



PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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Veteran labour leader, President, Trade Union Centre and former President of Communist Party of Bangladesh recounts his days as a labour organiser and the contribution of workers to the independence movement of Bangladesh.



I was born in Nabinagar thana, Brahmanbaria district (the then Comilla district). My ancestors were not involved in any kind of job or business. At one point, our insolvency reached a point where it was no longer possible for me to continue my education, so I moved to Dhaka to earn a living. During that time, my brother used to work at a jute mill. My initial plan was to join the mill, but the authorities rejected me as I was too young. However, after a few years of roaming around the city, in 1963, I got the opportunity to work at the Bawani Jute mill as a substitute worker.

During the early 60s, Maulana Bhashani was at the forefront of our politics. Among

the youngsters, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Muzzaffar Ahmed played a prominent role in politics. The political space was shrunk due to the oppression on political leaders by the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan. Amid this political lull, workers came out as a strong force to challenge the martial law administration in East Pakistan. In 1963, a strike took place at the spinning mill of East Pakistan. It was led by Haider Akbar Khan Rono, Kazi Zafar and others. They were joined by workers from mills in Dhakeshwari, resulting in an even bigger strike for 43 days with the shutdown of 30 factories. This was a significant event, as prior to this political parties hadn't been able to bolster a massive movement against military rule. This was the first time I witnessed such a powerful strike.

In January 1964, communal violence broke out among the workers. The workers of Demra, Adamjee and Narsingdi were provoked by the coterie of 22 families of Pakistan and engaged in conflict without understanding the context. Workers from minority communities were mercilessly killed during this riot. The politically conscious group of workers, most of them being from the minority community, faced a severe setback.

However, the workers, rising above the internal difference, successfully called a strike on July 1, 1964 for the demand of Rs 125. This strike was led by the pro-Muslim League Labour Federation. Many leftist leaders were

involved in this labour organisation. However, the leaders of the strike called off the programme after they were arrested. But the workers did not agree to this, and they prolonged the strike for 21 days in five mills in Dhaka with the participation of 40,000 workers. A temporary

workers into mainstream politics. The workers earned the trust of the people by making them believe that it was possible to fight against the Ayub Khan government. Ironically, the contribution of workers and labourers to our politics remains neglected in our mainstream history texts.

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in protest of the killing of student leader Asad. As decided, on January 24, 1969 almost 40,000 workers started a rally from Adamjee at 7am. Workers from surrounding mills and common people enthusiastically joined the procession. By the time the rally reached Tikatoli, the number of protesters went beyond 1 lakh. The west wall of the Secretariat was demolished once the protest reached Paltan. Even the employees in that area joined us, leaving their regular office work. This massive movement led to the mass uprising of 1969 which eventually lead to the downfall of the decade-long military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. It was a glorious achievement. Unfortunately, the whole credit was usurped by some political leaders.

The Agartala conspiracy case was still not waived after the mass uprising. Workers actively participated in freeing Bangabandhu from the false case. The laborers used to work in the mills with the slogan—"We will break the locks of the prison and bring Sheikh Mujib out" (*Jail er tala bhangbo, Sheikh Mujib ka anbo*).

During the Yahya regime, a student protest was held in West Pakistan demanding autonomy and democracy. The protest implicitly inspired the Bengalis to stage a demonstration against military rule. After 10 days of protest, the workers surrounded the mills and factories, shutting down all regular activities.

In the wake of another labour movement, the administration of Yahya Khan was compelled to adopt two policies under the commission of Nur Khan. The first one was concerned with the increase of minimum wage and the second one dealt with the initiation of labour law. The agreement came into execution, and the minimum wage became Tk 125, whereas the minimum wage in Karachi was Tk 140. However, Tk 125 was enough for a worker to lead a decent life. During that time, implementation of ILO convention was more effective than now.

After the end of the war, Ayub Khan released four important communist leaders. They stood against the Six-point demands. A division emerged in secret communist party and the communist movement divided into two streams: Pro-Peking and Pro-Moscow. It was a major setback for the labour movement because leftist organisations had a stronghold over both the labour and peasant forces.

During the tumultuous period of 1969,

workers again played a key role in fighting the autocratic regime. Workers realised that their participation was instrumental to run the movement. I already got the membership of the secret communist party during this time. The party urged us to involve workers and labourers in the movement. Awami League, particularly Sirajul Alam Khan using his connections in jute mill areas in Naryanganj, also urged workers to join the uprising.

We, the labour leaders from different ideological leanings, came to a collective decision to take the workers to the street

It is a matter of sorrow that independence couldn't bring liberation for the toiling masses. The labour law and minimum wage gradually deteriorated since independence. The labourers and workers apparently lost their rights in independent Bangladesh!

As told to Ananta Yusuf, The Daily Star. Translated by Labiba Faiz Bari, contributor to The Daily Star.

A story untold



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1958

The imposition of Martial Law is a major set back for all kinds of trade union activities. Strikes are virtually banned under Ayub's regime.

1959

11-point Labour Policy is announced by the military government.

1964

Serious riots spark up in Khulna and Chittagong between local workers and workers from other districts.

1965

Pakistan government ratifies ILO convention which guarantees Trade Union Formation and Workers' right to collective bargaining. But it promulgated East Pakistan Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act of which Section 25 entitles workers to come to court individually instead of collective bargaining mechanism of trade unions. As a result the labour dispute cases based on charter of demands dwindle down and there is a tremendous increase in individual cases.

1966

Great commotions and unrest in the industrial areas of Naryanganj, Tejgaon, Tongi and Chittagong take place. The police opens fire, killing a number of people. The workers from Naryanganj industrial area march towards Dhaka in a procession in spite of the promulgation of Section 144.