

**N**O doubt there are ideal factories and philanthropic owners, some we can write abroad about. But one rotten apple has for long spoilt the cart. And you are not alone in believing there are more rotten ones than one.

The owners invest their money and time; the workers invest their labour and time. That is normal considering both groups are necessary requisites for an industry; the third being machinery, which the owners procure, and the workers operate and maintain.

The owners travel in luxury cars, the workers walk in their hundreds to their workplace. That is normal considering their income difference.

The owners live happily with their respective family, the workers stay far from their homestead and family. That is normal considering their employment structure.

The owners at the BEPZA have formed the BEPZ Investors Association, presumably to protect their interest. That is normal considering they have invested so much.

The workers are NOT allowed to form their association at BEPZA to protect their interest at a place where they have invested their life. That is normal where human rights violations do not raise an eyebrow, where they do not need to demand anything because everything is supposed to be provided.

The owners have weekly holidays, and vacations at home and abroad. That is normal considering they need a break to refresh and recuperate to work harder for the national economy. The workers do not have weekly holidays. That is normal considering that a form of slavery is in practice.

The owners work before and beyond office hours to negotiate with buyers and shippers and bankers and machinery suppliers ... such involvement has a positive effect on their respective income. The workers also work overtime and have now muscled enough courage, that too only collectively, to demand only 60% of their agreed overtime payment. That is normal considering they are now getting only 40%.

The owners want all sorts of perks, privileges and protection from the government for their industry. That is normal considering they are a major contributor to the nation's foreign exchange earning; figures fly from 50 to 70% in the nation's economic barometer. The workers want their due salary for their sweat. That is normal considering that unawares of their rights they too are a major contributor to the nation's earnings.

The owners are not asked by the buyers of their goods to make a second shipment as condition for payment of a

# The great 'normal' divide

## Cheap labour should not be reduced to slavery

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shipment received in good condition. That is normal under international trading laws. The workers are asked to do overtime in the nightshift if they want their daytime salary. Case in point: a pregnant worker of Spectrum Garments, Savar. She died when the building collapsed. That is normal because the laws are not in their hands.

The owners have to have their factories surveyed by visiting inspectors for compliance certification for fulfilment of norms accepted by the Western buyers. The inspectors interview workers, where they have to say they receive say Tk. 3000 as salary whereas they take a third of that home, albeit irregularly. That is normal because otherwise both the owner and the worker would be out of work.

The owners tried to appease the workers by saying that those who attacked the factory buildings on ... were not workers but outsiders. As proof they put up the Rabindric logic that no worker would attack his own place of work. Further proof, they said, was that although 80% workers were women, they were not among the protestors as per television footage. That is normal as much as saving one's own skin. The workers again started agitating in early June and this time they were attacking the factories they worked in and there were women among the agitators. That is normal because women are the most exploited.

The owners claim that workers' salary is not a problem and often run into tens of thousands. A few highly qualified and experienced operational staffs are in that pay bracket. The general workers are in fact stuck at a minimum wage of Taka 930 per month (or get lost) at a rate fixed over a decade ago. Three governments have come over the period. Prices of essentials, house rent and communication have doubled. The contrasting high salary and low handouts are normal because there is a shortage of skilled manpower and a fierce competition among the factories, alongside a wealth of idle Bangalee manpower.

The workers are now attacking factories and burning down establishments. That is normal. Under the circumstances would you have not done the same?

The owners should be ready to part with part of their profit, and if necessary enhance prices in the international market so that better pay as well as human working conditions can be provided to the toiling workers. That is normal in any civilised society.

The civilised West should be willing to pay more for our products so that the next time they don a Bangladeshi garment they appreciate it was not made by an animal.