

## How Not to Solve a Strike

The hope for an early resolution of the crisis arising out of the continued teachers' strike has vanished. At risk with it is any possibility of a smooth conduct of the SSC examinations. This is despite the government's insistence that the SSC examinations will be held on schedule and in a trouble-free atmosphere. As things stand now the government will be held responsible for any dislocation and disruption of the conduct of examinations and the publication of results. All this because of the government's handling of the teachers' strike.

First the government continued to ignore the strike as if it was a non-issue. Then it allegedly tried to appease factions of the striking teachers so that the movement would peter out through internal squabbles. Afterwards it decided to talk to the teachers but without the Central Teachers' Action Liaison Committee, a platform of six organisations of non-government school and college teachers. When that did not work, the government finally demonstrated a flurry of activities by inviting the teachers, including the liaison committee. It is at this point that the government accepted some of the teachers' demands that included one time-scale from July 1 this year.

On the face of it the government's latest concession looks like more of yet another appeasement rather than a practical measure to solve the problem. Although one group of teachers, the Bangladesh Teachers' Association (Ashraf-Nazrul) has decided to discontinue strike, the main bodies of teachers have found the government concession too little too late. They consider the government move as an attempt to bypass their main demand for a national pay scale for the nongovernment teachers. No doubt that the government has been somewhat vague in its acceptance of some of the demands it has conceded to.

At this point we are forced to conclude that the government has already done enough bumbling and it seems it is bent on extending that streak further. If the government thought that some of the teachers' demands deserved to be addressed, why did it not agree to fulfil them in the first place? This is yet another example of the government's inept handling of crises following the fourth class government employees' movement and the nurses' strike. In all such cases, the government sat on the problem for long and allowed the agitating groups to push their movements to the point of militancy. At the end, the government had no way left to itself but to concede to most of the demands — some of them impractical and beyond fulfilment — through a last-moment negotiation.

This time also the government dragged on and on the problem that could be easier to solve if it paid enough attention to the issue when the teachers made their grievances public. We believe, a government concedes to demands of any discontent group only after a thorough and careful calculation of its ability to live up to its pledge. No adhocism has any place in the running of a government. If the government has accepted some of the demands put forward by the striking teachers, it naturally follows that it could do so earlier.

So what is the conclusion? It is simply confusing. Naturally, for the striking teachers the impression that the government gives is that under pressure this government buckles. Now that it has agreed to fulfil some of their demands, it will accept rest of them — no matter rational or not — if more pressure is exerted. Whether that impression reflects the government's ability correctly is however a different thing. The government has to take the blame almost squarely for bringing the whole issue to such a pass. At the same time the onus also lies with it to dispel the confusion it has created through its inept handling of the issue. It must also understand that such late agreements do not produce the desired results after the wastage of so many working hours and energy along with the bickering produced and sufferings caused to many.

## A New Look at May Day

Once the communist world took up the celebrations of the International Labour Day — observed every May 1st, and is popularly called the May Day — and made it an integral part of the communist revolutionary jargon. May Day came to symbolise the working class revolution, and was the most celebrated occasion of international working class solidarity. Today the communist world has almost disappeared, and the communist ideology stands discredited by its own poor showing. Yet the appeal of May Day continues. And people all over the world continue to observe this day, as we are doing so today in Bangladesh. This is because the significance of the clash in the streets of Chicago (ironically the country, and the city where the first May Day uprising took place, do not observe this day) remains just as valid today as it did hundred and ten years ago — communist movement or no movement. In fact one can say that the communists usurped the occasion and gave it a much more revolutionary and political colour than perhaps the substance of the issues demanded.

One hundred and ten years down the line, time has come to take a new look at the meaning of May Day. For too long this day has been celebrated in a context of conflict and antagonism, between the employers and the employees. The rights of labour have been projected as a class demand and not as a social demand. We would like to argue that paying the workers their due, and providing ideal working conditions for them is a demand not only of the workers but of all members of the community, a demand of every prospering nation. To see the relations between the workers and the owners as being one of conflict, and to propagate that the interest of the latter lies necessarily in exploiting the former has not only proven to be historically incorrect, but also counter-productive to the interest of the workers. A great deal of the legacy of this type of thinking still exists in Bangladesh, causing tremendous harm to our own process of industrial growth. Otherwise how can employees of a factory or enterprise end up demanding and getting wage packages far greater than the enterprise's capacity to bear. This has led to the closure of so many productive units in Bangladesh.

Let the message of this year's May Day be one of working together — the employers and the employees — to bring forth the much awaited spurt in our industrialisation process.

THE general election in South Africa, held on 26-28 April, 1994 marks not only a triumph for the African National Congress in its long and bitter struggle for dignity, equality and full citizenship rights for the South African people but it is also a milestone in humanity's progress through history. The injustice, and humiliation, the brutality and suffering of centuries cannot be wiped away in a few months or even a few years but one can certainly hope that the establishment of a multi-racial state will usher in a new era. Instead of conflict and confrontation between the races one can now look forward to a period of peace and constructive collaboration between them. By all accounts it is not going to be an easy task even if they possess all the goodwill in the world. The legacy of the bitter and violent past is too fresh to be forgotten so quickly. Do the leaders of all the races have the requisite reserve of patience, goodwill and wisdom? The coming months and years will provide the answer.

When I sat down to write on South Africa I could not help remembering the inimitable poem by Tagore on Africa. The great poet described, against the canvas of history, the pain and humiliation of the dehumanizing trade in human beings indulged in by the so-called civilized people from other continents. In a few vivid phrases which only he is capable of writing, he spoke about the sufferings of the

*"We are summoning our forces  
From Shipyard, Shop and Mill,  
Eight hours for work  
Eight hours for rest  
Eight hours for what we will"*

The above lines are excerpts from a song sung by the struggling workers of the United States whose sacrifices the whole world commemorates today as the International Labour Day. The First of May is almost universally designated as the May Day. Workers all over the world celebrate on this day their awakening to the imperative of solidarity and the struggle for a better life and for freedom from oppression and exploitation.

Prophet Mohammed (Sm) instructed all in unequivocal terms not only to give due recognition to the workers and labourers but also to ensure that their legitimate dues are paid even before the sweat on their brows dries up. From the days of yore, saints and seers have reminded us over and over again that true honour lies in the pride of being able to do one's own job by one's self, that none has any right to despise the workers, that none is authorised to deprive labour not only of dignity but of reward as well. Abraham Lincoln, the great giant among men, who worked his way from a log

# South Africa: The Land of Apartheid Turns into a Multi-racial State

African people. He laid bare the greed, the brutality and the hypocrisy of the slave traders. Indeed whenever I think about Africa I recall the immortal words of Tagore. History will no doubt judge the slave traders most harshly.

Curiously, the slave traders of the 18th and 19th centuries were either accompanied or followed by the missionaries and colonizers. In the name of saving the souls of the poor Negroes and giving them the light of civilization, the Europeans established their colonial grip over the whole continent and began a process of plunder and exploitation which continues even today. Fortunately the sordid chapter of slave trade is behind us; the phase of colonial domination has also come to an end. The journey to freedom has been long, bitter and arduous. The election in South Africa, ending white rule, completes the process of decolonization and brings the political domination of the African continent by the white people to an end.

South Africa is admittedly quite different from other African countries. With the exception of Southern Rhodesia (present Zimbabwe) which had a sizable white population, other 'south of Sahara' African countries had to wage a classic struggle against colonial pow-

ers. It was a part of the global process of decolonization. But in South Africa the rulers were not living in a distant land but living right there, claiming the land to be theirs as well. The Boers, also known as Afrikaners, who settled there three hundred and forty years ago are no doubt people of European descent but over the years they had come to regard

Gandhian technique of non-violent resistance and armed guerrilla struggles were used. International public opinion and the UN sanctions also played a notable role. Economic sanctions have not proved effective elsewhere but in South Africa, which has a developed and sophisticated economy, it started to have an impact. The African National

Congress was fortunate in having charismatic leaders like Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. Mandela, who spent 27 years of his life in jail, is today the man of South Africa's destiny. It has been his privilege to lead his people during the final phase of the struggle. The path to success has not, however, been easy and smooth. In 1960, there was Sharpeville. Unarmed anti-apartheid protesters were fired upon by the police and 69 people lost their lives. Then in 1976 came Soweto. A student protest against compulsory instruction in the language of the white rulers, spread widely. In crushing it the gov-

ernment killed 575 people, many of them under the age of 18. In 1984 it was Vaal Triangle. Angered by rent increases and a new constitution that gave the mixed race voters token places in the Parliament but not to the blacks, residents of townships south of Johannesburg started an insurrection that spread across the country. By the time Mr de Klerk became president in 1989, the white minority had seen the writings on the wall and had started to relax many of the more degrading aspects of apartheid. De Klerk's predecessor PW Botha had abandoned the policy of curbing out separate homeland for the blacks and had accepted the principle of power-sharing with blacks. The election of 1989 seemed to mark the beginning of the end of the white rule. Mandela was released from prison and president de Klerk began the negotiation with him. Three years of intense negotiation has led now to an agreement among all the parties which can be termed as the victory of goodwill and common sense and multi-racial future for the state. For Mandela has been most generous, not only to the whites but also to the other two minority groups. It has been agreed, for example, that the leader of the largest oppo-

sition party in the parliament will have one of the two posts of vice-president of the Republic. Similarly, it has been agreed that any party which will secure at least five per cent of the seats in the parliament can claim a seat in the cabinet. These concessions to the minorities have created a mood of optimism in the country. The Zulu tribe, with their own king and tribal customs, have been given all kinds of privileges and facilities in order to ensure their participation in the election. It is too early to say how Mandela will perform as the president of the country but he has already demonstrated statesmanship and vision in negotiating the agreement for transfer of power to a multi-racial government elected under universal adult franchise.

The long and bloody struggle of the black people and Africa to regain their dignity, equality and independence has come to an end but for South Africa it is the beginning of a most difficult phase in its history. Will the multi-racial state in which the black people dominate the government prove workable and successful? Will the white people accept with grace such a basic change in their position in the country? Will the trickle of migrating white families become a torrent? The coming months and years will provide the answer. The rest of the world can only wish the people of South Africa—blacks, whites, Indians and coloreds — all the success in their bold experiment.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

themselves as Africans, just like the Zulus and other African tribes. Other white settlers, principally the British, came later after defeating the Boers but it is the original Boer settlers who proved most intractable in accepting the terms of a multi-racial state. The system of 'apartheid' that they had built up was an affront to human dignity and sense of justice and fairness. It reflected the determination of a frightened white minority to cling to power and privilege and perpetuate their exploitative control over the majority black population. The African National Congress, established in 1912, took up the challenge. It was an epic struggle in which both the

workers the world over had no way out but to fight for their existence, an existence with dignity and honour, an existence with ensured rights and guaranteed facilities. This led to May Day which we celebrate today.

Workers all over the world celebrate on the 1st of May their awakening to the imperative of solidarity and unity and the struggle for a better life and for freedom from oppression and exploitation. May Day is also one of the earliest international affirmations of workers' demand for an 8-hour day.

# May Day — How it Began

by Syed Ashraf Ali

cabin to the White House, said: "If the Almighty had ever meant a set of men that should do all of the eating and none of the work. He would have made them with mouths only and no hand. And if he had meant another class to do all the work and no eating, He would have made them with hands only and no mouth". But in spite of these repeated sermons and eye-openers from the great men of light and learning, the world needed an unusually long period to rise to the occasion, grasp the true spirit and understand the dignity of labour, realise and appreciate the rights and privileges of the hitherto down-trodden toiling masses.

Day in and day out, the worker was deprived of the fruits of his labour. He toiled that another might enjoy. He 'slaved' that another might be rich. He was reduced to poverty and kept in chronic want to make continuous work necessary for him. He came to be despised because of his poverty, and with this his work also was despised. In course of time, work ceased to have any

dignity, and it was the 'idle rich' who earned social prestige at the cost of the poor workers' blood and toil, tears and sweat.

What the workers needed badly was the right to breathe freely and comfortably like other human beings. What they needed was the right to give vent to their own feelings with confidence and courage and conviction. What the eternal slaves of the factories and fields and workshops needed was a regulated and systematic working period together with a good day to rest the hands and give the brains a chance — to think about what had been and what was yet to be. He was indeed a lot harder up for a chance to rest the hands and use the head than the workers today. His work was tough, his hours were unusually long and sometimes almost unlimited, his pay was small. There was nothing, nothing at all in the world to fall back upon when he lost job or fell ill or became too old to work.

Naturally, therefore, the

workers the world over had no way out but to fight for their existence, an existence with dignity and honour, an existence with ensured rights and guaranteed facilities. This led to May Day which we celebrate today.

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The inspired thought of introducing a holiday for the workers as a means of obtaining the 8-hour working day first originated in Australia. In 1856, the workers there resolved to call for one day of complete work stoppage; the day to be spent in meetings and entertainment instead — as a demonstration for the eight-hour day. But it was the 21st of April, and not the 1st of May, which was designated

as this holiday. In the beginning, the Australian workers thought of instituting such a holiday but once, in the year 1856. But the first celebration made such a wide impact and great impression on the toiling masses that it was decided to repeat the holiday annually.

Robert Owen in 1833 appointed May 1 as the day for the commencement of the millennium. The commencement of Universal Happiness. But the first to follow the Australian workers were the workers in the United States of America. In 1884, a few labour leaders laid down their lives in Chicago on the 1st of May in their struggle to establish the legitimate right of the workers. The workers in the United States designated the 1st of May as the day of general work stoppage in 1886. On this day 2,00,000 workers left work and demanded the 8-hour day. The persecutions of higher authorities, however, prevented the workers for a couple of years to repeat this demonstration, but in 1888 they renewed their decision and designated the First May of 1890 as the next holiday.

The labour movement in other parts of world, specially in Europe, had in the meantime developed greatly. The world-wide upsurge found its highest expression through the First International Labour Congress held in Paris in 1889. Four hundred delegates

from different parts of the world attended the Congress. It was the worker Lavigne from Bordeaux, the delegate from the French Trade Union, who moved a motion to give substance to the demand of the eight-hour day by a Universal Workers' Holiday in all countries. The attention of the delegates were drawn to the American workers' decision regarding the 1st of May, 1890. The Convention designated this particular date for international holiday. By the moves of the motion it was originally intended that the workers should by direct action enforce a holiday on May 1, no matter what day of the week it might be. But even after this historic selection of May 1 as the International Labour Day, the Workers' Day of Unity and Solidarity, it needed a pretty long time to overcome the initial obstacles and hindrances. For example, May Day was first celebrated as Workers' Day in Britain in 1892.

As long as the struggle of the workers against the oppressors continue, May Day will continue to be the annual expression of the hopes and aspirations, the dreams and desires of the workers in fields and factories. But even when the better times shall dawn and all the legitimate demands of all the workers in every nook and corner of the world have been met with due sympathy and considerations, even then, in memory of the battles fought and the sufferings endured, humanity will celebrate the historic May Day.

The writer is Director, Radio Bangladesh, Dhaka

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## Building Construction Laws

Sir, Thank you very much for your editorial of 19th April, under the heading 'Get to the Bottom of this Incident' — highlighting the responsibility of Rajuk. Now that we have started construction of high-rise buildings, it is high time to amend the specification relating to keeping open space surrounding a building as contained in the Schedule I of the Building Construction Rules, 1984.

At present specification of open space differs on the basis of the size and side of the plot ranging from upto two *kathas* to five *kathas* and above. This should now be prescribed on the basis of foundation instead of the size of the plot. For building with foundation of two storeys, three storeys, four storeys, five storeys and more than five storeys a minimum open space of three feet, four feet, five feet, six feet and seven feet respectively, on all sides, may be prescribed, for all types of buildings whether residential, commercial or industrial. This will cater to the needs of light and air in a better way than at present. Construction of highrise buildings in smaller plots should be discouraged and elimination of danger to the existing buildings from damages of the nature as we have all seen the other day in one of our city residential areas, must be initiated.

Ghulam Kabir  
Juar Shahara, Dhaka.

## DUCSU Polls: VC vs BCL

Sir, The Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) has a glorious history. Its predecessor Pakistan Chhatra League had also performed laudable roles in our struggle for liberation. The legendary student organization led the Dhaka University Central Students'

Union (DUCSU) for many a time. But for the last few years the Jatlyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) has been leading in the DUCSU polls. It is a matter of envy for the BCL. The non-partisan general students wonder how JCD captures most of the seats of DUCSU and Hall Unions including the literary and cultural posts, though JCD is yet to develop its cultural network.

The parent organization of the JCD, the ruling BNP has crushed the Upazila system, snatched the Ershad government's credit of freeing rural girls' education up to class VIII, resorted to use the electronic media as their party mouthpiece (the Ershadian strategy in a different mould); late president Ziaur Rahman has been made a competitor hero of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman etc. All these are true. But what was the role played by the legendary BCL at the ruling party's partisan approach to the facts of history? We found no protest, let alone an essential 'Gherao BTV'. The BCL is busy with postponing the existing DUCSU election. The reason behind their asking for shifting DUCSU polls is that the present VC of DU Dr Emajuddin Ahmed must resign before the polls. Why should Prof Ahmed resign? Because, he is a member of Zia Parishad — 'a political organization' as the BCL terms it.

Now we are tempted to pose some questions. Is freedom fighter Ziaur Rahman only a party personality? If so, then what about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman? If Zia Parishad is a political organization, what is Bangabandhu Parishad? In actuality neither of these two great leaders was partisan (presidentialship not considered), they are our national leaders to be remembered and respected for ever leaving aside our political bias. Both Bangabandhu Parishad and Zia Parishad are to be treated as respectable national

committees. Would not the BCL wonder if JCD terms poet Sufia Kamal, a member of Bangabandhu Parishad, a party-personality?

The students and teachers of DU may boast of getting a learned man like Prof Ahmed as their beloved VC. He is a political scientist of international repute. The BCL should not dare to undermine his honour. However, the BCL may disclose the VC's weakness (if any) toward JCD, or, to be particular, any allegation of favouring JCD and/or disfavours BCL. We find no wrong in the VP's being a member of the Zia Parishad.

The BCL must also refrain from calling unnecessary strikes. The student front of the Awami League should work for the greater good of the nation. The legendary student organization should not boycott or hamper the ensuing DUCSU polls in any way, if there is no other genuine ground for its postponement.

Since every human being must have no reservations as regards the constant revision of his/her behaviour, the respected VC is also requested to review his dealings with student organizations.

Md Abdus Sattar Molla  
SME, IER, DU

## Gorazde and UN

Sir, It was a bolt from the blue. We were all dumbfounded, stunned and shocked to hear the sudden news of fall of Gorazde.

How could Gorazde the 'UN safe haven' fall despite repeated warnings to the Serbs by the UNO, NATO, US President Bill Clinton, UK Premier John Major, French President Mitterrand? How could the UN Commander Lt Gen. Sir Michael Rose and the UN Special Envoy in Bosnia Yasushi Akashi surrender to the so-called Serb leader Radovan Karadzic?

UN Envoy Yasushi Akashi checked his wrist watch and announced in Sarajevo late April 17, 1994 that the Serb leader Radovan Karadzic had agreed for a ceasefire but to the astonishment and horror of the people of the world, within hours of the announcement hundreds of tanks entered into Gorazde and the UN

peace keepers simply witnessed the Serb invasion as silent spectators.

US President Bill Clinton now sheds crocodile's tears and defends the failure by the United States and its allies to stop the Serb aggression on the enclave of Gorazde by saying that the NATO had only the authority to respond to United Nations request for air strikes to protect its peace keepers.

We strongly condemn the Serbs' invasion of Bosnia, we also deplore the inaction, languor, 'to be or not to be' policy and impasse of the UNO and the western powers for the last 23 months.

We strongly demand immediate military action, severe punishment against the Serbs, withdrawal of Serb forces from Bosnia and withdrawal of arms embargo against the Muslims.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka-1203

## New TV stations

Sir, It is very disappointing that when BTV is losing its viewers to Star TV Network, even in such a time it seems quite reluctant in trying to improve its own standard, especially in the technical side, which is perhaps gradually deteriorating. Transmission is interrupted many times each day. May be the officials of BTV are busy watching Star TV and they even do not know about these problems or, probably they care less.

It is understood that government is going to set up full fledged television stations in Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna. When with artists and performers from all over the country BTV is failing to run one channel successfully, it eludes me what BTV would telecast from so many channels.

To set up a television station huge amount of money must be involved and to maintain it well another additional expense. There are many sectors which could be improved with the amount which is going to be spent on such a project. I hope government would consider the priority areas first where attention is badly needed.

Nur Jahan  
East Nasirabad  
Chittagong.

## OPINION

### Taslima Nasreen and the Western Media

For any individual in a Third World country, it is almost impossible to attract the attention of the Western news media. But the barrier has been broken by a volatile female writer of the soil and for some time, the Western press is allocating their precious time and space depicting high spirit of the columnist, novelist, poet (and what not) against untold odds. The person in which the Western press and news media have profound interest, is none other than Taslima Nasreen. The interest is not in finding her intellectual or literary talents. But in depicting her as a crusader against fundamentalism, fighting for establishing rights for women.

So often, the Western news media try to make issue out of inconsequential subjects related to Third World countries. In the West, Taslima Nasreen almost enjoys the prestige of a holy reformer. The massive mass media of the West often portray Bangladesh as a country inhabited by illiterate fanatic Muslims, who are against any liberal idea and would not hesitate to put a woman in galleys, if she works against the established hypocrisy.

In fact, Taslima Nasreen was brought into limelight by the Government of Bangladesh itself. By imposing a ban on sale and publication of a fiction 'Lajla' (shame) by the author, she was brought into prominence. Her image was further brightened when some Mollahs in a far-flung area declared her anti-Islamic and imposed death sentence. Surprisingly, the government did not take any action against the Mollahs and provided the author state security.

In a free society, there is bound to be difference of opinions, as it exists in the

Western world. There are factions in the West, who are far more reactionary and extremists. But the Western media do not find anything to make a story out of those. Might be, the Western world is accustomed to their existence and do not find any news story to make.

The news media across our border have also found a celebrity in Taslima Nasreen. The prestigious periodical like 'Desh' has published a poem — 'Story of Insects' in its Puja issue. The Ananda Bazar publications enjoy unparalleled reputation of being the number one publication who have been promoting Bengali literature as a whole. It is shocking to find 'Story of Insects' finding a space in their coveted issue. Like most of her articles, poems and fictions, the 'Story of Insects' does not have much depth and is swarmed with ill-chosen words.

Our own press is also not lagging behind. Even the group of publications considered to be more or less orthodox in nature brought out cover story on her in their weekly Purnima. It is a relief to note that most of our national dailies have so far ignored this author.

Most of our periodicals have a trend — they are always in search of juicy, half-baked stories to attract the attention of a particular segment or readers. However, the motive of the Western media is completely different. They have little sympathy for Taslima Nasreen. They want to encash any opportunity offered to them to humiliate a Third World country and Taslima Nasreen perhaps is giving them just that.

Sherur Rahman  
Tejgaon, Dhaka