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# Report Reveals Repression of Labor Activists in Bangladesh

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Companies, government must do more to protect civil liberties and increase wages for garment workers, advocates say

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November 1, 2010 – A report by the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) released today reveals a severe government crackdown on labor rights activists in Bangladesh in the last few months as the country's garment workers demanded higher wages. Bangladeshi garment workers are the worst paid workers in the world. Worker protest against low wages and poor working conditions peaked in early August this year following the government's announcement of a new \$43 monthly minimum wage, well short of workers' needs and expectations. The new wage is scheduled to take effect today.

"We were forced to take to the streets as the owners exploited us right under the government's nose," said a garment worker quoted in *The Daily Star*, a Bangladeshi newspaper, after the government announcement of the new minimum wage.

According to the ILRF report, *Enemies of the Nation or Human Rights Defenders? Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh*, the new \$43 dollar minimum wage is still a "malnutrition wage." Even Bangladeshi prisoners are better off than garment workers in nutritional terms, the report claims. It estimates a garment worker needs almost four times the new minimum wage just to feed her average-sized family.

The ILRF report criticizes the Bangladeshi government for scapegoating labor activists for inciting worker unrest and branding them "enemies of the nation" instead of dealing with workers' genuine grievances. Focusing on the experiences of the leaders of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, one of the most prominent labor rights groups in Bangladesh, the report relates a harrowing story of persecution as Bangladeshi police and security forces, including the notorious Rapid Action Battalion, raided staff members' homes and attempted by subterfuge to discover the hideouts of the organization's leaders. When captured, two of the labor leaders were tortured in custody to extract a confession that the organization had fomented worker riots.

Human rights groups, labor rights groups, and industry groups have denounced the Bangladeshi crackdown on labor rights activists. Human Rights Watch condemned the "serious harassment of trade

union leaders and other labor rights activists and workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry who have been pressing for the right of workers to organize in unions and seeking increases in Bangladesh's minimum wage regulations" in a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 10, 2010.

The ILRF report calls on both companies and the Bangladeshi government to take action to protect civil liberties for the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and other labor rights defenders and increase the minimum wage for garment workers to at least \$72 per month, the workers' demand.

"We hope that this report will help bring justice for the leaders and staff of Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and, in so doing, advance the cause of Bangladeshi garment workers who seek only the basic dignity of decent work and good wages," said Bjorn Claeson, author of the report and director of the SweatFree Communities program at ILRF.

Enemies of the Nation or Human Rights Defenders? Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh is available at [www.sweatfree.org/bcws](http://www.sweatfree.org/bcws) [1].

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The International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) is an advocacy organization based in Washington, DC, dedicated to achieving just and humane treatment for workers worldwide. ILRF serves a unique role among human rights organizations as advocates for and with working poor around the world. We believe that all workers have the right to a safe working environment where they are treated with dignity and respect, and where they can organize freely to defend and promote their rights and interests.

A program of the International Labor Rights Forum, SweatFree Communities, coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promotes humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries. SweatFree campaigns build broad community support for sweatshop-free government purchasing and help build a market for decent working conditions.

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[1] <http://www.sweatfree.org/bcws>