

# Workers' cry in workers' land



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

ANU MUHAMMAD

Bangladesh is a workers' land. More than seven million people are working here as manufacturing workers, nearly nine million in hotels and tea shops, more than four million in transport, two million in construction and more than 20 million women and men are actively engaged in agriculture. With their unemployed dependents, they constitute more than 90 percent of the population, and yet they share less than 20 per cent of the GDP. With the rise in GDP and a good growth rate, the share of working people in GDP has declined.

At the time of independence, Bangladeshi society was dominated by small and middle-income groups: petty traders, low and middle-income professionals, small and medium farmers, small entrepreneurs. There were large farmers and *jotedars* in rural areas, but an elite class based on industry or in trade was almost non-existent. Therefore, the number of industrial/non-agricultural

workers was also small. That social composition changed radically over the following decades. Multimillionaires with big properties have grown in thousands through the capital accumulation process, mostly primitive in nature. In the same process, both the size and proportion of illegal, underground, unreported and criminal economic activities have increased on an unprecedented scale. The size of this economy has grown with bribery, commissions to approve bad projects, leakages from different development projects, violent crimes, arms and drug trade, corruption, land grabbing, women, child, and manpower trafficking, sex trade, cheating and fraudulent activities, etc. These activities have affected the social fabric and uprooted a huge number of people. Expansion of the service sector has captured a major part of the economy, thereby increasing the informal sector and its number of workers. In the industrial sector, the rise of an export-oriented garments sector has also changed the scenario in many ways, such as higher number of factory workers with lower real wage and insecurity, in recent decades.

As a newly independent country, Bangladesh inherited some big industrial enterprises in jute, textile, steel and sugar. Most of these were initially established by state patronage or with big subsidies from the state, and later transferred ownership to Pakistani big business houses. These were abandoned by them after independence in December 1971, and nationalised in early 1972. These enterprises formed the industrial mainstay of the newly independent country. These had strong trade unions mostly organised by leftist parties. Workers of these big enterprises, located mostly in Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong, had been very organised and politically active since the early 1960s. They played a crucial role in the political movement against military rule led by General Ayub Khan, the mass uprising in 1969 and later, the war of independence in 1971.

After independence, all governments, civil and military, did all they could to capture these trade unions. They even resorted to violence and killing to gain control over industrial areas and to plant corrupt persons in the trade union leadership. Abuse of trade unions climbed to its extreme during the 1980s under the military rule of General Ershad. It continued with later regimes. With the labour leaders co-opted into the ruling elite, corruption at the management level became a common phenomenon. This spread mistrust among workers towards their leaders, and weakened the unions' power to assert the workers' agenda.

With the World Bank's privatisation projects, top labour leaders were bribed in various ways, including with foreign trips to ensure the success of privatisation. Gradually, most of these trade unions became tools of the ruling party, thus separated from the general workers. These practices have contributed to a loss of credibility and a decline in the strength of the trade unions.

During the 1980s, like many other neighbouring countries, Bangladesh's ruling class/es also accepted its development path in accordance with the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), the other face of the "Washington Consensus" prescription. There were many elements in the package, such as reordering of public expenditure priorities, competitive exchange rates, liberalised trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), privatisation and deregulation. In sum, the programmes aimed to bring everything within the reach of private business, turning every activity into profit-making schemes, and opening everything for corporate interests. These are collectively known as neo-liberal economic policies. Privatisation of state-owned enterprises, education, health care and other public services, downsizing industrial units, closing down 'loss making' enterprises and retrenchment of workers have been the high priority of successive governments. These 'reforms' resulted in erosion of public enterprises, and consequent widespread unemployment and alienation. The process was at its peak in 2002 with the closure of Adamjee Jute Mills, the largest jute industry of the world. The demise of the enterprise was arranged under the guise of 'jute sector development' with a USD 250 million loan from the World Bank.

In this model, privatisation of common property, grabbing of natural resources appear as progress, destruction of wetland, forest or cropland in favour of profitable business are seen as development, dismantling of public institutions are seen as economic reforms.

The neo-liberal reforms that shaped the government actions also had a strong ideological-political dimension. Dismantling old industries was prioritised not only to expand the rule of private capital, but also to break workers' stronghold. Moreover, they were intended to create a large pool of labour-disorganised, scattered, unable to assert its rights, and forced to accept low wages.

The evolution of the export-oriented RMG industry in Bangladesh coincided with these reforms, reaping benefits from the rising unemployment and new

Continued to page 15

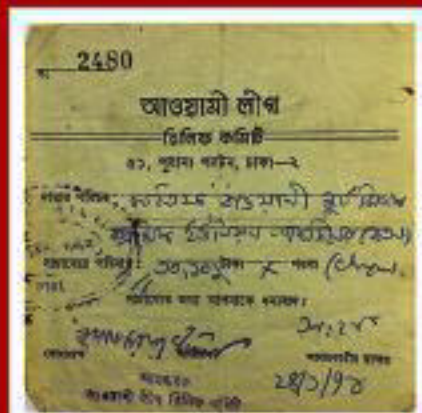
1969

Gherao Movement takes place.



1970

Nur Khan Labour Policy promulgated.



1971

"The bulk of labour force joined the war of liberation and as a working class had come to realise that the key to their true emancipation was the elimination of all vested interests of 22 families. The success in the struggle of liberation naturally gave them a high sense of expectation in the future," summarises the ILO-SIDA Mission.