

Historic May Day: Some questions

KAZI LIAKAT HOSSAIN

THE historic May Day is being observed today throughout the country and elsewhere in the world as a mark of respect to the workers, who shed their blood for the establishment of the rights of the working class in 1886. On this day 116 years ago, the workers at the Hay Market of Chicago City, USA, sacrificed their lives for ensuring eight-hour working day for them.

Three years later, the Second Socialist International in Paris decided to designate May 1 as the day for expressing solidarity of working people in memory of Hay Market martyrs. A number of countries around the world observe the day as a national holiday with rallies and meetings.

The new major steps in the labour front was the establishment of International Labour Organisation (ILO) (three decades after the decision to observe May Day internationally). The ILO was established in 1919 to promote social justice for working class everywhere. It formulates international policies and programmes to help improve working and living conditions, create international labour standards to serve as guidelines for national authorities in putting those policies into action.

The problems of labour and consciousness about labour rights did not come overnight. In fact, the history is as old as civilisation. The society came to be divided between the rich and the poor representing the exploiter and the exploited.

The exploited humanity gradually turned into slaves. They were

put to hard labour and labour was looked down upon. At one stage although slavery was formally abolished, vestiges still remain. The dignity of labour is yet to be fully recognised.

Labour movement has a proud heritage in this part of the world, now Bangladesh. The country is a signatory to the ILO Convention and has a number of legislations for labour welfare. The government is also keen on improving the lot of the working class and the concern

and also the present one is fiddling with the fate of the hapless lot by creating or allowing to create more than one Union? What is the achievement of the government in creating confidence and restoring industrial peace and harmony? The answers to all these questions will understandably be in the negative. Yet the questions need to be answered.

It is now nearly two years that the present democratic government is at the helm of affairs of the

The labour unions in question in most of the cases become unreasonable and come up with fantastic demands only to help in the closure of the units.

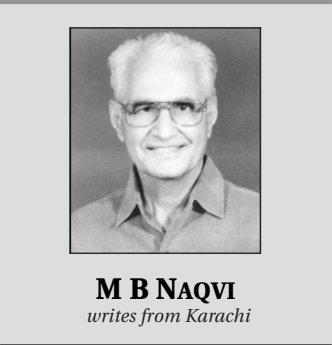
It must be understood that better employer-employee relations can only ensure productivity and welfare of the workers. They cannot always think in terms of agitation, strikes and gherao-jalao tactics ingrained into their minds by a section of labour representatives who are acting at the behest of vested quarters only to cause industrial breakdown in our country.

The wages invariably have to be linked with productivity and the demand for higher wages cannot reasonably be pressed without increasing output. There, of course, should be a guaranteed minimum wage. The working atmosphere has to be made conducive, peaceful and of course safe for women workers.

The efforts to remove economic and social causes swelling the number of child labour have to be intensified. The celebration of May Day should inspire all those connected with labour movements, to act in a manner that does not jeopardise production at any level. Without hard work and dedication, establishment of social justice will never be attained. The so-called champions of labour welfare must also realise the gravity of the situation and help in resurrecting the fragile economy of Bangladesh at a time when the foreign aid and investment climate is not so favourable, and thus ensure lasting welfare of workers through work.

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Nuclear WMDs in South Asia



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

THERE is something curious about the likely purposes of the recent visit of India's hardline Defence Minister George Fernandes to Beijing. Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee had only recently made the overture for talks with Pakistan. There must then be some link with Pakistan too. In Beijing Fernandes firmly reiterated India's nuclear doctrine of 'No First Strike'. Perhaps it was appropriate that the Defence Minister was sent, who after the Pokhran nuclear tests in May 1998, had nominated China as the main security threat to India. But Pakistan and the nukes must have figured in talks with Chinese leaders. NWMDs anyway have to be discussed between India and Pakistan.

So long as Indian and Pakistani governments say what they say -- that Indian WMDs are there to serve its core interests and concerns while Pakistan's basic security is predicated on its WMDs -- a modus operandi between them is, in this writer's view, impossible. Not many people fully realise the mischief these nuclear WMDs do. While India has those nuclear-tipped missiles aimed at Pakistan, no Pakistani general or civilian government can trust that those weapons would not be used against Pakistani targets in a grave crisis. Similarly while the nuclear-tipped Ghauris, Abdalis and others stand aimed at India, no responsible Indian can trust Pakistan's intentions. It is in the nature of these weapons; no adversary can be trusted with them in a crisis anywhere. Mutual trust and nukes don't gel.

There is unending rhetoric from Bomb-lovers about deterrence and a possible détente or a Nuclear Restraint Regime, based on Confidence Building Measures. India and Pakistan are overt nuclear powers for five long years. Has deterrence worked? Did the two go beyond signing a Memorandum of Understanding regarding a desired

tente or NRR? Could that understanding be ever negotiated? Why was it not discussed despite good drafts provided by the Americans to both sides? Indians loftily dis-

miss the reason for this failure to Gen. Musharraf's Kargil adventure. Have they asked the simple question: how could Pakistani military, in the context of India's proven nuclear deterrent, go ahead with cocking a snook at it?

It is a serious question requiring serious inquiry. This involves the basic mischief that nuclear weapons do. The first thing that happens after a country crosses the nuclear threshold is a swollen head of its policy planners. An arrogance of power penetrates into their think-

worked. Ideally, Pakistan should be deterred by Indian nuclear might and India should be duly respectful of Pakistan's capabilities. Are the two adequately deterred? Bold will be the man who will answer in the affirmative. Which general or government can miss the fact that a Ghauri will take two to three minutes to reach its target in India? Indian Prithvi too will take the same time to wreak terrible destruction in Pakistan. No government or an army can take a rational or calculated decision or

is starting or has started between these two neighbours. Now which commander in India will masochistically wait, while keeping his nukes primed, until Pakistani generals have pressed the red button *first* -- thus suffering absolutely unacceptable destruction of, say India's one or two urban-industrial centres -- as the theory is adumbrated. The world is told to believe that after Indian high command has made sure that this has actually happened, they will then order their own riposte that will be so massive as may send Pakistan to the stone age. Is this military behaviour amidst the dust and din of war credible? This is all too fanciful and unreal.

Just as India's No First Use is not credible, Pakistan's doctrine of reserving the right to use the nuke first -- in a critical situation where basic security of state is threatened, of course -- is also suspect. Its first use is predicated on a critical situation during a conventional war. If so, this use is even less credible because (a) the situation being already critical, such use will not ensure any relief or cessation of hostilities, much less victory; (b) it is sure to invite retaliation in kind which may lead to a worse defeat. Moreover, by the time the critical stage is reached, the capacity to use the option may have been compromised. A power with inferior conventional strength needs to avoid war altogether or start off with a nuclear strike. For, the use of nuclear weapons can only result in excessive destruction in both and old notions of victory and defeat do not apply.

What the opposing generals are more likely to do is to try and preempt the other. Thus there may be a race between the two sides to be the first to strike -- and as massively as may be feasible or judged adequate. The two, as of now, remain engaged in hectic arms races of various kinds. Why else are they conducting so many missile tests? *Whatever relevance* Mr. Fernandes' No First Use doctrine may work with regard to China, US or others, it has little to Pakistan.

There is no way the nuclear weapons can help win a war or maintain peace. All other uses of nuclear weapons in a possible war do not make sense. They will cause senseless destruction of vast areas. Not that preemptive use is sane. Thanks to dispersion of nuclear weapons in each country, both nations may end up with wholly unacceptable devastation for no rational purpose. Use of nuclear weapons on this Subcontinent is anyhow insane and can only result in Mutually Assured Defeat. Indeed, the damage to non-combatants outside India and Pakistan can neither be avoided nor justified.

The only sane and rational thing is for common South Asians to mount an effective peace movement and let both New Delhi and Islamabad be compelled by their respective people to do without nuclear weapons altogether. A wholly non-nuclear South Asia will be so many shades saner and safer. It won't solve all the problems, of course. But the nightmare of a senseless nuclear war will disappear. Let peaceniks be given a chance -- or rather they should assert themselves here first and show that Pakistan does not produce only hawks, if also mostly bogus.

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May Day: Global observance and national concern

SHAMIMA ISLAM

MAY Day is globally observed. It reminds us simultaneously of workers' rights and nations' obligations to fulfil those rights. I appreciate the global concern, but what I fail to understand is the global gap and the promises and their failures. The day and the tragedy, which ignited the global concern, is not observed in its own land -- USA. It is funny to see that whole world is observing this particular day while USA observes its own labour day and not the May Day. In our country, in recent years although May Day is quite loudly pronounced, but tragedies still are silently skipped.

To me the Labour Day means something more. Every year this day reminds me of the unforgettable pictures and the news items concerning our garment workers who were roasted alive while on the job in the garment industries. These women industrial workers were invited to the industry sector and the garment industries provided a scope to them for some earning. But neither the industries, nor the state could protect them from such tragedies. These female workers were killed in fire hazards while on the job and except the immediate media coverage on the following day and some necessary actions on the part of their employers, almost nobody ever remembered them. What a great contradiction! While on every May Day we observe the occasion stressing global concern for labourers' rights and narrate vividly what happened in Chicago more than a century ago, we forget our own and recent experiences and fail to take renewed pledges as a nation. Why is this gap? Is it because these workers are women? Or, because the garment workers are a marginal group? Do we take for granted that

the garment workers are too powerless employees against the too powerful employers? One may ask me at this point -- why I bring this issue particularly? Needless to say, the whole matter pains me much. It demonstrates our pathetic neglect towards a vital segment of our nation's workers.

On May Day let us not forget that the garment industries accounted for 73.28 percent share in the nation's total exports (1997-98), amounting to 3781.94 million US\$ and garment workers constituted an estimated 1.50 million in 2726 RMG factories in that particular year.

It thus suggests that garment sector's importance to national economy needs neither debate nor much dialogue to prove. Research

Every May Day should remind us that we killed our garment workers merely because of nation's neglect. It is an unforgivable offence and our shame! The clear violation of Factory Laws made our garment workers easy prey to fire hazards where they were trapped inside the factories.

Garment workers' susceptibility to fire hazard is unusually high as the raw materials used in the industries are highly inflammable. All the recent incidents have shown us that severe neglect in observing safety rules have made the garment workers victims. Doctor Protima Paul-Majumder mentions from Fire Brigade sources that upto November 1997, 58 fire accidents took place in garment industries killing 118 workers of whom 90

who laid their lives at the altar of our national prosperity.

RMG as we see it, is our gateway to 'trading out of poverty'. Its emergence as a major industrial sub-sector calls for more research, more debates, more thinking and re-thinking as well as challenges. This sector is not merely labour intensive, it is female labour oriented industry. Women are chosen because of their dexterity and sincerity who can work despite the strenuousness and adverse working conditions. As garment sector is heavily oriented towards women labour force, the tendency to neglect labour issues is highly observed. But we forget that labour is an essential factor in our production, and the more attention we pay to our female workers, the better for us.

In recent years, many improvements, at least on paper, are claimed to have taken place. Let us hope that these are meaningful ones which will bring us not only prosperity, but ensure safety for our workers in the garment sector. Let these be seriously implemented.

May Day should bring in real concern and not any tokenism of effort. Media should portray reality and give much better coverage.

Let the education system of the country play meaningful role in teaching our future generation the reality and implications of the Labour Day.

I strongly feel that a symbolic cenotaph be constructed with the names of the victims of our garment industries who were killed in the factories engraved, where people from all walks of life will have a chance to pay their own tributes.

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