

Celebrating with violence

Will BCL members listen to the PM's advice?

A picture in the back page of this paper yesterday embarrassingly contrasts a story on the front page. The picture shows Chhatra League members carrying weapons during a factional clash in MC college in Sylhet, and in the news report the PM has been quoted as urging Chhatra League to pursue education and spread education in their villages in preparation for their future role as leaders of the country. At least 11 people were reportedly hurt in the clashes.

The occasion that triggered all these events, including the PM's encouraging speech, was the 70th anniversary of Chhatra League's establishment. It is indeed unfortunate that an occasion as important as this should be marred by factional skirmishes on several campuses of the country. Most of these clashes were over petty issues.

But truth be told, we are not particularly surprised at the rowdy behaviour of members of this organisation. In complete contradiction to the organisation's role in the past, in national movements that made history, the present BCL has been in the news for the wrong reasons, the prime one being violent clashes on campus. This has degraded the academic atmosphere of these educational institutions and deprived general students of the peace of mind required while pursuing their higher education.

It is clear that the higher ups of the BCL, while giving lip service about how the organisation must be disciplined, actually do not have much control over the delinquent elements in their party. And because disciplinary action is not taken as much as is needed to reign in these belligerent, ill-disciplined elements, factionalism and hooliganism continues.

Thus, mere advice that BCL members should educate themselves in order to be effective leaders, is not enough to curb the increasingly violent, arrogant behaviour of a large number of members of the ruling party's student body. Exemplary punishment must be meted out to those who indulge in criminal activities. Failure to do so will be seen as a license to continue with such behaviour, ultimately dragging down the ruling party's image.

Least bothered about workers' safety

Strengthen workplace monitoring

TWO separate reports have been published recently about deaths at workplace. Indeed, the year 2017 has been a particularly deadly year for workers in Bangladesh. These are of course reported deaths and experts agree that the actual number may be much higher. The report by Safety and Rights Society, an NGO involved in improving workplace safety, states that there were 426 reported deaths in 2017, a rise of 11.5 percent from the previous year. Sectors where most deaths occur are transport followed by construction, and most deaths occur in the districts of Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur, Sylhet and Narayanganj.

The scenario has only become worse year after year in the absence of the government's workplace monitoring mechanism. Though there are bodies like Rajuk and Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment, neither have the manpower or clearly delineated roles, which make it easy for employers to simply ignore workers' safety. Mere formation of a committee or a cell will do nothing to improve safety standards; it has to be enacted into law replete with penalties, both financial and criminal negligence. As pointed out in another report prepared by Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) in late December 2017, the death toll continues to rise in factory boiler explosions and the lacklustre response from the government in recruiting inspectors to conduct safety inspections.

Not ensuring workers' safety, apart from violating human rights, also affects productivity, and in turn, the economy. Work deemed hazardous does little to encourage skilled workers to find work in sectors like construction, which ultimately will deprive the sector. It is really up to the government to get its act together in making employers take responsibility for ensuring safe working environment in all sectors.

A teacher's worth



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

MY postgraduate classroom was filled with teachers and social workers. Self-proclaimed idealists. Once, during a highly theoretical discussion, someone made a comment about how we are not all as selfless as we claim. She conjectured that most of us in the classroom are there because they know that a postgraduate degree from McGill would earn us a bigger paycheque. At that point, a little turned off by what I thought was cynicism, I blurted out that if that were the case, we wouldn't pick, of all things, education as a subject of study. In fact, I think my exact words were, "You are fooling yourself if you think you're going to make more money with a degree in Education. Nobody cares about teachers." My teacher, who was present in the classroom, gasped at me in faux dismay.

Thank God for her sense of humour. But what I stated so bluntly in a fit of my foot-in-the-mouth-disorder wasn't too far from the truth. Many educationists join the profession from an idealism that stems from wanting to play a role in breeding the country's brightest minds. Often, they are some of the country's brightest minds themselves. That is why, of the intellectuals systematically murdered in 1971, 991 were teachers.

On the first day of the new year, the front page of *The Daily Star* featured a report titled "English, Math Exams: Lack of quality teachers behind poor show." The report painted a grim picture of a drop in the pass rate in the Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams under the eight general education boards. The main reason behind the sub-standard performance of the examinees has been deemed by experts to be the lack of qualified teachers.

In other news, on December 31, teachers and employees of the non-MPO (Monthly Pay Order) educational institutions started a fast-till-death programme after staging demonstrations for five consecutive days near the National Press Club. Around 200 teachers started the strike in front of the club. A local daily cited some teachers saying the number of non-MPO educational institutions is 5,242, where around 80,000 teachers are working without any pay, some for more than a decade.

Idealism is beautiful. But unfortunately, it doesn't pay the bills. Low income levels of one of the most demanding professions, and I daresay, the most significant professions, in terms of their contribution to society, is a global predicament. Teachers are paid poorly all across the world. According to the Economic Policy Institute Issue Brief 298, teachers in the USA make 14 percent less than professionals in other occupations that require similar levels of education. Most people undertake the profession because there is a certain sense of respectability that is attached to it. But we live in a country where teachers are beaten up by mobs and made to do sit-ups holding their ears in the presence of local leaders. So, I wonder why teachers take up the jobs they do.

Some say that being associated with an educational institution allows them to earn a good income in other ways, such as through private tutoring or coaching centres. Some say it helps with their social status. There are allegations that they do not teach in school as sincerely as they should. Most critics cite teachers' engagement in coaching centres as reason to disregard any positive contribution they make to society.

And maybe they are not wrong. Teachers have

become increasingly commercial, and despite rising fees at coaching centres, the quality of education is not improving. In fact, according to the latest government report cited in *The Daily Star* report, around 88 percent of the 78,415 teachers giving English lessons at secondary level did not study English as a core subject in graduation and master's levels.

While, I am not sure we need subject-based specialisations to teach at primary or secondary level. I am certain that we need a love for teaching and a thirst for learning. But sometimes love needs reason and many teachers view their job as more of a profession than passion. So, their sole purpose of engaging in the profession is to make a living. However, we have to ask ourselves, why are we so rigorous in our scrutiny of how much money a teacher is making when we don't question high salaries that CEOs of multinational companies and banks make? Whether by default or by choice, isn't a teacher playing a direct role in shaping the country's future? Then why do we place such a demand on teachers to be so self-sacrificial?

resentment among non-government teachers and employees of MPO-enlisted schools and colleges. The reason behind their dissatisfaction was that the government had decided to increase the amount of monthly contribution from their salaries for their retirement benefits and welfare allowances. Understandably, this created much pressure on the teachers to sustain their families in the present.

I understand many of our teachers have disappointed us. And so instead of listening to the pleas of our teachers or raising havoc about their issues, our social media is better used in talking about why Jerusalem is or isn't recognised as Israel's capital.

But, in truth, there is no room to let disappointment fester. We must offer our teachers something. We have to ensure that they are adequately trained. We have to ensure that they are adequately paid. As a country that aspires to achieve middle-income status, and one that has numerous unprecedented challenges to tackle, we must create a solid foundation. And we can only do this by valuing those who pave the way for the foundation



The hunger strike of teachers demanding immediate enlistment into the Monthly Pay Order (MPO). The photo was taken on Wednesday, January 3, 2018.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

We must also ask ourselves, are we doing anything significant for those who play such a vital role in building the country's future? The remuneration that teachers are offered is meagre. Capacity building initiatives are inadequate. There are few training opportunities that teachers can avail themselves of. An example of this is when the government introduced the creative curriculum in schools which took most teachers by surprise as they had not received any training when this was done.

So, there is little money and little growth in the profession.

While it is the non-MPO enlisted teachers who have been covered by recent news, the MPO listed school teachers aren't too happy either. In July last year, *The Daily Star* reported on the brewing

to be built. It is what our future depends on.

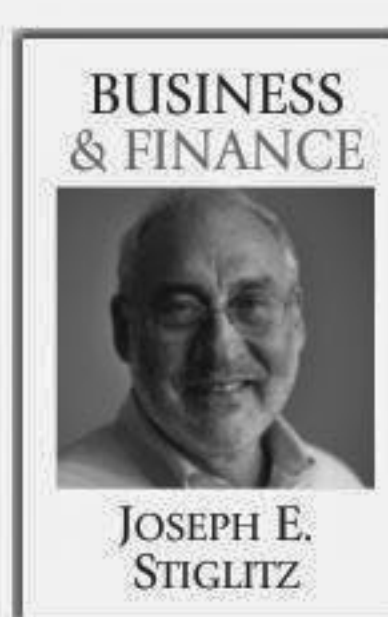
On January 3, 2018, the protests continue. The front page of *The Daily Star* shows a picture of about half a dozen men, lying on the ground, eyes half-closed or staring coldly. The picture was captioned: "Teachers continue their fast unto death, well into the night, demanding their institutions be given the Monthly Pay Order benefits. The photo was taken around 9 pm. last night."

But it may as well have been captioned with a quote from *Of Human Bondage*: "The idealist withdrew himself, because he could not suffer the jostling of the human crowd...and since his fellows would not take him at his own estimate, he consoled himself with despising his fellows."

Shagufta Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The US Donor Relief Act of 2017



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

BUSINESS & FINANCE
NEVER has a piece of legislation labelled as both a tax cut and a reform been received with as much disapproval and derision as the bill passed by the US Congress and signed into law by

President Donald Trump just before Christmas. The Republicans who voted for the bill (no Democrats did) claim that their gift will come to be appreciated later, as Americans see their take-home pay go up. They are almost certainly wrong. Rather, the bill wraps into one package all that is wrong with the Republican Party, and to some extent, the debased state of American democracy.

The legislation is not "tax reform" by even the most elastic reading. Reform entails closing distortionary loopholes and increasing the fairness of the tax code. Central to fairness is the ability to pay. But this tax legislation reduces taxes by tens of thousands of dollars, on average, for those most able to pay (the top quintile). And, when fully implemented (in 2027), it will increase taxes on a majority of Americans in the middle (the second, third, and fourth quintiles).

The US tax code was already regressive long before Trump's presidency. Indeed, the billionaire investor Warren Buffett, one of the wealthiest men in the world, famously complained that it was wrong that he paid a lower tax rate than his secretary. The new legislation makes America's tax system even more regressive.

It is now universally recognised that growing inequality is a key economic problem in the United States, with those at the top capturing almost all the gains in GDP over the past quarter-century. The new legislation adds insult to injury: rather than offsetting this disturbing trend, the Republicans' "reform" gives even more to the top.

A more distorted economy is not a healthy economy. The International Monetary Fund has emphasised that a

more unequal society worsens economic performance—and the new tax legislation will lead inexorably to a more unequal society.

Much of the complexity and distortion in the US tax code arises from different types of income being taxed at different rates. Such differential treatment leads not only to the (correct) perception that the tax code is unfair, but also to inefficiencies: resources move to favoured sectors, and are wasted as firms try to convert their incomes and activities into the more favoured forms. The worst provisions of the old tax code—such as the carried-interest loophole, which allows job-destroying private-equity

in the tax bill aimed specifically at them, not only further widens America's political divide; it's also bad economics. No sane government would undermine the most dynamic parts of its economy, and yet that is what the Trump administration is doing. Special tax breaks for the real-estate sector may help Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, but it does not make America great or competitive. And limiting the deductibility of state income tax and property tax will almost surely reduce investment in education and infrastructure—again, not a sound strategy for increasing American competitiveness. Other new provisions



Donald Trump speaks about the passage of tax reform legislation on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC.

PHOTO: AFP

firms to pay taxes at low rates—have been retained, and new categories of favoured income (earned by so-called pass-through entities) have been created.

The hoped-for spur to economic growth is unlikely to materialise, for several reasons. First, the economy is already at or near full employment. If the US Federal Reserve comes to view that to be the case, it will raise interest rates at the first sign of a significant increase in aggregate demand. And higher interest rates mean that investment, and thus growth, will slow, even if the consumption of the very rich increases.

Moreover, squeezing the "blue" (Democratic) states, including California and New York, by including provisions

will also hurt the US economy.

Because the fiscal deficit will increase—the only question is by how much, with my bet being that it will be far larger than current estimates of USD 1-1.5 trillion—the trade deficit will increase as well, regardless of whether Trump pursues more nativist/protectionist policies. Lower exports and higher imports will further undermine US manufacturing. Once again (as they have done with health care and the tax cuts), Trump is betraying his core supporters.

But the Republican Party is cynical. Its leaders are stuffing themselves at the trough—Trump, Kushner, and many others in his administration are among the biggest

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winners—thinking that this may be their last chance at such a feast. And no Republican believes the party can get away with it more firmly than Trump does.

That is why the legislation is structured to give individuals temporary tax cuts, with corporations getting a permanent reduction in their tax rate. The Republicans seem confident that voters will not see beyond the next paycheque. But voters are not so easily manipulated: they have seen through the trick, and are rightly convinced by the numerous studies, from sources in and out of government, showing that the lion's share of the tax cut goes to corporations and the very rich.

Trump's tax legislation also attests to many Republicans' belief that dollars are more important than voters. All that matters is pleasing their corporate sponsors, who will reward the party with contributions, which will be used to buy votes, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of a corporate-driven political agenda.

Let's hope that Americans really are smarter than the greedy corporate CEOs and their cynical Republican servants believe. With midterm congressional elections coming in November, they will have ample opportunity to prove it.

Joseph E Stiglitz is the winner of the 2001 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. His most recent book is *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited: Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2018. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Yes, we deserve better leaders

A letter titled *Do we deserve better rulers?* published by this newspaper on December 31 was an interesting read. Surely, in my opinion, we deserve better leaders. After all, the rulers in this age are supposed to be the elected representatives of the people. They ought to have a responsibility to work towards ensuring their welfare, and are accountable to them for their actions.

Good governance is essential for the growth and progress of a society. What is actually happening in our country, however, is far from satisfactory. Corruption has become rampant. All wealth is accumulated in the hands of a privileged few, depriving the common people, who are struggling to ensure their rights to education, health care, etc. We, therefore, deserve better leaders who will work for these people, who form the majority of the population.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka