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and Pacific countries. By the 1990s, it supported unions in approximately 30 countries in Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East, with resident representatives in Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Turkey.

East Pakistan's labour movement was further divided by the ideological differences between the two opposition parties, the Awami League (AL) and the explicitly left-leaning National Awami Party (NAP) at the forefront of the struggle against West Pakistani economic and cultural hegemony in the 1950s and 1960s. Both NAP and the AL sponsored their own trade union federations. As in the anti-colonial period, union activities became subservient to the immediate needs and strategies of the party and the nationalist struggle. Workers were as involved as students in the mass upsurges of 1968-69, the strikes, blockades and torch processions that ultimately forced the military to call the first parliamentary elections in Pakistan's history.

The government of newly independent Bangladesh should have been labour friendly. It espoused explicitly socialist values, nationalised key industries and enacted several pro-labour laws. Unfortunately, geo-political and other considerations not entirely within its control soon compelled the new government to dispense with much of its socialist inclinations. Nationalisation effectively politicised labour unions further. The result, among other things, was an increasingly authoritarian bent that eventually rendered the polity into a one-party state. All trade unions—regardless of individual ideology—were forcibly incorporated into the ruling party's labour front. The more progressive voices were silenced or forced underground.

Military rule under General Ziaur Rahman consolidated free market, neoliberal policies geared toward economic growth. Zia initially banned all union activity, but later rescinded the ban with severe restrictions. He also directed each political party to set up its own labour front, effectively diluting the impact of any independent militant unions.

Zia initiated the privatisation of state enterprises, a process his military successor, General HM Ershad carried forward. The large-scale retrenchment that followed weakened the labour movement greatly. Against the odds, and in response, existing private sector unions formed Sromik Kormochari Oikya Parishad (Workers Employees Unity Council) or SKOP. Despite mounting considerable resistance, SKOP was not able to generate pro-labour policies. Continuing privatisation resulted in a steep decline in

unionisation from which the country has never quite recovered. As unions affiliated with the ruling party spent their energies competing over political patronage and resources, state repression—by the police, army or increasingly by paramilitary forces—of independent labour became the norm.

A replay of the nationalist versus worker tensions took place in the 1980s during the movement to restore parliamentary democracy. The one organisation that mobilised garment workers, the Workers' Party, ultimately shifted its focus to the broader political struggle. Second, this was the phase of globalisation when Southern nations were compelled to liberalise trade policies, as conditionality for loans but also to stay competitive under new global conditions. States desperate to retain foreign direct investment actively suppressed, often brutally, worker protest. Bangladesh was no different.

The reinstatement of parliamentary democracy in 1990 did little to shift the prospects of improved workers' rights

reotype of mainstream unions as corrupt, nepotistic and ineffective in promoting and protecting labour rights may not be too far from the truth.

Back to the Future?

The lack of formal space for the legitimate voicing of grievances is the other side of numerous spontaneous, demonstrations, blockades, sit-ins, marches and destruction of factory property seen in the garment sector as early as the 1980s. The Sparrow apparel strike of the mid-eighties was one of the first sustained actions of this kind. The idea of national interest trumping that of worker interest comes forth in one of the first—and still of one the best—studies of trade unions in the garment industry. Drawing on data collected in 1996, Shamsul Khan mapped the ways state and capital—in elaborate collusion with each other—systematically deployed a variety of bureaucratic power as well as often violent forms of policing to suppress attempts to organise labour. According to the study a majority of factory owners in the 1980s perceived unions

at the workplace. The culling of radical voices happens at the source, now as well as then. Khan found that DoL employees routinely tipped off owners about pending or newly accepted applications. Individuals responsible for initiating the effort, along with those who signed on in support of unions, were invariably subjected to retaliation by the management. Reprisal took many forms. Most obviously, workers marked as trouble-makers would be summarily dismissed, and their names circulated and publicised to enable blacklisting as a whole.

In light of the analysis above, how should we read the increase in unions since 2013 and the amendments to the labour law? What are the implications—of control over union actions and agendas—when the process of union formation is top down, not to mention under the gaze of key global players? Under what circumstances would these unions constitute a social force that operates at a level of scale beyond the factory, and would be able to link up with other movements?

Key provisions of the 2013 amendments of the labour law leave the discretionary power of the bureaucracy intact. Under the new amendments, the registrar for trade unions can deny workers the permission to unionise if the official is unsatisfied with the petition. In addition, as in the past, it is evident that radical left-wing unions find it almost impossible to obtain registration. The general impression is that only unions formed with the help of externally funded NGOs (the implication being that they are shorn of any militant agenda, are deemed reasonable/pliant) tend to get approval. Many leaders of newly approved unions are already disillusioned. They come with high expectations but find that they possess little actual power.

Finally, the government reserved the right to prevent any demonstration or strike it deems 'disruptive' to the community or harmful to the 'national interest.' Suffice it to say, what counts as the national interest or as disruption is open to the logics of power. The issue of national interest is especially complex because it is easily mobilised by those on the right, and framed in the language of anti-imperialism.

Current debates have been subsumed in the urgency (or not) to maintain the presence of the Accord in Bangladesh. Whatever the merits of the Accord, it is critical to keep in mind factors other than building and fire safety that constitute workers' rights.

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PHOTO: STAR

since both the AL and BNP, which alternated in power until recently, embrace similar ideologies of free trade, open markets and export-oriented development. Currently, the government has as an 'Open Door' policy with respect to foreign direct investment (BEPZA). Whatever their other ideological conflicts, both parties concur that economic policy should be geared toward growth, in this case, toward securing the stability and expansion of the garment industry, whatever the implications for workers' rights.

By this time, progressive, leftist organisations had been marginalised, if not decimated. As for the rest, mandated affiliation with political parties produced intensely clientelist relations. It was not only that party interests always trumped those of workers but the very idea of what constituted workers' interests outside the national/party interest was subject to suspicion. In the circumstances, the ste-

as undesirable because they [owners] were still 'at the formative phase of their manufacturing businesses', and could not afford to be distracted by 'unreasonable' demands or 'unnecessary interruptions', by labour leaders who 'might try to pursue their own selfish agenda in the name of workers' participation'. Here we see owners deploying popular negative associations of unions to undermine genuine claims of labour.

Khan also observed an increasing trend of 'physical assaults, gherao, demonstrations, rallies, work stoppages, and lay-offs' by the mid-1990s. Much of what Khan recorded of that period should resonate with those familiar with the difficulties of trade union formation today. Khan reports, for instance, that the Directorate of Labour routinely refused registration to independent left-leaning unions, even if their paperwork was in perfect order, including proof of 30 percent support

1919



ILO adopts its first convention on limited hours of work and adequate rest periods for workers.

1920



Indian Communist Party is established in Tashkent on October 17. It will go on to play a key role in organising labour movements all over the Indian Subcontinent. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) is established on October 31. It is instrumental in giving the trade union in East Bengal its early backbone.