



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Bangladesh factory workers protest for higher wages and better working conditions, 2013

November

2012

to: December

2013

Country: Bangladesh

Location City/State/Province: Dhaka

Location Description: Capital City of Bangladesh

Goals:

1. Increase minimum wage by 170%
2. Improve working conditions for factory workers
3. Secure a list of those injured or killed in the Rana Plaza building collapse
4. Proper compensation for victims of Rana Plaza collapse
5. Legal consequences for the owner of the Rana Plaza building, Sohen Rana

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 106. Industry strike
- 184. Defiance of blockades

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 118. Hartal

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › Road blockade

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › Road blockade

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Notes on Methods:

Strikes were an effective tactic because they would shut down production at the factories, which hurt the factories financially (and thus made factory workers more interested in solving the problem). Protesting in the streets was also effective because the factories were located very close to one another, so the protestors could assemble in huge masses quickly. Police had a more difficult time dispersing these large crowds.

It is unknown whether any nonviolent action occurred during the second segment because new sources cover protests from a different campaign during this time.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Garment Factory Workers
- about 80% of whom are women

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Not known

Partners:

Trade Unions, including Garment Sramik Oikya Forum, Garments Sramik Trade Union Kendra, Garments Sramik Sangram Parishad, Bangladesh Textiles Garment Workers Federation, Garments Sramik Sanghati, Jago Bangladesh Garments Sramik Federation, Samannita Garments Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Garments Sramik Mukti Andolon, and Biplabi Graments Sramik Sanghat

External allies:

International Labour Organization (ILO), Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labour Rights Forum, United States government (Obama administration), Bangladesh Solidarity Center

Involvement of social elites:

Government Politician, Shajahan Khan

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bangladesh Solidarity Center
- Clean Clothes Campaign
- Garment factory workers
- International Labour Organization

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- United States government

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Politician Shajahan Khan
- United States government (Exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Unknown when International Labour Rights Forum joined and exited.

Segment Length: 2.167 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Ready Made Garment (RMG) factory owners [many of whom were members of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA)], Bangladesh Government officials

Campaigner violence:

Property destruction. Many garment workers engaged in destruction of factories and vehicles which led to some factories shutting down in the garment hub of Ashulia on the outskirts of Dhaka.

Repressive Violence:

In response to the protestor's acts of property destruction, police fired tear gas injuring hundreds of workers, as well as water cannons and rubber bullets in attempt by the opponent to stop them from demonstrating out on the streets. There were also reports that the police violently arrested protesters, particularly labor organizers, and continued to use violence against them when they were imprisoned.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The factory workers won a 77% increase, which is less than the 170% increase that they were hoping for, but more than the 20% increase the factory owners initially offered. Within a two year, 1 month time period, they achieved their goal of having the government prosecute the owners of the Tazreen Fashion and Rana Plaza factories. Some European companies signed a legally binding agreement, called The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (the Accord), to advocate for the

safety of Bangladesh garment workers, but not every manufacturer agreed to do so.

The survival of the campaign is rated at 0.5 because at certain points in the campaign, the labor unions accepted more concessions to the factory owners than the protestors who did not belong to an official organization did. This created the possibility for points of contention between labor unions and the laborers who were organizing themselves independent of an organized body.

The campaign grew in the sense that the issue of poor working conditions and extremely low wages became an issue of international concern and attracted international attention.

Bangladesh, located to the east of India, is a leading global garment manufacturer, producing clothing for such American companies as Gap, Walmart, and J.C. Penney. The Ready Made Garment (RMG) industry makes up 80% of the country's exports and employs about 4 million Bangladeshis, 80% of whom are women. A survey published by the Japan External Trade Organization in December 2013 reported that Bangladesh garment workers earn nearly the lowest monthly wage in the world, second only to Myanmar.

International attention focused in on the difficult working conditions of Bangladeshi factories as a result of two tragic factory incidences: the Tazreen factory fire and the Rana Plaza factory building collapse. During the night of 24 November 2012, a fire broke out in the Tazreen Fashions factory, located in the Nischintapur section of the nation's capital city of Dhaka. 111 workers died, and 300 more were injured. Factory managers told the employees to continue working even as the fire spread, and those who tried to escape were often deterred by the iron bars that framed many of the windows.

In the days after the fire, garment workers from factories throughout the Dhaka region led street protests to demand from the company higher wages than the then-current monthly wage of about \$37 (the lowest in the garment industry) and safe working conditions, and from the government, punishment for the factory owners who did not afford workers these safe conditions. The protesters specifically demanded the construction of fire emergency exits and stairways, exit doors that not locked from the outside, and less crowded work space. The protesters effectively blockaded one of the major highways in the area. Some protesters destroyed property, including vehicles and factory buildings. Since the exact leaders of the protest are unknown, it is difficult to say whether violence was planned or spontaneous. It appears that deep mistrust existed between the factory workers and the factory owners, as illustrated when the protesters continued to hold demonstrations after factory owners and one of the factory's clients, Li and Fung, pledged to give 100,000 takas (1200 US dollars) to the families of each of the 111 victims.

In February and March of 2013, garment worker protests faded into the background of Bangladeshi politics. During this time, the nation was shaken by the Shabag protests in which Bangladeshis pushed for the capital punishment of members of the Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), who had committed war crimes.

By spring, though, protests for better wages and better working conditions at Bangladeshi factories increased in response to the Rana Plaza tragedy. On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza factory building located in Savar collapsed, killing 1134 and injuring thousands. Workers immediately began protesting in such places as "Shyamoli, Kolyanpur, Technical Crossing, Gulshan, Mohakhali, Tejgaon Industrial Area, Malibagh and Karwan Bazar." Others marched to and protested outside the headquarters of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), an organization made up of the factory owners. Police reported that some protesters damaged vehicles and factory property during the protests. In response to the protesters, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowds.

As protests continued, eight workers' organizations organized a day-long strike, known as a "hartal," that paralyzed the city in May. Organization leaders, including Mushrefa Mishu of Garment Sramik Oikya Forum, called for the strike to be peaceful. Both the strikes and the protests caused the factories to shut down, at least temporarily, because there were no workers to produce the clothing and some protesters had damaged factory equipment necessary for production.

The protests gathered international attention. On 7 June, Sumi Abedin, who survived the Tazreen fire, and Kalpona Akter, who

worked in the factories as a child, organized the “End Death Traps” Campaign through the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), a leading Bangladeshi labor rights advocacy group that Akter directed. In this campaign, they organized United States citizens to push US companies to address the poor working conditions and low wages of Bangladeshi factory workers. Meanwhile, back in Bangladesh, protesters blockaded the Dhaka-Aricha highway on 5 June.

On 27 June, the United States suspended the Generalized System of Preferences policy it had made with Bangladesh, in which the US charged Bangladesh reduced tariffs that saved Bangladesh 34.7 million US dollars each year. In response, Bangladesh passed a law designed to support trade union development. Prior to the passing of this law, unions needed to provide 30 signatures of factory workers willing to join the union to factory owners, but owners would often violently punish these workers. The law changed this policy so that factory owners would not be able to access the signatures. It did not, however, address the wage increases the workers demanded most.

By September, the government organized a wage board that would hold discussions on setting new wages for garment workers. When the factory owners announced they would only be willing to increase the wages by 20%, a much lower rate than the 170% increase workers were demanding, workers staged new protests across Dhaka, starting on 21 September 2013. They nonviolently blockaded the Dhaka Tangail Highway, but some protesters threw rocks and vandalized vehicles. Police continued to respond with tear gas and rubber bullets. In October, the factory owners agreed that they would accept whatever wage the wage board recommended, an announcement that put a halt to some protesting.

On Monday, 4 November 2013, though, once the wage board announced that it recommended a 77% increase for a wage of 5,300 taka, the workers barricaded the roads and vandalized vehicles because once again it was not the 170% increase they hoped for. In response, the police launched tear gas bombs and used batons against the protestors. During one protest, on 18 November, 2 workers were killed after clashing with police. Further protests erupted in response to these deaths.

Then, on 1 December, the government officially accepted the wage board’s proposal and increased minimum wage to 5,300 taka. Most unions accepted this increase under pressure from government officials and factory owners. Although the workers did not achieve as high a wage increase as they demanded, their nonviolent action was partially successful because it brought the wage increase up from the 20% that the factory owners initially proposed to 77%.

Later in December 2013, the owners of the Tazreen factory and 11 of their employees were charged with homicide for the death of 111 people in the factory fire in 2012. This occurred within the 2 year time period of analyzing the success of the campaign, so they were successful in this regard. It was not until 31 May 2015, 2 years 1 month after the Rana Plaza building collapse, that Sohen Rana, owner of Rana Plaza, and forty other people involved in the Rana Plaza building collapse, were accused of the murder of the 1134 victims. This occurred after the 2 year timespan, so they were not successful in this regard. In 2015, Bangladeshi factory workers continued to fight for increased rights by waging other campaigns.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Bangladeshi garment workers were influenced by the previous minimum wage increase in 2010 (1). The protests were also spurred by the Tazreen factory fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013. (1).

Note that a survey taken in January 2014 found that about 40% of garment factories were not paying workers the new minimum wage, citing a drop in export orders from Western companies who were turned away from the uncovering of worker mistreatment. This led to backlogged payments, which influenced more protests in the summer of 2014 (2). See other database entry, <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/bangladeshi-garment-workers-fig...> [3].

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Additional Notes:

New author, Meghan Kelly, is picking up this case during the fall semester 2015.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Meghan Kelly, 21/11/2015 and Lorielyn Cadiz, 22/11/2013

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