

Workers' rights

UPS AND DOWNS



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The Dhaka Summit on Skills, Employability, and Decent Work, inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was held near the end of 2016. Director General of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Guy Rider visited Bangladesh on the occasion of the summit, and leaders of national trade union and employer federations participated in different sessions to share their findings, experiences, and opinions. A number of papers were presented in this summit, and a number of contracts were signed with the aim of providing skill training for the youth.

However, just after this positive initiative, in an unfortunate situation at Ashulia, at least 59 factories were shut down by owners when workers demanded an increase in the minimum wage. Hundreds of factory workers were sued and suspended from their jobs. A number of cases were filed against the labour leaders and many were arrested and put under remand. This happened solely due to the absence of regular dialogue between workers and owners and ignoring the importance of cooperation and role of trade union in this context.

Workers' welfare has been guaranteed in the Constitution of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Section 14 dictates that "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to emancipate the toiling masses, the peasants and workers, and backward sections of the people from all forms of exploitation". Section 15 also mentions the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage and the right to social

security. The aim of the National Labour Policy of 2012 is to ensure an investment friendly atmosphere by a creating productive, exploitation free, decent, safe, and healthy workplace for active citizens and to establish workers' rights and dignity of work. The government of Bangladesh enacted the Labour Law of 2006, amending it later in 2013. Moreover, Bangladesh Labour Rules were also introduced in 2015. These policies are all in place to ensure the rights of workers in Bangladesh.

Vision 2021 and its associated Perspective Plan have set development targets for the country by the end of 2021 with the aim of upgrading the country's status of a low income economy to the first stages of a middle income one. It is expected that citizens will have a higher standard of living, better education, social justice, and an equitable socioeconomic environment.

If we look back to the government's first term in power, we can see a number of ups and downs in workers' rights and workplace conditions.

The government has formulated various labour policies since 2010, namely the National Occupational Health and Safety Policy 2013, National Labour Policy 2012, National Skills Development Policy 2011, and National Child Labour Elimination Policy 2010. Additionally, Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation (Amendment) Act 2013 was enacted and Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation Rule 2010 was introduced. The minimum wage for RMG workers was set at BDT 5,300 in two steps with 5 percent of basic as yearly increment.

In the meantime, workplace disasters depicted Bangladesh to the international community in a negative way. At

the end of 2012, the fire at Tazreen Fashions factory killed 112 workers. The world's biggest structural failure was recorded in Bangladesh when the eight storied Rana Plaza building in Savar collapsed in 2013. Killing 1,133 workers, this disaster left thousands of workers injured, bringing suffering and uncertainty to their families. A total of 3,789 workers were killed in workplace accidents and violence between 2009 and 2013, while 8,451 were injured in different incidents. The majority of workplace accidents in Bangladesh occur due to the lack of administration, negligence, and avoidance of occupational health and safety (OHS) provisions on part of the employers.

In its Election Manifesto of 2013, Awami League stated, "Necessary funding and supply of technology will be made for the flourishing of cottage industries, weaving, rickshaws and van, and opportunities will be created to increase the efficiency of existing manpower. In order to reduce pseudo unemployment and poverty, the informal sector will be made more dynamic and productive and its relationship with the formal sector will be made closer."

It also declared, "Awami League is firmly committed to put in place a Labour Policy compatible with Chapters 15, 28, 38 and 40 of the Constitution of the country as well as with the ILO convention and to implement multifaceted measures to implement labour welfare. The government's ongoing programme for fulfilling minimum wages for workers and adjusting such wages in pace with living expenses, inflation and growth rate of the economy, will go on. Towards that end, the role of the Wages Commission and the related laws of the land will be brought

under sharper focus. In parallel with steps to provide trade based training for workers, and the resultant increase in their productivity, their right to trade unionism will also be ensured."

With the second term of the government in session, it is now necessary to carefully observe the maturity of different development issues regarding workers' welfare that were declared in the manifesto. The year 2021 will mark the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence. The government envisions a middle income Bangladesh by 2021 where poverty will be drastically reduced, citizens will be able to meet every basic need, and development will be on fast track with ever increasing rates of growth.

The government has adopted the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy of 2015 this year to protect the rights of domestic workers. Besides, Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015 and Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation (Amendment) Rules 2015 were also introduced during this period.

However, after the Rana Plaza collapse, another deadly accident occurred in Tampaco Foil Factory in Tongi on September 10, 2016 that took the lives of 40 workers and caused huge damage to the neighbouring area. Investors, who have been advocating for greater protection of factory workers through comprehensive fire and safety inspections, are alarmed and saddened by this latest tragic and avoidable loss of life.

Issues of promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all are included in the SDGs. In fact, decent work has been considered as a driving force for the

achievement of the SDG agenda. However, recent experiences remind us that decent work still remains elusive in Bangladesh. Employers do not care for safety issues unless they are compelled to do so. One of the very important pillars of decent work is workers' rights. But the registration process of a basic union seems overly complicated, while there is a provision for mandatory participation of 30 percent workers to unionise. Meanwhile, inequality is widening and poses a great threat to sustainable development. Inequality is increasing, despite sustained economic growth, because the growth is uneven.

The World Bank has said that its new Country Partnership Framework (CPF) 2016-2020 will support Bangladesh to achieve its vision of reaching middle income status by 2021. World Bank Country Director for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, Qimiao Fan, said, "Despite daunting challenges, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty and advancing growth and development." He added, "Job creation tops the development agenda and this requires higher, sustainable growth". In this regard, Bangladesh has to improve its social infrastructure significantly.

In this regard, we need to use our human resource effectively to achieve the target. Workers are integral parts of industry and national development. So, without involving them with this journey, nothing will be achieved for the nation. For the implementation of the SDGs, we need to address the issue of capacity development of the workers very steadily and ensure the skill development of our youth workers. Besides, we should also upgrade the skill sets of