



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Bangladeshi garment workers protest for a higher minimum wage, 2010

January

2010

to: December

2010

**Country:** Bangladesh

**Location City/State/Province:** Dhaka

**Location Description:** Garment production factories

**Goals:**

For the Bangladeshi government to increase the minimum wage from 1662.50 taka to 5000 taka for garment workers.

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

**Methods in 5th segment:**

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 048. Protest meetings
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Garment Factory Workers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra

**Partners:**

Not known

**External allies:**

International Labor Rights Forum, Clean Clothes Campaign, Human Rights Watch

**Involvement of social elites:**

US House of Representatives International Workers Rights Caucus

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity
- Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation
- Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

- Clean Clothes Campaign
- Human Rights Watch
- International Labor Rights Forum

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- US House of Representatives International Workers Rights Caucus

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** 2 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Bangladeshi government, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (garment industry factory owners)

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

From 26 to 27 June, the owners of garment factories in the Ashulia district reportedly locked out workers by preventing them by entering the premises after they had organized demonstrations to continue their demands for a wage increase.

**Campaigner violence:**

There were several reports of protesters retaliating against police violence throughout this campaign, characterized as spontaneous violence where protesters would throw stones at the police. However, these acts were not sanctioned or encouraged by the labor groups organizing the campaign.

**Repressive Violence:**

The Bangladeshi government ordered police forces to clamp down on protesters throughout this campaign, most notably on 30 June and July 30 where police used batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons to break up protesters that had gathered in Dhaka. Additionally, later in August, the police arrested several leaders of the different labor groups involved in organizing the campaign.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

3 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

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The garment industry has been a backbone of Bangladesh's economy. In 2012 Bangladesh had more than 4,000 garment industry factories making clothes for major Western brands such as Walmart and Zara. The garment industry earned the country \$12 billion a year – nearly 80% of the country's total exports.

Garment making employed about three million workers – more than in any other industrial segment in Bangladesh, a largely agrarian country of about 160 million. Low wages helped Bangladesh's industry compete effectively with other major garment producers in Asia, such as China and Vietnam, and Bangladesh became the second-largest apparel exporter in the world.

However, the conditions for garment workers were extremely poor, including hundreds of garment factory fire deaths. Employees consistently worked about 10 to 16 hours a day, six days a week and only earned a minimum wage of about 1662 taka (\$24) a month.

In October 2009, Bangladeshi labor leaders put pressure on the government to reconstitute a national minimum wage board – a tripartite government body that would consist of representatives of factory owners, workers, and the government to review the minimum wage for garment workers. Bangladesh labor leaders argued that the minimum wage should be raised from 1662 taka to 5000 taka (\$71) per month.

In January 2010, the heads of twelve companies sent a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, urging the government to form the minimum wage board. These companies included: Walmart, H&M, IKEA, Gap Inc., Carrefour Group, B&C Collection, Nike, Levi Strauss and Co., Tesco, KappAnl, Lindex, and Tchibo. Under pressure from Bangladeshi labor leaders and international companies, the government agreed to recreate the minimum wage board.

The board met for the first time on 24 January 2010 but without any representatives of factory workers. Factory workers accused

factory owners of deliberately holding up considerations to increase the minimum wage. Factory owners joined the board on 28 April 2010 but their initial agreement was to increase the wage to 1875, an increase of only 200 taka (\$3) a month. After continued meetings in May, they increased their offer to 2000 taka.

Leaders of labor groups threatened nationwide nonstop protests to force factory owners to increase the minimum wage to 5000 taka. Factory owners insisted that they could not raise wages beyond 2500 (\$36) per month in order to remain competitive with the international garment industry.

During the minimum wage board's meetings, from 1 January to 30 June 2010, labor groups led a series of protests and demonstrations to pressure the Bangladeshi government and the board to raise the minimum wage to 5000 taka. The leading labor groups included the Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity, the Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, and the Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra.

Campaigners reportedly organized as least 72 different protests during this time period, using actions including factory strikes, mass protests in the industrial zones of Dhaka, and demonstrations where workers blocked main highways near Dhaka. On 21 to 22 June, thousands of garment workers barricaded the Dhaka-Tangail highway with trees and burning tires. There were also reports of workers looting some factories and damaging vehicles.

In response, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), a group representing factory owners in Bangladesh, closed down all 250 factories in the Ashulia district. However on 23 June, these garment factories reopened after the government assured owners that it would provide better security, and police were sent to break up protests by using batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons.

Thousands of workers returned to work in Ashulia, where a total of about 500,000 people were employed. Over the weekend from 26 to 27 June, workers were locked out at garment factories in the Ashulia district after some workers organized demonstrations to continue their demands for a wage increase.

On 30 June, more than 20,000 garment workers gathered in the capitol city of Dhaka to protest. Protesters blocked the Rokeya highway for four hours before police used batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons to break up protesters. Many children were caught in clashes between workers and police, helping the garment protests make international headlines.

In response, on 21 July, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave a speech in parliament where she stated that garment workers' wages were "not only insufficient but also inhuman" and she argued that owners should give a greater portion of their profits to workers.

On 29 July, after fourteen rounds of talks, the minimum wage board announced its recommendation for a new minimum wage structure. The Bangladeshi government supported their decision to recommend to nearly double the minimum wage for garment workers, raising the wage from 1662 taka to 3000 taka (\$42) per month. The government agreed to enforce this increase, effective 1 November 2010.

Some labor leaders agreed to this new minimum wage while others felt that this pay increase still did not address the country's inflation and still urged a higher minimum wage of 5000 taka a month. Thirteen garment worker rights organizations announced that they outright rejected the outcome of the minimum wage board's negotiations.

On 30 July, one day after the government formally announced the wage increase, workers resumed their protest because the offer was less than the nearly three-fold hike they demanded. Thousands of protesters blocked highways and traffic in Dhaka. There were also some reports of workers pelting garment factories with stones and vandalizing buildings. Riot police used tear gas and baton charges to disperse protesters.

Throughout August, there were several reported incidents of thousands of garment workers from different factories protesting and making demands in relation to their wages. On 15 August, 4000 garment workers from a garment factory gathered on a main

highway in Dhaka and staged a demonstration demanding implementation of the newly announced wage structure in August, instead of the scheduled date in November. On 22 August, 2000 workers from another factory blocked a highway for three hours to demand that they be paid their overdue wages, but were broken up after police opened fire and threw tear gas shells at them.

In response to continued protests in August, the Bangladesh government began to crack down on different labor groups. By 16 August, they arrested the leaders of three large labor groups and eighteen other protesters on charges that they organized and participated in protests in July. They arrested Montu Ghosh, an adviser to the Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra; Babul Akhter, the executive director of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, and Kalpona Akhter, the executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity.

Many international advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch, the International Labor Rights Forum, and the Clean Clothes campaign publicly criticized the arrests.

On 30 August, the House International Workers Rights Caucus in the U.S. House of Representative wrote a letter to six major companies calling them to take a stand against the persecution of labor leaders in Bangladesh. The caucus, led by Representatives Phil Hare (D-IL) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), called on JC Penny, Wal-Mart, SEARS/Kmart, VF Corporation, Cintas Corporation, and H&M, as major purchasers of apparel from factory owners in Bangladesh.

Despite the arrests, sporadic protests continued in different industrial areas around Dhaka where workers continued to call for a minimum wage of 5000 taka.

Most workers agreed to the new 3000 taka minimum wage, but after many factory workers were not paid under the new minimum wage standard after 1 November, labor leaders re-organized protests to demand that the wage be implemented by factory owners.

On 10 December, thousands of garment workers began to picket factories and block roads near Dhaka. More than 4000 workers blocked a main highway and held demonstrations outside of two plants in the manufacturing zone of Gazipur near Dhaka.

After these protests, factory owners finally started to accept and implement the new minimum wage policy and by the second half of December, most workers ended protests while factories resumed normal production.

In the end, while garment industry workers were not able to attain a minimum wage increase to 5000 taka, they were able to pressure the government to increase the minimum wage to 3000 taka and ensure that garment factory owners actually implemented the new minimum wage.

The new minimum wage was the lowest wage for garment workers in the world. In September 2012, labor groups in Bangladesh organized to re-launch protests demanding that the minimum wage be increased from 3000 taka to 5000 taka and protests were still continuing when this case was published in December 2012.

## Research Notes

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

Rosanna Kim, 2/12/2012

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