agreed to release arrested workers and union officials, and to drop the cases against them. It also promised to set up a "minimum wage board for the garment sector and take steps to meet the demands of garment workers," and — in a bow to the manufacturers — to investigate the causes of the riots." (Power and Interest News Report, [http://pinr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=500&language\\_id=1](http://pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=500&language_id=1))

"Following the unrest in the garment sector, the factory owners at a tripartite meeting late last month accepted almost all demands of the garment workers, including the right to form trade unions, weekly holiday, maternity leave and issuance of appointment letter and identity card (these letters and cards are proof of employment and are often withheld to prevent workers later claiming back pay when they are dismissed). The meeting formed a minimum wage board comprising representatives from the government, the garment factory owners and SKOP [workers' representatives] as the workers demanded increase of minimum salary from Tk 940 [£7. 59/Eur10. 97/\$14. 03] to Tk 3,000 [£22. 24/Eur 35. 03/\$44. 79] because of the unprecedented price hikes of essentials." (New Age, 29/June/06) So far, as unrest in the factories continues, the bosses are resisting agreeing to a minimum wage of Tk 3,000. (An average 30% wage rise.)

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## The Globalized Sweatshop

Below we will briefly describe general working conditions and some background to the revolt:

"Bangladesh is endowed with abundant and cheap labour force that is easily trainable and convertible into semi-skilled and skilled work force. Price, heavily weighted by the labour cost, is one of the main determinants of comparative advantage in the labour-intensive garment industry. The price of labour in our country is lower compared to some of our neighbouring countries as well as some other garment producing countries in South-East Asia and East Europe. Obviously, existence of such cheap but easily trainable labour is one of the advantages that Bangladesh enjoys and will be enjoying over a considerable period in the context of international trade on clothing." (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association [GMEA] website.)

"The garment workers of Bangladesh may be the most deprived labor force in the world. Most are paid between US\$14 to US\$16 per month, the lowest salary in the world". - Amirul Haq Amin, Coordinator of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council (BGWUC), 2005.

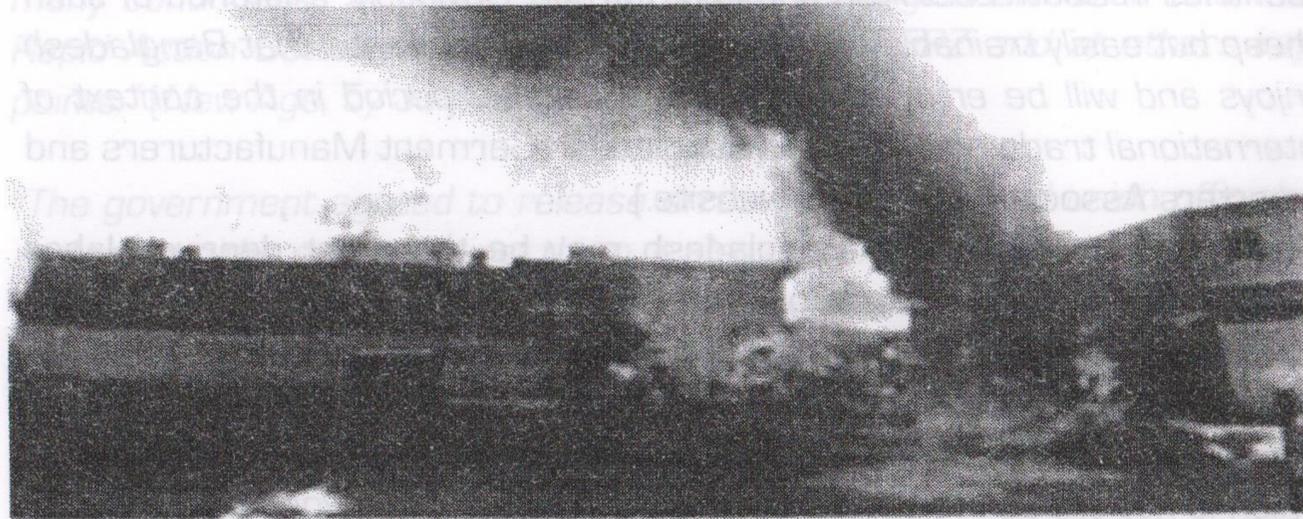
"I get Tk 900 [£7. 27/Eur10. 50/\$13. 43] for a month of hard labour which is not enough to even cover my food bills,' said a worker at Tejgaon. 'Can you show me one worker who runs his family without a hitch with the money he gets?' - Sagar, who works in SS Sweater factory.

"Bangladesh's apparel sector now employ 2.5 million in more than 5,000 factories and the largest industrial sector contribute more than 75 per cent to the country's export earnings." (New Age, 30/June/06) [2.5 million is the highest and most recently quoted figure for workers - most sources say 1.5 -1.8million.]

" In February 2005, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation found that the [official] monthly minimum wage for Bangladesh's garment workers was some \$33 ten years ago, but that came down to \$16 in real value due to devaluation of Bangladesh Taka against dollar.

The Brussels-based organisation shows that in India and Pakistan, an apparel worker gets at least 20 cents per hour, in China 23 cents, in Sri Lanka 40 cents while in Thailand the worker is paid 78 cents. " (Bangladesh trotskyist Democratic Workers Party.)

The 2 million or so workers in the Bangladesh garment industry work for little more than starvation wages, under conditions closer to those endured by European workers 150-200 years ago. 90% are young girls and women from 12 years upwards: physical and sexual abuse in the workplace is common. Average rates of pay in the EPZs are \$20 a month, less than half the supposed official minimum wage, overtime is often compulsory and wages are sometimes withheld for months. Outside the EPZs, where over 80% of garment workers labour, conditions are worse. *"Some of these garment workers earn as little as eight cents an hour, while the top wage for an experienced sewer is just 18 cents. ..."*



*Helpers earn: 8 cents an hour; \$3.64 a week/ \$15.77 a month/ \$189.28 a year.*

*Senior Sewing Operators earn: 18 cents an hour/ \$8.40 a week/ \$36.40 a month/ \$436.80 a year."*

*(National Labour Committee, www.nlcnet.org, 2004)*

*"The bourgeois media reports that the industry currently owes \$US300,000 in back pay, a staggering amount considering the miserly wages."* There are no guaranteed weekly days off, no holidays, no guaranteed maternity leave, no annual leave. Employment is also often insecure; workers change jobs frequently due to wage arrears, lay-offs, ill health or harassment from the bosses and their security guards.

The workplace is a highly dangerous place in this industry: in February and

March this year 2 fires killed over 100 workers and injured hundreds more, provoking strikes. As is common, most exit doors were locked, increasing casualties greatly. Also in February, a multi-storey factory collapsed: originally built as a 2 storey building, then over-extended, 19 workers were killed and around 50 injured. Thousands of workers have died from employers' neglect of safety procedures.

In the generally stagnant economy of Bangladesh, the ready made garment sector is the only significant economic force. This sector is entirely export oriented and is composed of over 5000 units – most working for international buyers, some owned by international companies. Most of the garment units are clustered in industrial areas and EPZs (see below) in and around Dhaka – Ghazipur, Savar, Ashulia, Mirpur, Tejgaon, Mohakhali, Uttara, Wari and Tongi etc.

This is the modern face of 'Globalization'. Capital goes where there is surplus labour to be had cheapest, installs its plant machinery and begins to extract profits. Equally, local capital sees an opportunity to utilise cheap local labour for the global market. In 1978 the Bangladesh government set up Export Processing Zones (EPZs) to attract foreign capital and earn export dollars. (100% foreign ownership, 65%; joint venture, 13%; 100% local venture, 22%.) In 1993 the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) was set up and a blanket ban on trade union activity imposed. An attractive investment location for investors, also including tax breaks and other incentives. The EPZs now employ 70,000 workers, mostly in the garment and shoe-making industries (though most of the

garment industry exists outside the EPZs). National labour laws do not apply in the EPZs, leaving BEPZA in full control over work conditions, wages and benefits. The garment industry is the life blood of the Bangladesh economy. Garment factories in Bangladesh provide employment to 40 percent of industrial workers. More than three-quarters of the \$7.8 billion of Bangladesh's export earnings comes from exporting garments. Despite falling prices, export volume has grown,



and business is booming at present as the Bangladesh garment industry takes advantage of comparatively cheaper labour costs and World Trade Organization restrictions put on China, the world's largest Ready Made Garment (RMG) exporter. Bangladesh RMG imports to the US have increased 25% this year so far.[2]



In its negotiation of trade agreements with the US, the Bangladeshi garment industry is attempting to box clever in the arena of geo-politics; "Dhaka raised the issue that most of these countries rely heavily on the export earnings of textiles and apparel which are subjected to some of the highest US tariffs, averaging 17 percent.

"Any debacle in the apparel industry would lead to massive unemployment of women, creating economic and social instability, and have other possible ramifications," the Ambassador said, conveying his country's apprehension to his American audience.

Elaborating on Bangladesh's achievement in this sector, Chowdhury pointed out that in a society where women empowerment is so deeply entrenched there is no scope for religious radicalism. "This must be sustained," he emphasised." (Bangladeshinfo.com, July 06) The implication being that lucrative duty-free access to the American market will encourage social conditions that lessen the possibility of a rise in Islamic fundamentalism. It is true that the so far limited emergence of fundamentalism in Dhaka has led to attacks on unions for their attempts to organise the predominantly female RMG workforce.

Most of the garment workers have migrated from the poorest rural areas into the city slums. The slum population of Dhaka has doubled in the last 10 years. "More than 90 per cent of the slum dwellers have income below poverty line, which is Tk 5,000 a month a household. The dwellers are mostly transport workers, day labourers, garment workers, small vendors, hawkers and domestic helps..." (New Age.) It is this wider community that joined in the clashes and rioted with the garment workers.

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## Unions and Workers

Though there are 16 unions representing garment workers, according to the *Democratic Workers Party* "...the level of unionisation among workers is very low. Where unions are involved, they act more like extortionists, taking money from management to keep the employees in line while at the same time collecting dues from their members, with whom they have virtually no contact. Most of the unions have direct or indirect links with local and foreign NGOs, and receiving lucrative grants seems to be their main goal."

Most of the trade unions appear to be tools of one or other of the political parties, strikes being used more as vehicles for pursuing political goals against rival parties than improving workers' conditions. The Nation Garment Workers Federation[3] apparently is an exception to this, being a more grass-roots organisation, closer to an expression of workers' self-organisation emerging from their own struggles. It would be too easy and simplistic to apply critiques of modern western business unions to such an organisation. 11 years ago the NGWF was an organisation with 3 workers paid a basic garment workers wage operating out of a shed in a workers slum. Working in conditions more similar for workers in Europe a century or two ago, basic organization for defence and improvement of working conditions is a matter, sometimes, of whether one starves or not. With rapid large-scale proletarianisation of rural workers in many parts of Asia (China, India etc) struggles for unionisation are likely to follow. How institutionalised and bureaucratised organs like the NGWF might have become is unclear at present, and will be partly determined by their success as negotiators. One can predict that official recognition, with a greater budget and status to manage and protect, would accelerate that process. NGWF was at one time (though apparently no longer) in an alliance with the BGWUC, which has recently shown an eagerness to promise an obedient workforce to the bosses. [4]

Though organising trade unions was banned by employers in the EPZs, this is changing, as one of the concessions won by the revolt. This is anyway a convenient concession for the bosses; a Bill is being introduced into the US Senate which, if passed, would ban all imports produced in sweatshops. This is a form of US trade protectionism and corporate image

management expressed as concern for workers' conditions. The Bill would penalise Bangladesh, Jordan etc and America's big rival China in, for example, the garment industry, by attempting to undercut their present advantage of cheaper labour costs.

"... the Greater Los Angeles area ... has surpassed the New York area as the center of the North American garment industry. Home to more than 1,000 manufacturers who employ an estimated 90,000 workers, most of them immigrant, the garment and related industries account for as much as 10 percent of Los Angeles' economy, according to "Sweatshop Slaves." Nearly one in five local employees today work in the garment industry,



making it Los Angeles' leading manufacturing sector." (Review of "Sweatshop Slaves: Asian Americans in the Garment Industry", Various, 2006.)

As well as the dire conditions of employment, the low level of unionism is one likely reason for the ferocity of the workers response. When it erupts, unmediated class war is generally conducted more brutally on both sides. The Bangladesh state finally realised this when it brought in union officials to mediate and negotiate an end to the rebellion. In the long term, union representation is usually granted by the bosses as a necessary safety valve

mechanism and tool of management for the stability of the production process.

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## Riot as Struggle

Some commentators, from the bourgeois media to the ultra-left, have considered the working class's use of riot as a sign of organisational weakness. On the contrary, we see their use of riot[5] and fire as brave and intelligent in a situation where they faced brutal repression by a determined body of employers and the armed forces of the state. Property damage combined with withdrawal of labour is a time-honoured tactic of proletarians. Rioting also opens up an opportunity for the wider working class community to become involved in the struggle and immediately spread the perspective beyond isolated sectional activity. When the cops and army invade workers' living areas it is anyway inevitable that the neighbourhood is drawn into the struggle. The extensive use of this tactic is also an inspiring example of effective collective self-organisation that, for the garment workers, has been far more successful than all previous struggles.



These events are part of a wider situation where, with so many workers in Bangladesh working at or below the level of a minimal wage necessary for survival, the class struggle more readily takes extraordinary forms.

"Thousands of primary school teachers have last week called off a hunger strike to the death in a struggle for higher wages. 15 said they would 'self-immolate' (set

themselves on fire] if their demands were not met quickly. Negotiations are ongoing." (New Age, Dhaka.)[6]

## The Economics of Exploitation

The workers' revolt led to a sharp drop in share prices as international investors panicked at reports of a 'workers' insurrection' in the garment industry. At a meeting between the garment owners and the major international buyers (Gap, Walmart, Asda, Carrefour etc) on June 29th, they were criticised for their handling of labour relations. The bosses responded by saying that the agreed concessions such as wage rises would be passed on to the buyers and retailers abroad. One buyer's representative, claiming fake indignation at low wages in the industry, (which never captured their interest till now when it jeopardised smooth supply and cheap price) replied by asking; why had wages not risen in 12 years when prices had? (In the same period the cost of living for workers had doubled.) "First Secretary and Chief Economic and Commercial Officer of the US Embassy in Bangladesh David W Renz said it was not enough to just increase the workers wages. "Improving the competitiveness is vital to compete in the global market." Meaning: claw back the wage increases by pushing for higher productivity.

The ruling class in Bangladesh should be worried by this expression of workers' power - a major revolt forcing major concessions in the only significant export industry. Some Western analysts are already classifying the country as 'a failing state' and it is rated as the most corrupt in the world (in whatever way the ruling class calculates such things). This is causing international concern at the potential destabilising influence on the region. "The geopolitical significance of the riots lies in the fact that they reveal the weakness of the Bangladeshi state. The failure of the government to contain the violence quickly and opting instead for half measures that satisfied neither side and did nothing to bring them to an agreement points to an implosion of governability and indicates that Bangladesh is drifting toward the status of a failed state. This has implications for the stability of the South Asian region." (pinr.com) The

political system in Bangladesh is a vicious mess of instability and regular political assassinations. There is no cohesion within the ruling class, only warring factions perpetuating an economically and politically vulnerable state.[7]

For capital, the competition in the global RMG sector grows fiercer. Upward wage pressure, such as the Dhaka revolt expressed, will lead to demands for greater productivity to compete with those countries that have managed to keep the lid on wage demands. Competition for a bigger share of the market will cause market saturation and price drops. The possibility of new regulations outlawing or regulating sweatshop conditions by western buyer countries, as a form of protectionism and to ease concerns about corporate image, is another factor, as is import quota restriction by both the EU and US. The neo-liberal globalizing project has exported new forms of trade and production and, consequently, new forms of class struggle.

RM (July 2006)

## NOTES

[1] By the evidence of press photographs, the majority of demonstrators were male. There have been some pictures showing female demonstrators, but the insufficient evidence gives an impression that the activity on the streets is predominantly male, even though 90% of garment workers are female.

[2] "After the end of the Multi-Fiber Agreement at the beginning of 2005 and the changeover to the new World Trade Organization regime, it was feared that the Bangladesh's booming textile industry would suffer as it would lose business to countries like China and India. But fortunately for Bangladesh, so far this prediction has been proved wrong. In fact, the industry has continued to grow at a healthy rate of 20 percent. However, this does not indicate that the Bangladesh garment industry has become more competitive. The reality is that this increase has been largely due to restrictions imposed on China by the Western nations

than to the ingenuity in Dhaka or Chittagong. The Chinese cannot be held back after 2008, which means a completely different picture might emerge after that.

Industry also faces various infrastructural problems. Due to shortage of power and diesel industries are not able to work to their full capacity. Bangladesh



Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) fears that production in RMG industry might fall by 50 percent and production cost might go up by about 25 percent due to the crises. Due to power shortage shipments are sent through air, thereby increasing its cost. Unfortunately the government has not taken any step to improve the situation. On the other hand, people have been shot dead for demanding regular supply of electricity." [South Asia Analysis Group. <http://www.saag.org/%5Cpapers19%5Cpaper1852.html>]

[3] For a description of the functioning of the NGWF in 1995 see <http://libcom.org/library/node/2141>. The NGWF membership estimates vary from 20,000 to 7-10,000. As workers frequently change jobs, there is a high rate of fluctuation. For a description by the ICG of class struggle in Bangladesh from the 1980s-90s see; <http://libcom.org/library/burma-struggles-riots-icg>

"The National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) of Bangladesh has the largest and most sustained industrial union organizing drive in the world. Workers in hundreds of factories have joined the NGWF. While they have no legal recognition, workers in all these factories strike and protest together. While workers in other countries try to organize shop by shop and judge their success with union contracts, when they lose a particular struggle they are left with no organization and no way to move forward. Long ago the NGWF of Bangladesh made a decision to organize industrially and maintain their organization and it's paid off. The NGWF maintains its own campaigns and calls for international solidarity without the help of NGOs and workers advocates." [New People, April 06, Pittsburgh, US.]

[4] The Bangladeshi Trotskyist Democratic Workers Party describes the BGWUC

as a collection of "sham unions" (though whether this description is motivated as much by political rivalry as political clarity is uncertain).

"On 3 May, garment workers and supporters staged a peaceful protest against a sudden wage cut in the Savar EPZ, 50 km north of the capital Dhaka. The management of Ring Shine called in the police, who attacked the 1500 strong gathering. One knitting operator, Rafiqul Islam, and one supporter, Mosharaf, were shot dead and 200 injured. Outraged demonstrators ransacked the factory in revenge. Six people were arrested, and a further 80 face charges of property damage.

In mid-May the Bangladesh Garments Workers Unity Council (BGWUC), comprising 8 such sham unions, secured an agreement under which Ring Shine agreed to pay the medical expenses of all injured workers, drop the charges filed against the demonstrators, pay back wages and follow the BEPZA rules regarding minimum wages and benefits, as well as compensation of about \$US4,000 to the families of the two men killed by police.

Under the agreement the BGWUC promised to undertake "the responsibility for peaceful operation of the factory and will ensure that the workers will not create any further problem in future in the factory". A rival union, the Garments Unity Forum, staged a demonstration condemning the deal as a sell-out but a few days later put its seal to the same agreement. Such 'compromises' are not in the interest of the workers, benefiting only the self-serving union bureaucrats and playing into the hands of the bosses.

The Ring Shine incident is the most recent example of the volatile situation within the fortress-like compound at Savar, comprising 33,700 workers. In 1997, 15,000 of them went on strike in defiance of the ban, demanding trade union rights and job security." [Our emphasis.]

[5] Those left and ultra-leftist 'marxists' who routinely dismiss rioting as a valid form of working class struggle [yet still slavishly take Marx's word on everything as gospel] ignore the fact that Marx himself participated enthusiastically in three 1855 riots of the London proletariat during mass demonstrations against proposals to restrict pub opening times. On successive Sundays working class demonstrators streamed out of Hyde Park into nearby rich areas such as Belgravia, rioting and assaulting the rich and their property. According to his companion, Liebknecht, Marx came close to being arrested. Marx later wrote, "We saw it from beginning to end and do not think it an exaggeration to say the English revolution began in Hyde Park yesterday." [Unfortunately, it was an exaggeration.] So despite what moralistic ultra-leftists and bourgeois alike may say, Marx clearly saw rioting as a radical weapon of the proletariat.

[6] <http://www.newagebd.com/front.html#3> - New Age, a Dhaka-based daily

paper, has been the most detailed mainstream media source on the recent unrest.

[7] "The disadvantageous material and economic situation of Bangladesh is a cause of and is compounded by the lack of integration of its political class. Since its adoption of democratic institutions in 1990, after a chaotic succession of ineffective military governments, the country has been riven by severe and persistent conflicts between its two major political parties — the Awami League (A.L.) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (B.N.P.). Whichever party is out of power attempts to undermine the government through strikes and non-cooperation. The destructive rivalry between the A.L. and the B.N.P. is decidedly partisan rather than programmatic or ideological, although the A.L. is allied with left and secular parties and the B.N.P. with Islamic parties. [...]

The failure of the two factions in the pre-democratic period to reconcile with one another within democratic institutions has led to chronically ineffective governance, exacerbated by unwillingness to compromise and readiness to take direct action, with general strikes the preferred tactic. Most recently, on April 20, 2006, the A.L. called a general strike demanding Khaleda's resignation in the midst of a row over the constitution of the country's electoral commission. Until February 2006, the A.L. had been boycotting parliament after violent attacks on its rallies. [...]

The severity of Bangladesh's partisanship is epitomized by the failure of the putatively democratic parties to close ranks against extra-parliamentary tendencies. Instead, they both have added fuel to the fires, accusing one another of connivance with those tendencies." (pinr.com)

## ...and it's not just the garment workers...

### people take control of Phulbari

"The British company Asia Energy on Monday night evacuated its staff from Phulbari as protest against a coal mine project escalated into violence with



Victory Demonstration in Phulbari after the Government gave in...

thousands of people taking control of the volatile northern town following withdrawal of the paramilitary BDR blamed for Saturday's firing on demonstrators. In a meeting with the deputy commissioner of Dinajpur in the night, the leaders of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Natural Resources, Power and Port, which is spearheading the movement against the coal mine project, gave the administration three days to scrap the controversial agreement with Asia Energy and shut down all offices of the company in the country or face tougher agitation. Boiling with anger after Saturday's police firing which left 5 people dead and scores injured,

the locals carried out arson attacks on at least six houses and business establishments belonging to 'dalals' (collaborators) of the British company, torching and ransacking whatever they found there. The police in riot gear looked on in silence as over 30,000 farmers, indigenous people and petty traders staged demonstrations all day on Monday, the second day of a non-stop hartal enforced by the locals in protest at the killings and demanding 'ouster' of Asia Energy. Locals fear the proposed open-pit mine will displace farmers, threaten their livelihood and destroy the environment. The troopers of paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles were withdrawn from Phulbari on Sunday night and the police were ordered to show restraint. On the second day of the non-stop hartal on Monday, the tiny northern town witnessed processions and rallies but there was no

major violence barring the arson attacks on a few houses. People from different neighbourhoods of Phulbari and surrounding villages started pouring into the town since early in the morning. They cut off the upazila town from the rest of the country by felling tress, electric poles, putting up barricade on a bridge and burning spent tyres and wood.? A 15,000-strong mob first attacked an oil mill owned by Hamidpur union parishad chairman, Anwar Ali, at about 11:00 am, threw everything out on the street and set them on fire. One and a half hours later they attacked the house-cum-



office of one Bulbul Chowdhury, burning three motorbikes, two refrigerators, 15 bicycles and other valuables. Other shops in the town were also damaged and set ablaze till 3:00pm. The angry mob turned down the request of deputy commissioner of Dinajpur, Tahsinur Rahman, thana nirbahi officer and police officials to show restraint. 'We would beat them to death if they are captured,' one of the demonstrators yelled. 'These people are helping (Asia Energy) to realise their ill-motive,' the youth said. Earlier, the deputy commissioner of Dinajpur held a meeting with the local leaders of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Natural Resources, Power and Port which led to the withdrawal of BDR personnel at about 9:00pm Sunday. After the meeting, the DC announced that there would be no office of Asian Energy in Phulbari, but the assurance did not satisfy the leaders who insisted that Asia Energy must pack up by Monday noon. 'It is the government which is responsible for the situation as they did not pay heed to our pleas that the mining project would be disastrous for us,' said Tajuddin, a farmer, as he was shouting a slogan against Asia Energy. 'How the government could go ahead with the project since everyone is against it,' asked Razzak, a van driver of the town. The DC told New Age that the strike was continuing and the police were asked to show restraint despite mounting tension in Phulbari. He, however, denied media reports that the local administration had imposed a ban on gatherings in Phulbari. He claimed that three people died in firing on Saturday." (New Age)

In response the Government announced it will not now allow the opencast mining project in Phulbari to go ahead. The scale of the resistance has clearly shocked the State; the proposed project provoked a seizure of the town by 30,000 protesters for the past 5 days (after troops shot 5 people) and a nationwide general strike on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> August.

"In Dhaka the strike left schools, shops, colleges and private businesses closed and private vehicles off the road. Over 10,000 police and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles were on the streets, said police official Mahbubur Rashid. In the country's second city of Chittagong, police deployed around 4,000 officers, but there has been no violence, said local police commissioner Majed ul Hoq. Deliveries at the main port at Chittagong however had been suspended... Protesters blocked the roads

## the issue of energy

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, textile workers in Narsingdi, central Bangladesh, fought police in protests against irregular power supply to their factory workplaces.

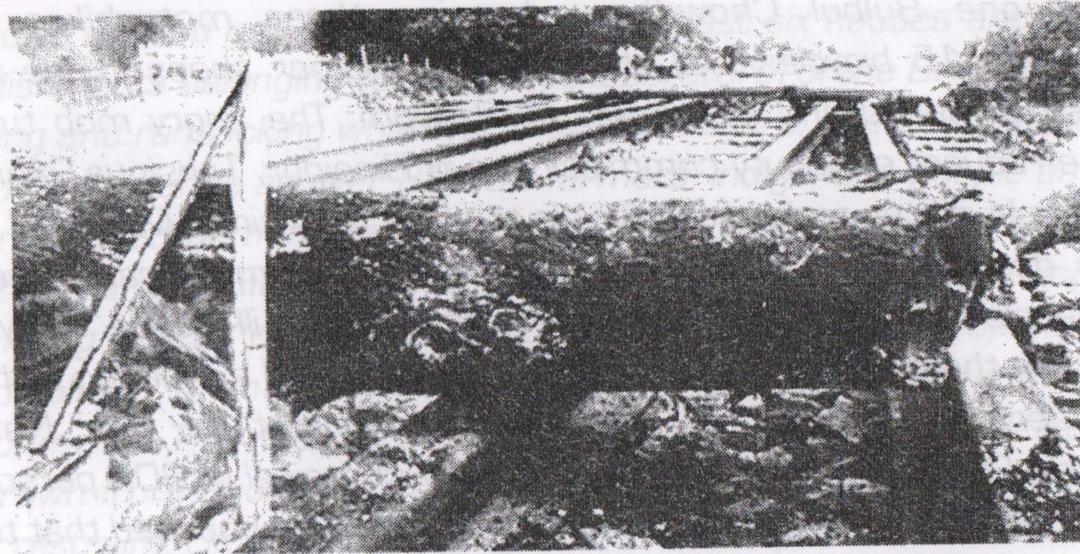
They are not paid for time lost to interruptions. Over 1,000 fought with officers as they laid siege to the electricity company offices, setting fire to company vehicles, 2 transformers and a circuit breaker. 50 workers were hurt as cops baton-charged, fired rubber bullets and tear gas. 10 cops were also injured by thrown missiles.



Energy is an important political issue in Bangladesh - there have been regular countrywide protests and riots this year over intermittent supplies. Alongside the inconvenience of cuts in domestic supplies, cuts in power to workplaces mean cuts in wages.

Due to maintenance problems/equipment failure the national supply is only functioning at little more than half its capacity at present. Interruptions occur several times daily and some areas only receive a supply for 6 hours per day. Several foreign investment projects have failed due to government corruption, bureaucracy and state reluctance to sanction often unpopular energy projects. In a country where arable land is limited, open pit coal projects - and other forms of energy development - are not environmentally friendly, eat up scarce land resources and destroy thousands of homes.

The deals agreed with foreign energy investors mean the majority of energy generated is for export, and the behaviour of foreign capital has also encouraged a general cynicism towards them. The American company, Occidental, had a major pipeline explosion in 1997 and issues of compensation for environmental damage have still not been fully resolved;



A burning log blocks a railway in Dhajpur

leading to Phulbari by felling trees, logs, making fireworks on numerous points of the town throughout the day. No transport was allowed, excepting that some rickshaws and vans. All the shops, markets and business establishment remained closed for fourth straight day. Some tea and cigarette vendors opened in the afternoon but were forced to close down...

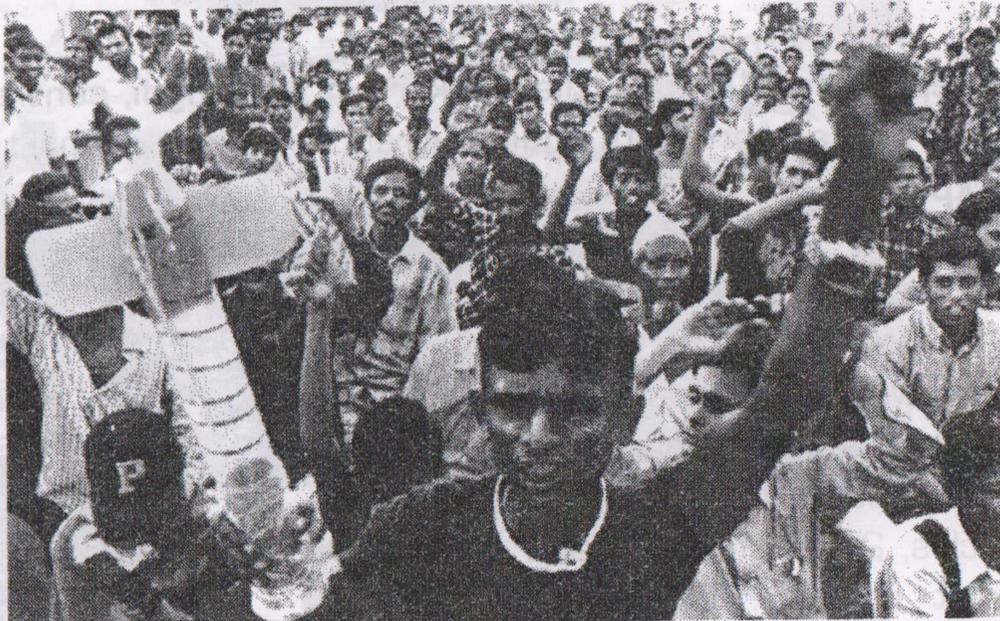
Mahmud [Govt. Energy Minister] is acting in favour of Asia Energy... Mahmud is the biggest dalal [broker] of the company... We want his execution... were some of the slogans." (New Age, 31/8/2006)

The Govt. apparently has not signed the final agreement giving permission for mining to start and the British company Asia Energy is reported to have

failed to conform to some of its legal and financial obligations under Bangladeshi law. Asia Energy is refusing comment. It is speculated that, as the Govt. has only 2 months left in power before the election, it will stall the issue until then. It may also hope that the mass movement will dissipate sufficiently over time for another modified attempt at beginning mining to be tried later.



Occidental pulled out of Bangladesh several years ago, leaving the wrangling over compensation to be dealt with by Unocal, which took over their interests. There were also two incidents last year at facilities run by the Canadian



*Protests in Dhaka against power cuts*

company, Niko Resources. Here too there is confusion over what is happening about related compensation claims.

In the **south west**, jute mill workers at **Khulna** ended a 2 week strike; they received owed back wages and the employers agreed to consider other demands such as "regularisation of their jobs, allocation of sufficient funds for jute purchase, smooth supply of power and opening of the laid off mills"

On 27/09, two hundred people, including police, were injured as more riots and demonstrations in protest against regular interruptions to electricity supplies, erupted in nineteen hours of violent clashes.

*"...We had been experiencing an unusual on-again, off-again electricity supply that we had not seen ever before, causing immense sufferings ... throughout the night in abnormally hot and humid weather. We had been constantly sweating inside our houses amid sweltering heat,"* said a resident of Senpara area in Mirpur.

Some Dhaka residents are presently only receiving 2 hours supply per day.

The rioting broke out in Dhaka's northern Mirpur district, where nearly 1,000 stone-throwing demonstrators took to the streets, and it soon spread to other parts of the city including the Shanir Akhra and Keraniganj



*A barricade of burning tyres, Mirpur, during energy riots*

areas. A main road through Mirpur was barricaded for several hours and at least two buses were torched. Government offices were attacked and power plants damaged.

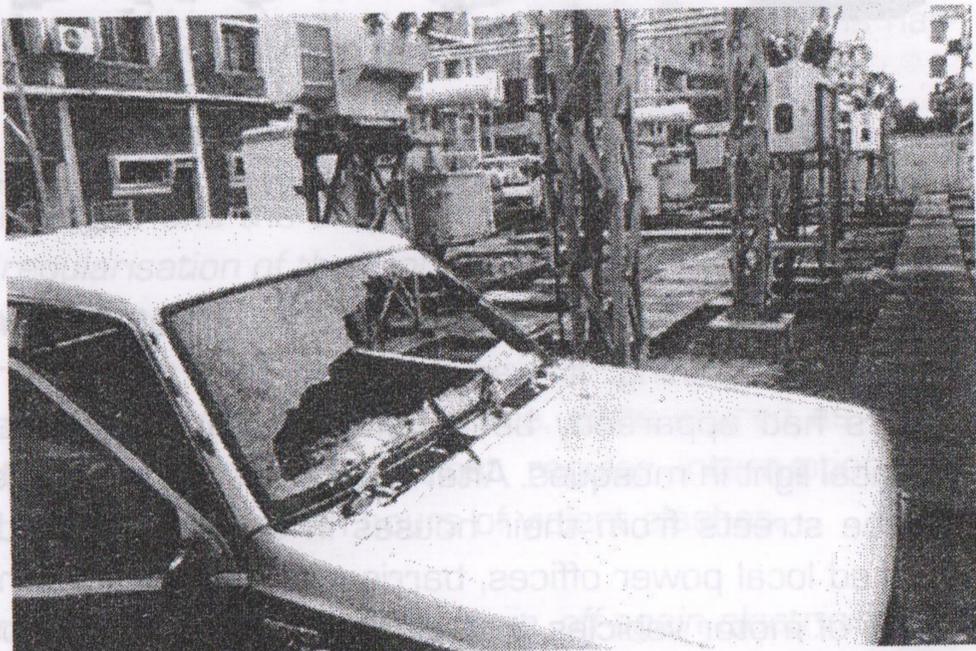
The violent protests began after the breaking of the Ramadan fast on the Wednesday evening. It was reported that the observance of evening prayers had apparently been hampered during Ramadan by a lack of electrical light in mosques. After this break-fast hundreds of youths poured into the streets from their houses in Senpara and adjoining areas and attacked local power offices, barricaded roads, and damaged or set afire scores of motor vehicles, including police and RAB (Rapid Action Battalion - paramilitary police) vans during the protests. In the Keraniganj area about 20,000 people came out into the dark to protest power cuts and set fire to police vehicles, throwing some proletarian light on the situation.

But religious concerns were not the real issue; the present events are a continuation of a long-running struggle in the country over unreliable energy supplies. Power cuts affect daily life in various important ways. Life in city slums becomes even more unbearable when denied basic air conditioning of domestic fans during sweltering, humid weather. Workers lose earnings when production stops in the factories. Domestic water

supplies are affected as the reservoirs and distribution system are dependent on electricity. Consumers are charged a regular meter rental fee whether or not supply is maintained. (In effect, you pay for the mere possibility of receiving electricity.)

*"Farmers report not receiving electricity for days, and then when they do get a supply it is only for a maximum of four to five hours. Farmers are demanding that electricity supplies be continuous, and that they should pay only for the electricity that they actually receive."*

Farmers' crop irrigation systems are also usually dependent on electrical pumps to draw the water from deep wells and bore holes. The effect of water shortages on rice crops have led to fears of food shortages later in the year. Farmers fear economic ruin if the crops are lost. On 4th January 2006 up to 12,000 people, many farmers, took to the streets under the banner of the Palli Biddut Shangram Parishad (Rural Electricity Movement Association) in the northern town of Kansat to protest against failures in power supply. Police fired live ammunition with AK47s, rubber bullets and tear



*Azampur Power Office, Dhaka, after a visit from some aggrieved 'customers'*

gas to disperse the crowd, who responded with sticks and machetes. Local news reported around 300 people were injured, including nearly 20 cops. At least 2 men were killed and 50 suffered bullet wounds. The repression did not stop the protests; on 23rd January at least 7 more were killed with over 100 injured by cops. A young boy later died from his injuries. (Later estimates put the number dead from these 2 protests as at least 18.) On 5th April 2006 at least four people were killed when local members of the

ruling Bangladeshi Nationalist Party mounted bomb attacks on another farmers' rally.

The government claims that increased industrial demand is to blame for the power cuts and, as a token gesture, has announced its intention to turn off illuminated billboards and to restrict supplies to shopping malls. The national electricity system is suffering multiple breakdowns and maintenance problems and is working at less than two thirds capacity at present - it is inadequate for modern growing demands and is in a poor state of disrepair. It is not expected to return to its normal (inadequate, unreliable) capacity for several weeks.

### **GARMENT WORKERS UPDATE**

The Govt. and employers have also been facing renewed resistance in the garment industry; labour organisations named August 31st as the deadline for bosses and Govt. to implement the concessions agreed after the mass revolt of May/June. But talks between employers, government and workers representatives failed to reach any agreement about setting a minimum wage or implementing other concessions.

The general secretary of the Bangladesh National Garment Workers Federation, Aminul Haque, said *'Labour organisations have realised that the government and the owners do not respect the recent agreements. So, they are preparing to go for movements again.'*

As there has been no compliance, the unions threatened renewed actions - though in fact spontaneous, self-organised agitation by workers on the job has been widespread and continuous since May, so it may be more a case of the unions tail-ending the ongoing independent actions, in an attempt to gain control and show to the employers that they are worth negotiating with.

In early October, revolt broke out again... Seven garment factories were severely damaged, while bosses claimed 100 other factories were vandalised; three shopping malls and 50 vehicles were also attacked on Tuesday 10th October as thousands of striking garment workers fought pitched battles with the police and factory security forces in and around the capital, Dhaka. Over 100 people were injured in the clashes.

Since the garment workers revolt in May-June, negotiations on promised concessions, improvements in conditions and setting of a minimum wage have broken down and/or the bosses have refused to implement them. It had previously been announced by unions that as a result of the stalemate a new wave of agitation would begin this week. There is a tantalising but vague report that workers at one point in the morning held a rally and *"demanded minimum wage of Tk 3,000 [£24/\$45/EUR36], and chanted slogans against the leaders who, they alleged, had hatched a conspiracy against them."* It is unclear, but "the leaders" seems to refer to their trade union leaders, presumably seeing the deal negotiated with bosses as an unsatisfactory sell-out. There is little evidence to suggest that union leaders (or any other body) dominate or lead the garment workers' struggles. (Though there is also a report that one attack on factories was provoked by the arrest of a union leader of the National Garment Workers United Forum, apparently one of the more grass roots unions based in the workers neighbourhoods.)

At 9am workers poured out of their factories in their thousands, marched to other factories still working and closed them down. Refining their tactics, they broke into smaller groups, attacking and looting factories and businesses. Vehicles were set on fire and roads blocked; due to force of numbers, the police could often only stand by and watch as workers attacked their bosses' property and looted. The main police tactic appeared to be to restrict movement of the demonstrators and contain the crowds within a limited area.

Cops and workers clashed several times in different locations, with numerous injuries on both sides and 35 teargas rounds being fired. Eventually a massive force of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) paramilitaries and police reinforcements managed to regain control by 12.30pm.

In **Uttara**, a northern suburb of Dhaka, thousands of workers seized the Airport access road in the morning and a pitched battle ensued with cops, as a main traffic intersection "became a battlefield". Police baton-charged the crowd, "fired 100 rounds of teargas cells and 60 rounds of rubber bullets on them", leaving more than 50 workers and cops wounded. Workers looted offices, a supermarket, bank, filling station and other businesses. They also torched and damaged dozens of vehicles. Once



*A burning police van - with cops still in it - goes over, Uttara, early October*

again, a massive deployment of RAB and cops restored order by 12.30pm.

In **Narayanganj**, a river port town close to Dhaka, several processions of workers also clashed with cops.

At **Savar**, 24km northwest of Dhaka, vehicles were damaged and 25 garments factories attacked by workers. *"Police arrested 15 workers, including Savar's regional leader of the National Garment Workers United Forum, Harunur Rashid, from the scene. After hearing that Rashid had been arrested, the workers hurled brickbats at Cannon Garments Ltd, Apparel Ltd and JK Garments near the bus stand. The workers of other local garment factories, on hearing the news, came out and barricaded the Dhaka-Aricha highway and damaged 10 cars, including a police car... Protesting against the police attack and demanding release of the arrested workers, the agitators announced a demonstration programme on Thursday at around 10:00am at Muktangan."* (New Age, 11/11/2006)

The garment bosses' federation, BGMEA, has demanded that the

Government arrest several union leaders they have named as supposed instigators of the unrest, who they claim are in the pay of foreign sources. This same absurd claim implicating India and/or other commercial rivals as the root of the troubles was made after the May-June revolt, conveniently absolving garment bosses from any responsibility (and playing on time-honoured paranoia and prejudice against regional neighbours). A spokesman for the employers threatened a lockout of the workforce if unrest continues and the Government fails to contain the agitation. "If steps are not taken, we may close down our factories together for an indefinite period". Factory owners have already tried this at several factories in an attempt to starve workers into submitting to worse conditions. "The ultimatum is to protect the industry," claimed the BGMEA president. Meaning, to protect its bosses' profits. A decision on the lockout is expected today, Thursday.

Also on Tuesday 10th, a national rail strike occurred against the proposed privatisation of the industry.

**The above texts were originally written  
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