FAIR DEAL FOR PRESSWORKERS

forum
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The views expressed by writers in these columns are not necessarily shared be the journal.

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Last week's twelve-page truncated forum and our late appearance two weeks in succession bears testimony that we were a casualty of the industrial dispute which recently left most of East Pakistan without its daily news.

We have worked side by side with the press workers and can sympathise with their predicament from direct experience of their working conditions. The spectacle of workers painfully, but with consummate skill, composing matter by hand in ill-lit and badly ventilated surroundings arouses our compassion as much as out respect for their craftsmanship. The delicate task of making up copy, of handling obsolete machinery, all with skill and superhuman patience would be the envy of newspaper proprietors the world over. The irony in this industry lies in the fact that skill and hard-work vary in inverse proposition to the modernisation of the enterprise. To cope with new and highspeed machines which operate with the flick of a switch is easy in comparison to the skills and labour involved in operating presses which have not progressed appreciably beyond the days of William Caxton.

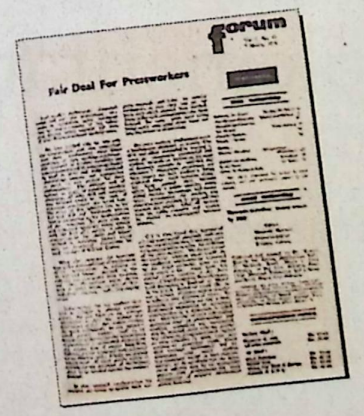
When one examines the miserable wage scales and conditions of employment of the press workers in relation to the skill and labour invested in the task one can appreciate their problem, and their desperation which drives them to strike action, in spite of their inadequate reserves and low-staying power.

Unfortunately for the workers they have to struggle in adverse circumstances. No one likes to be without newspapers so that the absence of a daily paper makes the public restless for quick settlement. In our indoctrinated society workers tend to be blamed for strikes whilst the intransigence of proprietors is overlooked. Furthermore the regular flow of papers from West Pakistan greatly weakened their potential for an effective strike. Finally the general organisation of most papers makes it possible for the mystique of the balance sheet to be invoked against the workers' demand.

In this unequal confrontation the workers are driven to modify their original demands and come to interim settlements so that they can get the basic wage which ensures their survival. These make-shift arrangements take them forward for some years until rising living costs once again drive them out into the streets in desperation.

The press workers' predicament poses a fundamental challenge to society. Can skill and effort demanded in running a press so perpetually unrewarded and workers be made to survive on the wage of domestic servants or unskilled day labourers? Newspaper proprietors say they cannot pay their workers a living wage and keep their concerns viable. Let them present their business affairs before a public enquiry, where skilled layers, accountants and economists, representing the workers can scrutinise their capacity to pay, and thus apprase their capacity to pay, and thus apprase the public. After all newspapers are public property and cannot be treated as conventional business ventures.

If it is then found that payment of a living wage would genuinely spell ruin to the organisation then it becomes society's responsibility to solve the problems of the press workers. We do not favour the capitalist solution which would let the inefficient small paper be consumed by the larger corporate giant to the point where a few press lords can control public opinion in the footsteps of Axel Springer in West Germany, Lord Thompson in England or Hearst in the USA. Rather we would like to see a variety of papers survive in order to reflect a rich diversity of views. To reconcile this problem we feel a more fundamental exploration of newspaper proprietorship in a democracy is called for. Here the idea of truly independent newspaper trusts in which workers and working journalists are represented, may be explored along with the possibility of society


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giving substantial support or even subsidies to make such new ventures in ownership viable. Given their personal involvement and the seriousness with which workers in a newspaper attend to their responsibilities, we do not doubt that the newspaper industry may be an appropriate place to start re-examining the basic assumptions of property relationships within Pakistan.