

Bangladesh

NGWF allocation campaign for garment workers shows first success



Workers in Bangladesh garment factories generate 78 per cent of the country's foreign income. Despite this fact, the workers live in poor conditions – while the government does nothing to support them.

On 15 May, during parliamentary debates on the 2011-2012 budget, the NGWF made demands on the behalf of the – mostly women – garment workers:

1. subsidised basic foods for factory workers
2. maternity clinics
3. child care centres
4. building and improvement of the public transport network
5. social housing for factory workers

The aim of these measures is to alleviate workers' conditions, because wages are too low to provide for decent food, clothing and housing.

Between 17 and 20 May, the union organised a series of actions to make the Bangladesh government allocate resources for these measures in the new budget. Each of the

5 demands was handed over to the responsible ministry, a discussion event was held on "Garment workers' expectations of the new budget", and a large-scale gathering of all trade unions and workers' organisations in garment production. Further actions followed at the beginning of June.

The government initially ignored all this. The draft budget presented to parliament on 9 June contained no provision for funds in support of the garment workers. To ex-



Developing and strengthening links between workers from Asia and Europe, working along the subcontracting chain of garment production, is the main objective of the **ExCHAINS** project. These links are vital to the global fight against the exploitation of workers and for the eradication of poverty.

In the **ExCHAINS** project, TIE (Transnationals Information Exchange) is collaborating with three regional unions:

- ✓ Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU, Sri Lanka) (former Free Trade Zones Workers Union, FTZWU)
- ✓ National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF, Bangladesh)

✓ Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver.di, Germany)

We want:

- ✓ to raise awareness concerning the international production chain in the textile, garment and retail sector;
- ✓ to establish concrete solidarity between workers along the supply chain;
- ✓ to support freedom of association and the right to organise;
- ✓ to support concrete campaigns;
- ✓ to pressure big retail companies to name their suppliers and to support the right to organise at their suppliers.

This newsletter is being published regularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Germany, containing information about working conditions in the respective countries, as well as information about ongoing campaigns. We hope this will provide an opportunity for information exchange and raise awareness about the connections between the different countries and unite workers' demands.

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press their dissatisfaction with this, the workers marched through Dhaka and held a rally on 24 June.

Eventually, the NGWF demands were taken up by more workers' and other organisations and also received support by some politicians.

Finally, on 5 August, the Ministry for Women's and Children's Affairs approved the construction of a 10-storey apartment block for factory workers, including a child care centre, in the garment industrial area of Ashulia. This is the first time the government has responded positively to two of the 5 demands, which represents a first major success for the NGWF government allocation campaign.

The campaign is being continued. NGWF and its supporters call on the government: Don't use the workers just to generate profits – create an infrastructure that enables them to live and work in dignity!

Another success story

As reported before, NGWF activities on International Women's Day (8 March) were often centered on the ongoing campaign for adequate maternity leave. Most recently, in 2011, the union demanded the end of divergent standards: workers in the private sector should also have a right to 6 months' paid maternity leave, just like their counterparts in the public sector. Garment workers currently have a right to 4 months' maternity leave – a right that is frequently being violated by employers. And it is still true that workers can lose their job if their employer finds out about a pregnancy.

Since January 2011 women employed in the public sector in Bangladesh have had a right to 6 months' maternity leave. This may seem like a long leave to us. But in Bangladesh 5% of all children die before they reach



the age of 5, while half the children in this age group are undernourished. Only 17% of mothers have the opportunity to breastfeed their children during the first 6 months, as recommended by the World Health Organisation. Hence maternity leave here is a question of survival for children, women and their families.

Since January, the NGWF has repeatedly demanded to extend maternity leave from 4 to 6 months in the private sector too. This has contributed to building a broad acceptance for this demand within society at large.

On 11 August the Prime Minister issued an urgent appeal to employers prior to the World Breastfeeding Week 2011: that they too should implement

a system of 6 months maternity leave in their factories.

A new era for workers

As part of its May Day celebrations the NGWF called for a "new era" to begin for the workers in Bangladesh's garment industry: after more than 30 years, surely it is time for change! About 5,000 workers took part in the May Day rally, at which employers and the government were called upon to

- ✓ make jobs more safe (no more deaths from factory fires),
- ✓ improve working conditions,
- ✓ pay the workers a living wage,
- ✓ respect the fundamental workers' rights,
- ✓ apply labour law not only in the interests of industry but also in the interests of workers,
- ✓ and provide food subsidies and welfare facilities.



But a call also goes out to the international buyers of the garments produced, as well as to the governments of the importing countries:

- ✓ pay a fair price per item of clothing and
- ✓ relax import restrictions on garments coming from Bangladesh

Still common- place: union busting

The practice of simply firing workers – or, in extreme cases, of closing the factory – if they demand their rights to be respected, remains widespread among employers in the garment industry.

This is what happened to more than 400 workers at five companies in Dhaka: Onyx Knitex, Alana Garments, Benson Apparels, Riz Fashion and Aditi Apparels. The workers had complained about poor working

conditions – wages being paid months later in some cases, no maternity leave, no employment contracts. All this violates existing labour laws in Bangladesh. Two of the companies even paid their workers less than the legal minimum wage.

When around 200 workers protested the actions of the five companies by taking part in a symbolic hunger strike in Dhaka on 8 July, some of the workers had been laid off for more than 6 months and still not received any compensation. Some were still waiting to be paid their last wages.

The NGWF had already been very

active before: it met with the employers' federation BGMEA many times and submitted complaints regarding each conflict to the authorities. But nothing changed for the fired workers.

The NGWF protest campaign started with the hunger strike has now led to an agreement that both sides can live with, at least in two of the five conflicts: the fired workers received their outstanding wage payments and a modest compensation.

The remaining three cases are still waiting for resolution. The campaign continues. Employers should not be allowed to get away with harrasing,

pressuring and firing workers whenever they struggle for their rights!

International solidarity

“A concrete form of international solidarity is needed”, says

Amirul Haque Amin, General Secretary of the NGWF. To achieve this, the German trade union federation DGB began in May to support a project for solidarity along the garment supply chain. The aims are to provide support for union organisation and to improve the working conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh.

The NGWF will identify supplier factories of large European retail companies in Bangladesh and investigate the working conditions there. The research results will then be used by the NGWF to inform the workers about their rights and to formulate common problems and demands towards local producers and multinational buyer organisations. Within a year about 600 workers will receive training in this way.

Outcomes and demands resulting from the project will be shared with ver.di union works council members in German retail companies in the context of the ExChains project. These German workers will support the demands within the retail companies and exert pressure on their employers to use their power to improve working conditions in their supplier companies.

