

MAY DAY SPECIAL |

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international division of labour. However, this new emerging sector enjoyed policy and material support from both the government and the international financial institutions. It also enjoyed other favourable factors including quotas under the multi-fibre agreement that ensured an international market. The new rising rich were looking for high-profit investment; they became new owners. A huge pool of unemployed young women from poor families, ready to work for rock bottom wages and longer working hours, made up the new workforce.

While old factories had been suffering from hostility from the policy makers, a long list of incentives became available for export-oriented industries. These incentives included duty free import of capital machinery for 100 percent export-oriented industries outside the export processing zones (EPZs), creation of an export promotion fund (EPF) for product development and market promotion of new items, exemption from payment of 50 percent of income tax on income derived from export, exemption from payment of import license fees by exporters who import raw materials exclusively for export production, and retention of up to 10 percent of earnings for general business purposes (soon to be raised to 20 percent). In later years, on many occasions, garment exporters could pull more benefits and favours from the governments.

By the 1990s, it became clear that the old industries were dying, while export-oriented industries and construction materials showed strong and steady growth. In old factories, workers had trade unions, housing facilities, schools for their kids. In the new phase of industrialisation, instead of improving these facilities,

the new generation of workers found themselves totally disorganised and unprotected. Almost no trade unions, no schools, no hospitals. Real wages also decreased. Permanent industrial jobs were replaced by a temporary, part-time outsourced unstable work system. Remittances sent by migrant workers appeared as the lifeline of the economy, but they got little support for their job security and life-safety. Big public enterprises were dismantled; the land of large mills was replaced by export processing zones, shopping malls and real estate.

overseas have contributed to increase in human trafficking. It is evident that NGO microcredit programmes helped non-farm activities to grow in the rural areas, like small trade, small money lending, small scale handicrafts and rickshaw vans. But many studies have revealed the limits of microfinance as a tool of poverty reduction or stable job creation. Therefore, the supply of youths, including teens, from rural areas to urban areas looking for jobs remains steady.

The main features of the workers in Bangladesh today may be summarised as follows: Average wage level remains much

can now show some good numbers regarding GDP growth, remittance, export, foreign exchange reserve etc. The main contributors behind these good numbers are mostly migrant workers, garments workers and agricultural workers. But all these macro statistics could not ensure good and stable job opportunities and other public rights for them. There is a constant tension over job search, and the flow of job seeking people has increased the size of the reserve army of labour, which gives more manipulating power to the employers. There is no security for job, no security even for life. Because of a weak organisational base of working people and declining power of their political support, the situation is getting worse.

This has become, in fact, a global pattern in neoliberal models: no regular job, no trade union, no organised workers' power. I agree with Leo Panitch *et al* (2012) that, "Added to the huge numbers of the unemployed is the 'precariat', the growing segment of the working population in jobs that are temporary, low-wage, and without benefits or protection. Conditions that were once associated with the informal sector in the developing world are now becoming truly global."

In Bangladesh, democratic institutions and practices are far from real, workers' agenda and politics have become insignificant in the power struggle, governance has become a *zamindari* system that overrules any institutional and legal process in the country. Therefore, the space for healthy growth of political and cultural activism in favour of workers is still a dream, and a matter of continuous struggle. Nevertheless, sparks of protest arise against overtly torturous acts by the state under every regime, and against anti-people policies from the state. That gives birth to new formation in every section of society. Among students, workers, and women, we find anger and new forms of alliances.

As a result, despite regimented control over labour, we have seen outbursts of non-trade unionised workers several times in the past decade. At one point, thousands of workers, women and men, demonstrated their strength to seize the capital city. We see the anger of deprived workers in and around Dhaka repeatedly. It has not, however, progressed yet to transform spontaneous angry workers into an organised political force. Therefore deprivation, torture, abuse and uncertainty continue to haunt the workers in this workers' land.

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PHOTO: STAR

During this phase, export-oriented garments factories became the mainstay of the manufacturing sector. Despite its high growth, incidents like that of Spectrum and Tazreen exposed the vulnerability of the sector. Even the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, the deadliest industrial horror in the world that killed more than 1100, could not change workers' lives significantly. This sector, its global chain, remains a source of huge profit for owners, as well as buyers and brands, with the lowest wages in the world and great vulnerability for its workers.

Migration from agriculture to non-agriculture within rural areas and to semi-urban or urban areas has increased only to find temporary low wage jobs in the informal sector, small industries, transport and services. Desperate attempts by many unemployed youth to find jobs

lower than living wage. Less than five percent of the workers are trade unionised. A significant number of the workers work in unregistered establishments without any protection. The informal sector remains the biggest employer where low wage jobs with low security dominate. Government monitoring to protect workers is, in reality, absent; on the contrary, police and government institutions are highly biased towards big private owners. Gender composition of workers changed to include more women workers. Untimely death and injury of workers has become common in factories, transport and construction jobs because of unsafe working conditions. There is no protection from the government, compensation is like peanuts, and even that is not available for many.

It is well publicised that Bangladesh



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

1972

The Prime Minister, in a press statement, urges the workers to maximise production and calls for firm commitments by the workers in the task of national reconstruction. He also requests the workers to accept their existing wage rates and other benefits for the time being.

1973

Industrial Workers' Wage Commission is set up by the government.

1975

Emergency declared and all strikes and lockouts are banned.