

May Day: Just another holiday?

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

YET another May Day dawns today in a milieu where its weight has been significantly shifted from espousing the cause of the working class to being a platform for political battles and a show of strength of a different kind.

The day, when battles were waged by the working class to protect their rights against exploitation, has today lost its focus and theme and has become just another holiday adding to the list of holidays.

Missing are the chanting and raising of slogans and May Day parades of the past, when the city of Dhaka was a riot of colours. May Days then were huge draws, when the working class took the opportunity to make their voice heard. It was almost religiously observed by them.

Still, there will be vestiges of past May Days today and a sprinkling of workers in red shirts and caps will reiterate their pledge of unity towards fighting against exploitation and to defeat their chief enemy capitalism, but not with the same gusto of May Days of yore.

Time was when May Day was an event to look forward to, when the working class rallied to voice their collective grievances and highlight the injustices and exploitation of their lot. Trade Union leaders marshalled their troops while the organisation of the events was carried out with precision.

In those pre-television days May Days drew large number of spectators to the city to see the large colourful parades. Apart from the external trappings May Day was also helped to win many demands of the workers and paved the way for improving their lot. Many reforms were born for the welfare of the workers following May Day resolutions, which carried much weight.

Alas, much of the colour and exuberance have gone from the traditional May Day scene, not only in Bangladesh but also elsewhere in the world. May Day, once the Red Letter day in the calendar of the working class, is fast losing its relevance and significance in an increasingly shrinking world and a globalised milieu which has led to the polarising of the working class.

Instead, May Day today in Bangladesh has been converted into a political battleground where parties vie with each other to project and demonstrate their strengths, with the issues and problems concerning the proletariat relegated to the background. May Day slogans, which were once colourful and imaginative, too



in a genuine effort in their workplaces but lose no opportunity to demand their rights and resort to strikes at the drop of a hat.

May Day should once again become a focal point for the working class to seek just solutions for their problems and advance their cause in general. May Day symbolises the struggle of the working people for their rights. It is a day of working people's solidarity. It was Marx and Engels, the leaders of the workers' movement, who gave the clarion call "Workers of the world unite!" which has reverberated throughout the globe ever since.

What distinguishes Bangladesh May Day is the disunity of the working people rather than their unity. Even the slogans in May Day demonstrations have become more partisan, not on class lines but on petty political party lines. The government must ensure that workers get a fair deal and are not at the mercy of ruthless exploiters earning super profits. The working masses too should work with dedication to develop the country for it is the path to their own wellbeing.

As the Bangladeshi working people have demonstrated over the years, they are ready to guard the country's national interest and foil all attempts by external and imperialistic forces to undermine the sovereignty and independence of the country under various pretexts, including attempts in the name of workers too. They should also realise that patriotism means doing your duty above everything else. So a full eight hour contribution by means of work would be much more patriotic than slogan shouting for a whole month.

There's logic in struggling, because the terms of exploitation can and should be re-negotiated. But the workers of the world can relax; they have got nothing more to lose than the chains that the Marxists and so-called Leftists put in your minds. They have no place for "class" any more, and certainly not for the working class.

May Days have lost their zip in Bangladesh, and today we see the worker's day degenerating into hollow slogans with the workers themselves drifting rudderless, sans effective leadership. Hopefully, this May Day there will be less demand by the workers in a spirit of sacrifice on behalf of our valiant soldiers and also taking cognisance of the economic gloom and the humanitarian situation unfolding across the country.

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have been taken over by political content instead of being worker-related.

Not that there was a total absence of political flavour in past May Day rallies, but they were more worker-oriented and emphasised on winning the rights of the workers. It would be correct to state that May Day today has undergone a sea change in Bangladesh.

One of the reasons for the lackluster May Days perhaps could be the fall of communism, which was in the vanguard of organising the working class. Another reason was the decrease in labour-intensive jobs caused by the sweeping technological revolution which left many vocations redundant. No doubt, May Day will always assume importance as a symbolic event marking the emancipation of the working class,

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and at least some semblance of its heyday is still evident in Bangladesh.

The politicisation is unavoidable given that the Trade Unions are affiliated to political parties and, like in the past, they wish to obtain the maximum

mileage for their patrons using May Day as a platform. Members of these Trade Unions, though making demands and engineering strikes, never pause to ponder on their contribution to increasing output and by extension the overall development of the country.

They shout slogans demanding high pay and other privileges during their May Day parades but do not adhere to a proper work ethic. Some of them engage in sabotage, destroying the very institutions they serve. Many of these Trade Union members do not put

Hammer or homework!

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

MAY Day is being observed today in the world with the vow to institutionalise the socio-economic rights of workers. Different trade and labour organs/unions, human right organisations, socio-cultural organisations and political parties observe the Day by holding rallies, cultural programmes, etc.

Child domestic service is a widespread practice in Bangladesh. The majority of child domestics are 12 to 17 years old. But children 5 or 6 years old can also be found working. 50% domestic workers work 12-14 hours a day, but are the least paid. In most cases, they give their earnings to their parents,

The working child population of the country demanded the following essential facilities from the government: Free education for the disadvantaged children; family pension for the work-

Poverty, illiteracy and child labour go hand in hand. A child's earnings is a necessity for the families that struggle to make ends meet. The child has no alternative. The lack of quality education and the pitiable conditions of available schools are no incentive for a child to quit work and join school. In addition, children become the victims of violence, exploitation and abuse, which can result in physical and psychological disabilities.

Children do different types of work. Breaking bricks may cause damage to the fingers, for which a rubber glove could be worn. Chips of brick may enter the eyes and cause harm. Another job is welding. This work is inappropriate for children. When they work in welding, they must use protective spectacles. Another work is motor mechanic. The children work with chemicals and acids. If this acid goes into the eyes then that would destroy their vision. Another work is

High Court has banned employment of children who are less than 12 years as domestic workers.

Recently, in a seminar, it was shown that there are almost 3.5 crore children in Bangladesh, of which 18% are working children. 5% of the children are engaged in hazardous jobs. Children are involved in 301 kinds of jobs, among which 48 jobs are very dangerous.

ILO says that the number of child labourers is highest in Asia, followed by sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. ILO wants to remove child labour from the world by 2016, though it might not be possible for economic reasons.

Both in the government and the non-government sectors, women workers are discriminated against in payment of salary. They often don't get the wages fixed by the government. In all kinds of industries in Bangladesh, 48% of women workers don't get minimum wages in the non-government sector, and 14% are deprived in state industries. 32% of the women who work as helpers in garments industry don't get minimum wage fixed by the wage board. A woman worker has to work more than a man to prove her efficiency but still she does not get the same pay as men.

A woman helper gets Tk.274 while a male helper gets Tk.361. A woman helper gets bonus of Tk.612 per year while a male gets Tk.1220. BIDS published a survey which showed that 33% women leave their jobs because of inadequate pay. Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen said that many skilled women were lost from the job sector because of the discriminatory attitude.

72% girl children of urban-slum are workers. Presently, 4 lac women of 18 to 19 years age work in garments industry, whose average salary is Tk.700 to Tk.1,400 per month. It has been found that 25% of teen-aged female domestic workers are sexually harassed by their employers and 10% of them are raped.

We always heard about the demand for Bangladeshi workers in the international labour market. But the present situation is quite different. Bangladesh is losing many labour markets because of the lack of skilled workers. In 2000, Bangladesh had 5% professional workers in international markets, but in 2008 it was almost 0. But international demand for women workers is increasing day by day.

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ing children; compensation to be provided by the employers in the case of accident during work; and essential requirements like food, clothing, lodging, education and medical treatment have to be provided by the government free of cost. Stop child trafficking, oppression of women and children, and all forms of terrorism. Ensure payment of salary in time. Stop child labour; ensure healthy environment at home and workplace; provide recreational facilities for children.

Employers in urban areas usually recruit children from their village homes through family, friends or contacts. Most of the domestic child workers come from vulnerable families, and many of them are orphans. A good number of them are from single-parent families.

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carrying heavy load or bricks up the stairs.

A large number of child domestics are working either without salary or no fixed salary. Lack of salary is compensated by commitment by the employers for better jobs in the future. A study shows that no money was paid to the child domestics when they went on home leave or when they had visitors (parents/other relatives) coming from their rural homes to see them. The majority of child domestics earn less than \$2.50 per month.

National Women Lawyers' Association found that 52 domestic workers were murdered in 2010-2011, and most incidents of torture were not published. In Bangladesh, more than 20 lac people are engaged in domestic work. Among them, 80% are women and children. 18 lac domestic workers are under the age of 15. The

Why hold the people hostage?

SYED WASIF

I am, to say the least, sick and tired of our two "eternal" political parties, and I dare say I'm not alone in this contention. We are sick of their politics of *hartals*, we are sick of their politics of corruption and we are sick of their politics of flagrant nepotism.

We, as law abiding citizens, want to send a clear message to our political leaders. We don't want *hartals*. Rather, we want to send our children to schools, we want to shop freely, we want to visit our loved ones, we want unhindered use of transportation, we want exams on time and as per schedule, we want our day labourers to go about their daily work freely so that they can feed their children.

We don't want our economy to suffer, we don't want any decline of our production, we don't want any fall in exports. We don't like to see shops closed, we don't want to see burning buses. We don't want to see our brother citizen dead on the streets.

Why hold the people hostage? If you have differences resolve them as gentlemen. Why drag the whole nation to the streets?

We want a corruption free society. But from what we have seen and heard about the so-called elite of our society during the last few years, makes my heart bleed. There must be zero tolerance for corruption. But who will implement this? We must seek out honest sincere people in all departments and give them power to root out corruption from all levels, be it kickbacks in tenders, commissions in financial deals, bribe from recruitment, nepotism in appointments, or bribes in police, customs, various government departments, etc.

But does our government have the will to bring about such change? I have serious doubts. I only see an unbridled, shameless powerplay to hang on to the chair. The scrapping of the caretaker government clause from the constitution reeks of this.

Whereas in India, which is touted as the biggest democracy in this part of the world, Muslims constitute 30% of the population, but they don't hold even 2% posts in top echelons of administration.

My tirade may appear to be against the present government, but let me assure you we are also disillusioned by the opposition as well. Their track record in the past governments is equally frustrating.

Every five years, the opposition party comes into power. Not by dint of merit, but due to bad governance of their predecessor. For us, it's like jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

So please, our political leaders, don't make us regret having fought for a free, vibrant, equitable Bangladesh. Please don't let us regret the loss of our friends and brethren who died for our country. Otherwise, history will not forgive you. We will not forgive you, Allah will not forgive you.

Why hold the people hostage? If you have differences resolve them as gentlemen. Why drag the whole nation to the streets?

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