

# Perception is Reality

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THE hope for discourse among the workers and the owners of the garment factories seem to be waning fast. The workers continue to agitate hoping to pressurise the industry owners to meet their 11 point demand, the foreign investors threaten to pull out and the private owners struggle to manage a volatile mob and keep businesses running. While, most people agree that the condition of the workers need to be improved, it is disturbing that again violence was chosen as the means to be heard. Difficult days lie ahead for the industry and the thousands of workers engaged in this sector as the closing of the EPZs do not serve the interests of either group. But what else

was expected? It is naïve to think that those involved in the lawlessness that went on for two weeks are unperturbed by the possibility of losing their livelihood or are oblivious to the impact this violence will have on the industry. Then why such extreme hostility? Why such comprehensive disenchantment? The answer may lie in the cliché "perception is reality." The perceived mountain of wealth accumulated by the owners on the backs of the garment workers has translated into the swing of their brick bats and the zeal with which they shout their demands.

Over the last decade, the RMG sector has put Bangladesh on the map. It has also created a new breed of Bangladeshis we often term "garment-wallas." It is also true that a generation of new elites have risen, throwing the already existing income disparity in Bangladesh completely out of whack. How many of these elite members of society have come from the booming garments industry and how many are politicians and government servants is not a question that can be answered definitively. However, to the common man it makes little difference. Every evening as the human chain of garments workers cross the roads on their way home, they traverse through the choc a block traffic packed with the latest BMWs and SUVs. Just the wax job of any of these vehicles cost more than a year's salary for

most of these hard working men and women.

The ostentatious lifestyle of Dhaka's elite continues unabated and is thrown in the faces of the blue collar workers every day. As the number of luxury cars, apartments in the flashiest of neighbourhoods, private schools where monthly fees are no less than fifty thousand taka, diamond sets and shopping sprees in Dubai increase, all eyes focus on the owners of these garment's factories and their families. However, little is done to change the working conditions of the garments workers. There is no improvement in health and safety (as we've witnessed with the collapse and burning down of several factories) and no change in wages and benefits. But the owner's BMW parked outside the factory changes series numbers every year. Is it really then so hard to understand why the garment worker demands an improvement in her wage and working conditions?

As the rich and famous move away from humility and social responsibility and the income disparity is shoved in the faces of the common man, such reactions from the have-nots are only to be expected. There are many companies in this sector that have the interests of their workers in mind, who already provide fair wages and good governance, but until this becomes the norm in the entire industry, perception will remain that, they are all the same; and perception is reality.