

LABOUR UNREST

Garment industry's Achilles' heel

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The garment industry in Bangladesh flourished during the late 1980s due to globalization. Availability of workers, especially female workers, is one of the major reasons behind the foundation of this industry. Except for availability of cheap labour, Bangladesh did not have comparative advantage in any other factors of garment production over other countries. Bangladesh solely enjoys the comparative advantage of cheap labour as the cost of labour is much cheaper in Bangladesh than any other garment manufacturing countries. To retain this advantage, the manufacturers try to keep their labour as cheap as by keeping their salary low and refusing them basic labour rights. And the labour unrest generally arises from this.

However, the manufacturers do not realise that they can keep the competitiveness of cheap labour by improving the workers' productivity by providing the workers with their basic rights, while also increasing their salary. Because workers' productivity can be increased manifold within the same working hours if they are provided with their basic rights including skill training. Various researches have shown that no investment was made during the last 25 years to improve the quality of garment workers in Bangladesh. As a result, their skill level has remained the same in the last 25 years. Therefore, they have not been able to increase their income in the same period of time. It has been found that the foremost

reasons behind all labour unrest and violence that took place in the garment sector since 11th May 2006 is deprivation from minimum wage, non-payment of monthly salary on time and, not getting paid properly for overtime.

It has been found that low income is the main reason of labour unrest in this sector. Minimum wages fixed for the garment sector of Bangladesh at different times are also very low. According to the decision taken by the Minimum Wage Board, the minimum wage was increased to Tk. 930 in 1995, which was previously Tk. 627 in 1984. However, during this time, the rate of inflation was 10 percent per year. Thus, the garment workers found it hard to meet their basic necessities back then and even now. Recently, a tripartite wage commission involving workers, manufacturers and the government has set the minimum wage for garment workers at Tk. 1604. But if one considers the commodity prices, this amount should be between Tk. 2,500 and Tk. 3000. However, results of various surveys on garment sector in Bangladesh show that the workers employed in this sector are deprived from even such low minimum wages for years whereas, to get minimum wage for work is a fundamental right of a worker.

Various researches have shown that the garment workers in Bangladesh are being deprived not only of minimum wages and timely wage payment but also of most of their other basic labour rights such as 8 hour work day, health facilities, fringe benefits, weekly



holiday, maternity leave, sick leave, etc., for the last two decades. The results of a survey conducted by BIDS in 1990 showed that a worker generally used to work 12-18 hours a day. Almost 18 years have passed

since the survey and it seems that a garment worker is still putting in the same number of hours at the workplace. As in 1990, most of the garment workers do not get weekly holiday. They tend to be deprived of other leaves such as maternity, sick and casual leaves as well.

Due to long working hour and absence of leave facilities, the garment workers are damaging their physical health. However, recent studies have shown that there has been an overall improvement in provision of health care in the garment factories. But still, health service provided by the factories is not nearly enough to combat health problems arising from extra burden of work, and work hazards. Also, the garment workers are not able to buy nutritional food to replenish their health due to low salaries. As a result of all these, the workers are not able to continue working at factories for a long time.

A survey conducted by BIDS shows that due to various health hazards arising from work, a woman worker can generally work in a garment factory for only 4 years on average. Another research conducted by BIDS shows that a worker needs around 4 years of on-the-job training to become a skilled worker. Thus, a garment worker, particularly a woman garment worker has to leave her job as soon she has gained all the skills and expertise through on-the-job training. This is why the garment sector in Bangladesh suffers from shortage of skilled labor.

In fact, the owners of the garment factories have not taken any steps to retain the garment workers for a longer period. For example, one of the primary conditions for retaining a worker is to provide him or her with the sense of job security which will only come in a worker when the temporary nature of job turns into a more permanent one. But still now majority of the workers employed in the garment sector in Bangladesh do not get any formal appointment letter.

And the job uncertainty is also a dominant reason for the workers' unrest.

It has been observed that as the garment industry in Bangladesh grew larger, the more the workers were denied their basic rights. Presently, the multinational companies are regularly monitoring the garment factories for compliance of the International Labor Standards (ILS) determined by the ILO. The manufacturers believe that if all the ILS are followed, then the overall price of Bangladeshi labour will increase a lot. And as a result, Bangladesh will lose its comparative advantage of labour over other garment producing countries.

To evade compliance monitoring, the manufacturers tend to put their main factory under the purview of monitoring, while having other sister factories outside it. A lot of the production is done through these factories, depriving the workers of their basic rights. A survey shows that around 40% of the factories in Dhaka city have sister factories in the suburbs or outside the city. There is a big chance of this number increasing. Also, to evade compliance monitoring, garment owners often get their production done through sub-contracting.

It has been observed that a long sub-contracting chain has formed due to the continuous sourcing for cheap market by the large multinational buyers. There are a number of middlemen throughout this chain, who help the large multinational companies in the buying process. After meeting the buyers' cost, these middlemen often squeeze the manufacturers to maximize their profit. In turn, the manufacturers have to squeeze their profit out by denying the garment workers their basic rights. Various researches have shown that the workers in factories outside the purview of compliance monitoring do not enjoy most of the rights included in ILS.

It has been observed that the level of deprivation of labour rights for the garment workers

in Bangladesh has not changed much over time. Various researches have shown that more than 80% of the garment workers are unhappy with their job. They have worked despite their dissatisfaction for the last two decades. Due to this, there has always been frustration among the garment workers of Bangladesh. Gradually, frustrations and discontent deepen and explode in a massive way as happened in a sweater factory in Gazipur on May 11, 2006.

After this incident, workers from many other factories joined in the violent protests with various demands, especially the demand for wages increment and timely payment of monthly and overtime wages. As a result, properties worth millions of taka were destroyed in the process. Workers' agitations continue still now although a tripartite wage commission has set the minimum wage for garment workers at Tk. 1604. Very recently (in January 4, 2008), workers of SQ Group and other garment factories in Mirpur staged a violent demonstration on the streets in support of their 12-point demand including wage increase, timely payment of their monthly salary and overtime allowances.

Before May 11, 2006, the garment workers had never participated in such a mass scale protests to voice their frustration. One of the main reasons for this was that they were never allowed to be united to obtain the power to raise their voice. It has been observed that whenever the workers have tried to go for united protest, they were tortured and heavily punished. The hardest punishment for them was retrenchment from their job. Moreover, because of overwhelming illiteracy, the garment workers were never aware of their basic rights. But now, the garment workers are not illiterate as before. Presently, there are hardly any illiterate workers in the garment industry. As a result, they are more aware of their basic

rights. Besides, various programmes undertaken by NGOs and trade unions have also increased the workers' awareness regarding their rights. Undoubtedly, when workers become aware of their rights, they will demand their rights and if they don't get their rights, they will go for protests to attain them.

However, the garment manufacturers, and even the Government of Bangladesh (GOB), could not accept the protest of the workers as legitimate protest. They described these protests as politically motivated and claimed that some political party had provoked the workers. They even accused foreign powers and garment manufacturers in neighboring countries, who are competing with their counterparts in Bangladesh, of being behind these protests. This should be investigated very carefully to find out the real reasons behind the garment workers agitation.

However, it should be understood that no evil power can instigate our workers to begin violent and destructive activities if they are satisfied with their jobs. But the state of labour rights enjoyed by the workers in the garment sector of Bangladesh shows that the workers in this sector are always unhappy with their jobs and unhappy workers can easily be instigated from outside. Therefore, whatever the reasons behind the labour unrest are, the fact is that the garment workers are largely deprived of their various rights.

However, owners are concerned about losing competitiveness in the world market since providing of labour rights will increase the cost of labour on which Bangladesh has comparative advantage. But various researches have shown that there is a very positive correlation between workers being provided their basic rights and improvement of the quality and quantity of production in the garment industries.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31



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To provide workers with their basic rights and to protect these rights are primary responsibilities of the government of a country since the owners always try to maximise their profit, even if it comes at the cost of denying workers' rights.