

May Day and the politics of 'Made in Bangladesh'

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HOW are our workers? How well are they playing their role in the development of the country? Has the government really become labour-friendly? Has it allowed trade unions in the real sense of the term? Have our labour laws changed? Has our labour movement and its leadership been able to break away from the clutches of mainstream political parties? We discuss these issues on each May Day. Although 130 years have passed since the first observation of May Day in 1886, these questions are still relevant. The major slogan of May Day was: "Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest." In Chicago, USA, workers were shot dead by the police while protesting for their rights. As a result of their consistent movements, May 1 was recognised as Labour Day.

In order to give you a glimpse of the state of workers all around the world since the conception of May Day, I will introduce you to a group of young people. They were supposed to have been the rising stars of Bangladesh. At an age when they were supposed to graduate to college from school, they were introduced to needles and threads. Instead of getting entry to college or university, these large numbers of young people, who came to the city from villages, were introduced to rooms full of machines. They soon became familiar with various tags and country names. While sewing the tag of "Made in Bangladesh" on garments of huge international brand names such as Walmart, H&M and Primark, these young workers of Bangladesh's garment industry have also become a part of globalisation. Thus, instead of standing proud as citizens of Bangladesh or becoming the rising stars that they were supposed to be, they ended up as the cheap labourers of the world.

If anyone asks me what their condition is or how they are doing, I would say that to understand their condition one need not go far. There is no need to look back at the Rana Plaza disaster, in which thousands of workers died under the rubble of a collapsed building. I would rather request one to look at the faces of our garment workers. You will notice how their once lively young eyes turn blank after working in factories for only two to three years. The lifeless face of each of these workers is a silent testimony of their misfortune.

A large portion of the over 44 lakh workers of garments factories situated in Dhaka and other divisional cities belong to the poverty stricken northern areas of the country, which have experienced heavy river erosion over the years. Destitution and deprivation did not allow them to stay in their villages for long, and with the hope of a better life, they made a move towards industrial zones. While women comprise 80 percent of the labour population, most in this profession are below the age of 28. Their expectations don't run beyond a roof over their heads, coarse rice and threadbare clothes. They can't even



Eleven members of a garment worker's family share the same room to survive.

PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

dream of a house or a car; their only wish is that their children are not forced to enter this profession. But fate is such that the kids of many of these workers are compelled to follow their parents' footsteps. It's not only the workers who end up as 'cheap' commodities in this world market dominated by factory owners, the government and international buyer brands; even their lives, their dreams are considered cheap, expendable. The workers who lost their lives in the Rana Plaza collapse, the workers who were burnt to cinder in the Tazreen fire are testament to this statement.

The garment industry started its journey with only 30 factories in the 1980s. According to BGMEA statistics of 2012-13, the number now stands at 5,600. In these factories, our workers produce clothes for various international companies of the world including USA, UK, Canada, Spain and Germany. Bangladeshi workers produce clothes for Walmart, H&M, Zara, Tesco, Gap, Primark, Joe Fresh (Canada), JC Penney, Levis, etc. The products of these brands are marketed all across Asia, America and Europe.

The workers of this 20 billion dollar industry are responsible for 80 percent of our foreign reserves every year. With a meagre salary of Tk. 5,300 or US \$67,

(according to the new pay scale declared in 2013), our workers have ensured that the name of Bangladesh is recognised all over the world. It's the workers who attract customers and traders of the international market to Bangladesh; it's the clothes sewn by them that are worn by consumers in America and Europe; it's their labour that is recognised as cheap all over the world. And yet, despite 100 years after the founding of May Day, these workers are forced to work for up to 12 to 14 hours a day. They have to depend on overtime to sustain their livelihood. Most of the time, they do not even get to enjoy weekends or national holidays.

With the advent and development of this new industry, women workers have emerged as a new workforce. But their woes continue. Now they are being exploited both at home and outside. They do not have access to maternity leave and maternal care. These women workers often fall victim to sexual harassment. They also suffer from malnutrition and disease due to the unhealthy work conditions of most of the factories. They have to work in Rana Plazas and Tazreens, risking their lives.

Bangladeshi workers are the lowest paid in the world. They can hardly survive the spiraling living costs with this meagre wage. They cannot afford the minimum calorie

intake to maintain their productivity and efficiency at work. In 1994, the minimum wage was only Tk. 930. After 17 years, the government raised it to Tk. 5,300 in 2013. However, it is still far below the minimum requirement for a dignified life. That's why the workers have been demanding a total wage of Tk. 16,000 with Tk. 10,000 as basic.

In a free-market economy, such as the one our state has been propagating, the main attraction is to make huge profit while exploiting cheap labour. To maintain the high profit margin, local owners and foreign buyers often neglect the integral relation between industrial productivity and well-being of the workers. In this hierarchy of profiteering, the top tier gets the largest pie of the profit, while at the bottom, the workers suffer inhumane exploitation. Unfortunately, the state is also part of this exploitative system and serves the interests of the owners and foreign investors.

Without any trade union rights, the workers cannot raise their voice against oppression. Although the government now boasts of having introduced trade union rights in the garments industry following the outcries after Tazreen and Rana Plaza, the reality is that the workers still cannot freely form a trade union. Local *mastaans* and influentials control the factories. There are also paid agents of the owners who try to create division among the workers. Thus the efforts of forming trade unions are often thwarted by various machinations of the owners. If the owner gets a hint that workers are planning to organise, in most cases they immediately sack the workers. There are several provisions in the Labour Act such as Article 23, 180 and 205 that also curb workers' right to form trade unions. The labour leaders are often threatened and tortured. We saw how the movement of workers of Toba Garments was brutally suppressed by the owners. We did not see any reform in the Compensation Act even after the disasters of Rana Plaza and Tazreen. In the not-so-high-profile cases, the workers will not get the same kind of support that the workers of Rana Plaza received from the foreign brand. These loopholes ultimately serve the interest of the owners and the government.

Workers constitute a large part of the population. Improvement of living conditions is closely linked with the question of democratic transformation of the country. But the government and the owners continue to ignore this issue. They always find "conspiracy" when workers' movements demand what's due to them and ignore the pressing issues at hand. It never occurs to the government that there's no other way to protect this industry except to safeguard the lives and working conditions of the thousands of young workers.

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Translated by the editorial team

The brief origins of May Day

On the occasion of May Day, The Daily Star publishes excerpts of an article written by Eric Chase which was first printed by Industrial Workers of the World in 1993.

ERIC CHASE

MOST people living in the United States know little about the International Workers' Day of May Day. For many others there is an assumption that it is a holiday celebrated in state communist countries like Cuba or the former Soviet Union. Most Americans don't realise that May Day has its origins here in this country and is as "American" as baseball and apple pie, and stemmed from the pre-Christian holiday of Beltane, a celebration of rebirth and fertility.

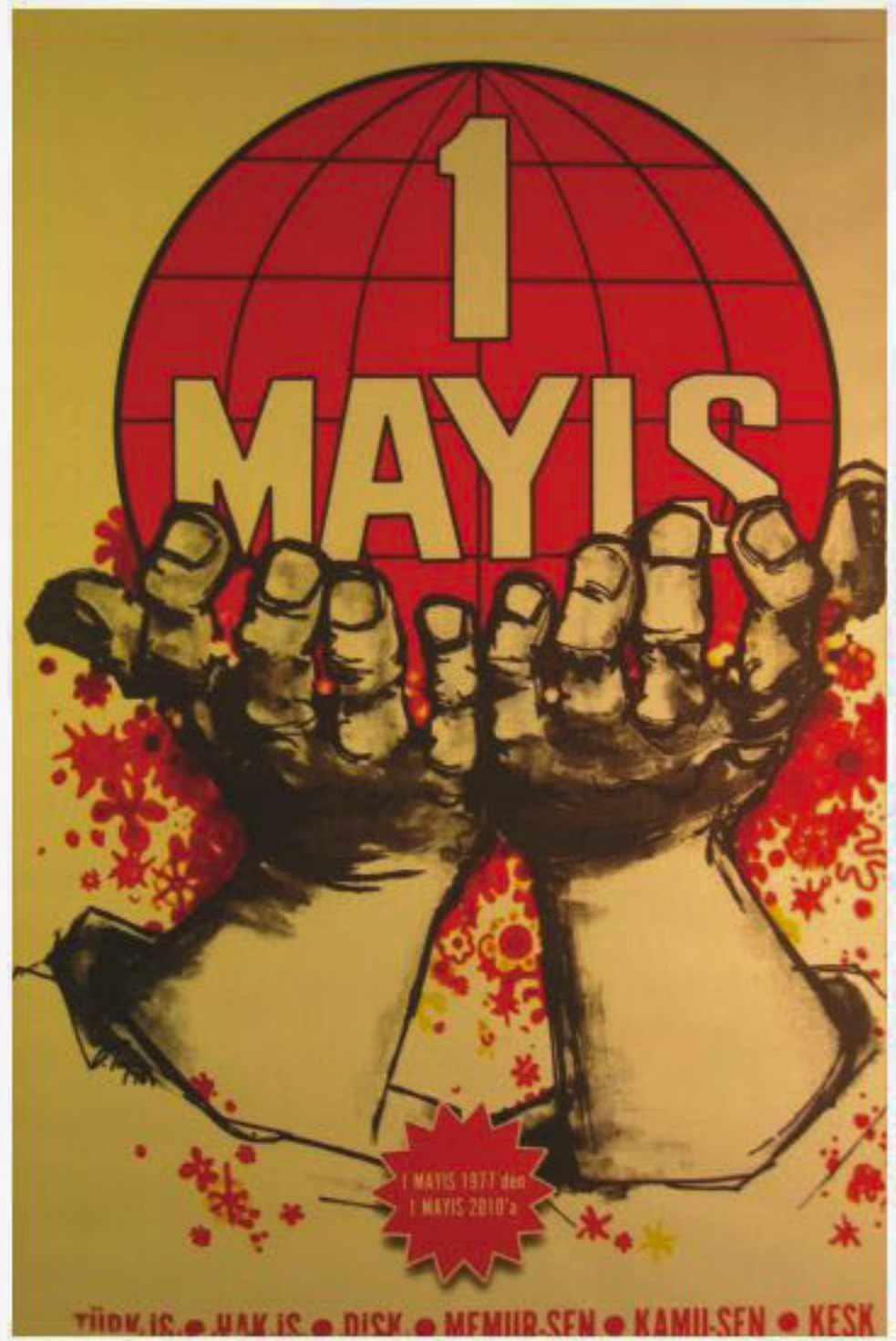
In the late nineteenth century, the working class was in constant struggle to gain the 8-hour work day. Working conditions were severe and it was quite common to work 10 to 16 hour days in unsafe conditions. Death and injury were commonplace at many work places and inspired such books as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. As early as the 1860's, working people agitated to shorten the workday without a cut in pay, but it wasn't until the late 1880s that organised labor was able to garner enough strength to declare the 8-hour workday. This proclamation was without consent of employers, yet demanded by many of the working class.

At this time, socialism was a new and attractive idea to working people, many of whom were drawn to its ideology of working class control over the production and distribution of all goods and services. Workers had seen first-hand that Capitalism benefited only their bosses, trading workers' lives for profit. Thousands of men, women and children were dying needlessly every year in the workplace, with life expectancy as low as their early twenties in some industries, and little hope but death of rising out of their destitution. Socialism offered another option.

A variety of socialist organisations sprung up throughout the latter half of the 19th century, ranging from political parties to choir groups. In fact, many socialists were elected into governmental office by their constituency. But again, many of these socialists were hamstrung by the political process which was so evidently controlled by big business and the bi-partisan political machine. Tens of thousands of socialists broke ranks from their parties, rebuffed the entire political process, which was seen as nothing more than protection for the wealthy, and created anarchist groups throughout the country. Literally thousands of working people embraced the ideals of anarchism, which sought to put an end to all hierarchical structures (including government), emphasised worker controlled industry, and valued direct action over the bureaucratic political process. It is inaccurate to say that labour unions were "taken over" by anarchists and socialists, but rather anarchists and socialists made up the labour unions.

in 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (which later became the American Federation of Labor), proclaimed that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from and after May 1, 1886." The following year, the FOTLU, backed by many Knights of Labor locals, reiterated their proclamation stating that it would be supported by strikes and demonstrations. (...)

Despite the misgivings of many of the anarchists, an estimated quarter million workers in the Chicago area became directly involved in the crusade to implement the eight hour work day, including the Trades and Labor Assembly, the Socialistic Labor Party and local Knights of Labor. As more and more of the workforce mobilised against the employers, these radicals conceded to fight



for the 8-hour day, realising that "the tide of opinion and determination of most wage-workers was set in this direction." With the involvement of the anarchists, there seemed to be an infusion of greater issues than the 8-hour day. There grew a sense of a greater social revolution beyond the more immediate gains of shortened hours, but a drastic change in the economic structure of capitalism. (...)

Not surprisingly the entire city was prepared for mass bloodshed, reminiscent of the railroad strike a decade earlier when police and soldiers gunned down hundreds of striking workers. On May 1, 1886, more than 300,000 workers in 13,000 businesses across the United States walked off their jobs in the first May Day celebration in history. In Chicago, the epicenter for the 8-hour day agitators, 40,000 went out on strike with the anarchists in the forefront of the public's eye. With their fiery speeches and revolutionary

ideology of direct action, anarchists and anarchism became respected and embraced by the working people and despised by the capitalists. (...)

More and more workers continued to walk off their jobs until the numbers swelled to nearly 100,000, yet peace prevailed. It was not until two days later, May 3, 1886, that violence broke out at the McCormick Reaper Works between police and strikers.

For six months, armed Pinkerton agents and the police harassed and beat locked-out steelworkers as they picketed. Most of these workers belonged to the "anarchist-dominated" Metal Workers' Union. During a speech near the McCormick plant, some two hundred demonstrators joined the steelworkers on the picket line. Beatings with



police clubs escalated into rock throwing by the strikers which the police responded to with gunfire. At least two strikers were killed and an unknown number were wounded.

Full of rage, a public meeting was called by some of the anarchists for the following day in Haymarket Square to discuss the police brutality. Due to bad weather and short notice, only about 3,000 of the tens of thousands of people showed up from the day before. This affair included families with children and the mayor of Chicago himself. Later, the mayor would testify that the crowd remained calm and orderly and that speaker August Spies made "no suggestion... for immediate use of force or violence toward any person..."

As the speech wound down, two detectives rushed to the main body of police, reporting that a speaker was using inflammatory language, inciting the police to march on the

speakers' wagon. As the police began to disperse the already thinning crowd, a bomb was thrown into the police ranks. No one knows who threw the bomb, but speculations varied from blaming any one of the anarchists, to an agent provocateur working for the police.

Enraged, the police fired into the crowd. The exact number of civilians killed or wounded was never determined, but an estimated seven or eight civilians died, and up to forty were wounded. One officer died immediately and another seven died in the following weeks. Later evidence indicated that only one of the police deaths could be attributed to the bomb and that all the other police fatalities had or could have had been due to their own indiscriminate gun fire. Aside from



the bomb thrower, who was never identified, it was the police, not the anarchists, who perpetrated the violence.

Eight anarchists - Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Louis Lingg - were arrested and convicted of murder, though only three were even present at Haymarket and those three were in full view of all when the bombing occurred. The jury in their trial was comprised of business leaders in a gross mockery of justice similar to the Sacco-Vanzetti case thirty years later, or the trials of AIM and Black Panther members in the seventies. The entire world watched as these eight organisers were convicted, not for their actions, of which all of were innocent, but for their political and social beliefs. On November 11, 1887, after many failed appeals, Parsons, Spies, Engel and Fisher were hung to death. Louis Lingg, in his final pro-

test of the state's claim of authority and punishment, took his own life the night before with an explosive device in his mouth.

The remaining organisers, Fielden, Neebe and Schwab, were pardoned six years later by Governor Altgeld, who publicly lambasted the judge on a travesty of justice. Immediately after the Haymarket Massacre, big business and government conducted what some say was the very first "Red Scare" in this country. Spun by mainstream media, anarchism became synonymous with bomb throwing and socialism became un-American. The common image of an anarchist became a bearded, eastern European immigrant with a bomb in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Today we see tens of thousands of activists embracing the ideals of the Haymarket Martyrs and those who established May Day as an International Workers' Day. Ironically, May Day is an official holiday in 66 countries and unofficially celebrated in many more, but rarely is it recognised in this country where it began.

Over one hundred years have passed since that first May Day. In the earlier part of the 20th century, the US government tried to curb the celebration and further wipe it from the public's memory by establishing "Law and Order Day" on May 1. We can draw many parallels between the events of 1886 and today. We still have locked out steelworkers struggling for justice. We still have voices of freedom behind bars as in the cases of Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Peltier. We still had the ability to mobilise tens of thousands of people in the streets of a major city to proclaim "THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!" at the WTO and FTAA demonstrations.

Words stronger than any I could write are engraved on the Haymarket Monument: "The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."

Truly, history has a lot to teach us about the roots of our radicalism. When we remember that people were shot so we could have the eight-hour day; if we acknowledge that homes with families in them were burned to the ground so we could have Saturday as part of the weekend; when we recall 8-year old victims of industrial accidents who marched in the streets protesting working conditions and child labour only to be beat down by the police and company thugs, we understand that our current condition cannot be taken for granted - people fought for the rights and dignities we enjoy today, and there is still a lot more to fight for. The sacrifices of so many people cannot be forgotten or we'll end up fighting for those same gains all over again. This is why we celebrate May Day.

The writer is a labour rights activist.
Courtesy: Industrial Workers of the World