

Colonial Legacies, Capitalist Presents: National Interests vs Labour Interests?

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The post Rana Plaza period is often seen as a turning point for labour organising in the garment sector, given critical amendments to the labour law, implementation of the Accord and Alliance, as well as the increased scrutiny of international pressure from buyers and others. Yet not only do the number of factory related unions remain relatively small, worker dissatisfaction manifested in large-scale mobilisation, occupation of public spaces and invariably violent encounters with law enforcement, have been regular features of the industrial landscape since 2013.

While there is no one neat explanation for this state of affairs, one aspect that is rarely taken into consideration is the tension between national and labour interests. Any analysis of labour organising in Bangladesh must keep in mind the conditions of precarity under which the garment industry 'took off', the centrality of the industry for the national economy, and Bangladesh's marginal structural position in global political-economic order. Three decades into the industry, Bangladesh's one 'comparative advantage' remains its cheap(ened) and relatively unskilled female labour force. As a consequence, labour repression in various forms can ultimately be justified as a valid 'cost' of maintaining the nation's competitive edge, or represented as an issue of vital national interest. Yet 'national interest,' is an elastic and opaque category that can accommodate multiple and contradictory interests. Whose nation and whose interests are served when the rhetoric of nation appears to be pitted directly against the interests of labour?

Legacies

Despite their historical role in anti-colonial and nationalist struggles, trade unions have a distinctly negative place in the public imagination. Widely perceived to be corrupt and self-serving, they wield minimum leverage in the public sphere. The politicisation of union agendas is a basic structural weakness that must be contextualised historically.

Union formation in the two major industries of British India—jute and textiles—was profoundly shaped by conditions of colonial rule. From the outset nationalist struggles and labour struggles became inextricable. The somewhat uneasy relationship that ensued laid the foundations for a peculiar mode of worker politicisation. The extreme partisanship

of unions in postcolonial Bangladesh is one manifestation of this outcome. Anti-colonial movements relied on mass mobilisations—literally on the ability to generate numbers that leaders could claim to represent. Not surprisingly, unions were rapidly incorporated into broader anti-colonial struggles.

A related but different legacy of anti-colonial struggles, one rarely taken into account, concerns emergent modes of legitimate public resistance and expressions of grievance. Highly contextualised registers of public protest, "of breaking the law peacefully," are deeply embedded across the South Asian political landscape "as a set of possible languages of political expression and dissent" (Thomas Blom Hansen, "The Political Theology of Violence in Contemporary India"). These possible languages include *gheraos*, blockades, sit-ins, and hunger strikes, all modes of protest invoked by the labour movement in Bangladesh at various moments in recent history.

The 1947 partition of British India did not interrupt the pattern of political unionism established earlier. Pakistan's first military ruler, General Ayub Khan, introduced factory-level unions to counter what he saw as undesirable communist inroads as well as to extend his regime's hegemony over the working class. The Pakistani state's hostility toward communism and progressives/leftists in the labour movement represented a critical feature of the country's evolving Cold War alliance with the United States. After a formal ban on the Communist Party came into place in 1954, progressive workers and organisers were forced underground. Political and union leaders found themselves under mass arrest during the martial law period.

It was during the early stages of the Cold War, soon after independence, that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the US based AFL-CIO first became active in East Pakistan. The AFL-CIO practiced 'Cold War Trade Union Imperialism', consolidating anti-communist trade union movements, long before its formalised overseas front the Asian American Free Labour Institute (AAFLI) was set up in 1968. AAFLI was originally targeted at labour in Vietnam, but soon expanded its operations to include the Philippines and other Asian

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