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How Repressive Law Enforcement Crushed Minimum Wage Protests in Bangladesh's Garment Sector

BY [DAVID BERGMAN AND MUKTADIR RASHID](#) ON [02/02/2017](#) • [1 COMMENT](#)

Arrests of trade union organisers and workers, along with the suspension by garment manufacturers of as many as 1,500 workers from their jobs, has been a great success for the employers.



Representative image of protestors demanding a hike in minimum wage in Bangladesh. Credit: Reuters/Andrew Biraj

Dhaka: On December 23, 2016, a police officer phoned television and print journalist Nazmul Huda, telling him to come later that day to a press conference concerning the ongoing worker disputes in garment factories in Ashulia, an area on the outskirts of the capital, Dhaka.

Huda had distinguished himself four years earlier

(<https://rsf.org/en/news/reporter-arrested-over-coverage-garment-industry-strike>) as the first journalist to report on the cracks in the wall of the Rana Plaza factory, a day before it collapsed in April 2013, killing more than 1,100 people.

When Huda arrived at Ashulia police station that evening, there was no press conference. Instead, officers bundled him into a vehicle, blindfolded him and then beat him.

“I was taken to different places and threatened with crossfire,” Huda said in a recorded conversation heard by *The Wire*. The term ‘crossfire’ refers to the term used when police claim that a person was killed during a police gunfight with criminals.

At about 4 am the next morning, Huda was dropped off at the local office of the detective branch of the police, from where he was taken to the Savar government hospital for the treatment of injuries sustained from police beatings.

The next day he was remanded by the magistrates court into police custody after it was alleged that he had committed an offence under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (<https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38365/en/bangladesh-information-communication-technology-act>) by apparently publishing an article for a national newspaper which was ‘false’ and likely to incite the garment workers – a crime that carries a *minimum* sentence of seven years imprisonment.

Huda – who spent one month in jail before receiving bail last week (<http://www.dhakatribune.com/crime/2017/jan/23/journalist-nazmul-huda-gets-bail>) – is one of at least 21 people who have been arrested since the end of December 2016 as part of the Bangladesh government’s successful crushing of an apparently spontaneous movement of garment workers seeking an increased minimum wage and improved working conditions.

The other 20 people arrested comprise trade union leaders, activists and organisers – many of whose detentions, like that of Huda, were demonstrably illegal, politicised or without merit, with threats of ‘crossfire’ appearing to be part and parcel of police interrogation tactics.

Worker unrest

The dispute in Ashulia, one of the centres of the country’s thriving ready-made garment sector, started on December 11, 2016, when workers at the Windie Apparel factory walked out.

The factory had been a site of simmering discontent after Taslima Akhter, 23, a sewing operator, had died in late October on the shop floor of the factory after managers refused her repeated requests (http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_grind/2016/12/bangladesh_s_apparel_factories_still_have_appalling_worker_conditions.html) for time off.

In December, the un-unionised workers at the factory approached managers seeking a tripling of minimum wages, set three years ago at \$67 per month, along with a list of 15 other demands. After they were rebuffed, the workers walked out and in subsequent days employees from about 20 other factories in the area joined in.

Trade union activists and leaders working in Ashulia say that the walk out by Windie workers and the subsequent stoppages at other factories took them by surprise.

“The issue of the minimum wage was something we all talked about,” said Kalpana Akhter, a former garments worker who is the executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity and works closely with different unions. “It has been three years since the last minimum wage increased. However, no one had any idea that Windie workers were going to make this kind of demand or that other workers would join them.”

Whether the protests took place without any outside trade union assistance is difficult to say, but in the subsequent days, intense efforts were made to resolve the conflict with meetings between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and leaders of the various trade union federations active in the area.

“My response was that they should talk to the workers and factory owners, and negotiate with them,” said Babul Akhter, president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation

(BGIWF) and one of the leaders involved in discussions with the BGMEA. “I said, if they don’t negotiate then it will be a big problem, as Ashulia workers are very strong, their voice is very strong.”

Very few factories in the Ashulia area have trade unions, so the national federations had limited influence over the factory workers. “We were telling the workers not to go to on the street, but to go to management with their demands,” Kalpana said. “But the workers were not listening to us.”

“But what was interesting about these protests is that they were one of the most peaceful protests garment workers had ever held in Bangladesh. There was no vandalism, no looting and no beating,” she added.

By December 20, the manufacturers had decided to take a confrontational route to resolve the crisis. The BGMEA announced they would close 55 Ashulia-based factories under a provision of the Bangladesh labour law which allows an employer to close a factory “in the event of an illegal strike”. Whilst employers said that this was to stop vandalism, trade unionists saw this as a way to break the strike and stop engaging with the workers’ grievances.

“People talk about workers’ strike, but this was an employers’ strike. Workers only stopped work in 20 factories. But the employers closed over 50 factories,” said Alonzo Suson of the Bangladesh country programme of the Solidarity Centre, an international labour group.

The arrests begin

The BGMEA closure was just the first counter measure by the authorities to deal with the protests.

On the morning of December 21, the industrial police called a meeting of union organisers in the restaurant of Fantasy Kingdom, a children's theme park in Ashulia.

One of the men who attended the meeting was Ibrahim, who worked for the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity as an organiser and was also a local trade union leader for BGIWF. Both organisations claim they were uninvolved in the protests and had helped the industrial police to encourage workers to go back to work.

“At 9 am, Ibrahim called to say that they were given snacks but the police were not allowing them to leave the restaurant,” said Kalpana. “At about 10:30 am I found his phone turned off.”

Two hours later, Ibrahim along with three other trade union organisers were seen being put into a white microbus outside the theme park and taken away.

“When we spoke to Ibrahim later, he said that all four of the men were blindfolded, taken to the detective branch office in Dhamrai in Savar and questioned about their links to various organisations, and whether they were involved in the wage campaign,” said Kalpana. “They were then blindfolded again, separated and taken to a house in the forests for whole night and then threatened with being cross-fired.”

The police filed a case against him and the three other men under the Special Powers Act 1974 for an offence which, remarkably, had years earlier been removed from the statute book.

Subsequently they were each ‘shown arrested’ under eight further cases filed by different garment factories and accused of a total of nine different offences including trespass, criminal intimidation

and extortion allegedly committed since the worker dispute began. Significantly, their names did not initially appear as accused in any of the cases.

The same night, two plain clothes police men came to the house of Jehangir, president of the Designer Jeans factory union, who was asleep with his wife and children.

“They first knocked on the door at about 11:20 at night, pretending to be from Polmal Garment where Jehangir’s wife worked,” Kalpana said. “His wife did not recognise the voice so she told them to come in the morning. The police officers then kicked down the door and said he just wanted to take Jehangir away for 30 minutes. He was allowed to change his clothes and put into a waiting van.”

According to colleagues, Jehangir was kept in a ‘dark room’ for two days, before being brought to the court on the evening of December 23 – although the law requires detainees to be brought before the court within 24 hours.

As with the other four trade union activists picked up the previous day, he was also accused by the police of an offence that no longer exists and subsequently of an additional eight cases filed by garment factories.

Arrests in Gazipur

The day after Ibrahim was taken, detective branch officers went to the office of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF) in Gazipur – over 25 km from Ashulia. Two of the union’s organisers, Azadur Zaman and Md Golam Arif, lived on the fifth floor of the building.

“At about 11:15 pm, the DB (detective branch) police came and

asked Azad and Arif what they knew about what was going on in Ashulia,” said Rashadullah Alam Raju, the vice president of the union who subsequently met the two men in jail. “They informed the DB police that the union had no organising activities in Ashulia and BIGUF was not involved. But the police told them that you have to come with us.”

The following day, the authorities denied they knew anything about the detention. “I spoke to the local police and the detective branch officers, including the men whom I subsequently found out had detained the men,” Raju said. “They denied they had arrested Azad and Arif.”

Early on the morning of December 24, the police told Raju that the DB had handed over the two men and that he could collect the men from the police station the following morning. However, instead the police showed Zaman and Arif as arrested in a criminal case involving setting fire to a bus two years earlier in January 2015.

This was an old case filed during a period of concerted political conflict (<http://bangladeshpolitico.blogspot.com/2015/01/political-conflict-2015-understanding.html>) between the Awami League government and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Zaman and Arif’s names had never before been linked to these cases and in the two years since the incident the police had shown no interest at all in arresting the two men.

In the subsequent days, three other trade union organisers and 11 workers were also picked up in Ashulia, and along with the other men have been imprisoned and denied bail by the lower courts.

Many trade union activists are currently in hiding, sleeping at different places at night scared of being arrested or worse. “On January 20, detective branch officers came to BIGUF’s Konabari

office in Gazipur,” Raju said. “They said that they were looking for me and two other union men. None of us were there at the time. The DB officers said that ‘if we catch Raju will we kill him and throw him in the drain’.”

The article

It is, however, the action taken against the journalist Huda which most clearly exposes the police.

The article which provided the justification for his arrest was published in the Bangladesh daily paper *Bangladesh Protidin* (<http://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2016/12/20/193554>) on the morning of December 22, the day after the first arrests of the trade union organisers.

The police claim that there were four sentences in the article that were false and likely to incite workers.

These state that: “long route public buses on the Abdullahpur-Bypile road had been stopped from the previous day”; that “there are more than 600 garments factories in Savar and Ashulia area”; that “the police did not allow any vehicle through the Bypile road” and that “other than the 55 closed factories, workers of other factories came to their workplaces, but did not work”.

Even if these statements were all proven to be false, it is difficult to see how they could have “created a discontent among the garments workers... attempted to break the resolve of the government, and to create chaos in the law enforcement system,” as the police alleged in the FIR.

Intriguingly, the FIR misquoted one of the sentences in the article falsely claiming Najmul had stated that 600 factories in Ashulia

were 'closed'.

Moreover, those close to Huda think that his arrest had little to do with the content of this article but rather his failure to abide by an earlier police request not to report any more on the dispute.

The day before he was picked up, Huda is said to have had an altercation with a police officer. In a recorded conversation heard by *The Wire*, Huda claimed that this officer had instructed him "not to do any further reports on this issue" alleging that the journalist was "instigating workers".

Huda says that the police authorities were angry with him as TV stations had a few days earlier broadcast the police using tear gas to break up an assembly of workers.

In the recent years, the government has used law enforcement action to quieten any political opposition. The arrests linked to the worker disputes in Ashulia show how similar tactics, with the police working hand in hand with garment manufacturers, work equally effectively in dealing with other kinds of political challenges.

The arrests of trade union organisers and workers – along with the suspension by garment manufacturers of as many as 1,500 workers from their jobs and the operation of a 'black-list' intended to stop alleged troublemakers from working in the garment sector – has been a great success for the employers.

Workers' rights activists now cannot see how workers will be able to raise the issue of the minimum wage for at least another two years, when the government should set up a new minimum wage board.

"It has crushed the whole minimum wage demand," says Kalpana.

"There is a lot of fear as result of the action by the authorities."

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