Living Wage is Not Just Wages

MIR MAHFUZ UR RAHMAN explores the option of spreading ownership among the masses as a way of integrating the concerns of the garment industry into wider society.



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EVERY day, when the millions of employees of the several thousand garments factories, hundreds of thousands workers of the several hundred knitwear factories or the several thousands of workers of the few hundred spinning mills head off to work, they are busy thinking of the several daily chores and expenses as is expected of any earning professional in any other company in Bangladesh. We all seek earnings for housing, food, education, utilities and some savings for a rainy day. Others more fortunate can begin to think of some savings to take care of parents, sharing in some creature comforts and finally, some helping hand to the less fortunate.

Instead of limiting the discussion between workers and owners only in the arena of wage, which itself shall continue to be the main means of transferring of benefits, diverse ownership of equity units by the urban poor may be an additional alternative. This has been carried out successfully in India, where equity ownership by urban lower middle class, and even the poor, have made them a stakeholder in the future of the nation. Similarly, we need to think of innovative methods of channelling benefits to the workers, which breaks their leanings to the leaders of the splinter and fringe groups bent on extracting benefits through threats and violence. We should not be surprised if workers give a hearing to such destructive leaders as long as they are made to feel that only their immediate benefits are taken care of by the companies that they work for. Wage negotiations become the sole preserve for gaining compensation and the fear of the law remains the sole deterrent to vio-