



COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SITUATION OF WORKING PEOPLE, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD TO FUTURE OF WORK

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS in association with The Daily Star organised a virtual roundtable titled “COVID-19 pandemic : Situation of working people, challenges and way forward to future of work” on April 30, 2020, where a number of trade union leaders, government and non-government high officials, civil society and development organisation representatives, researchers and academicians participated. BILS Chairman Md. Habibur Rahman Shiraz chaired the session while BILS Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan was present as the moderator. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



NAZRUL ISLAM KHAN,
Secretary General and
Executive Director,
BILS

The current situation of COVID-19 pandemic has caused most countries of the world to close their borders. The global supply chain has hence been severely impacted. Now, one main issue is the drastic decrease in remittance from our migrant workers, with a fall of USD 170 million.

The lockdown since March 26 has resulted in all establishments, including factories, closing, pushing millions of our workers towards unemployment. This pandemic has also left most workers in the informal sector unemployed. The World Bank has stated that if this situation continues, our GDP growth will decrease significantly. Unlike China, Bangladesh's COVID-19 recovery rate is lower than the infection rate. The working people are suffering the most during this pandemic.

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) has created multiple task forces throughout the country. These task forces need to be tripartite so that the workers can have a platform to voice their opinions.

ILO Director General Guy Ryder has taken the initiative to urgently hold discussions with the government, brands, buyers, factory owners, and trade union leaders to find a way to save the RMG industry. We hope this will help improve the situation in a way that is comparable to how the industry recovered after the Rana Plaza disaster.



CHAINA RAHMAN,
Secretary General,
IndustriAll Bangladesh
Council-IBC

The labourers are the most adversely affected by the pandemic. Every day, hundreds of workers gather and protest in front of their factories for their wages. Proper social distancing cannot be maintained during these protests, resulting in further increases in the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

The initiatives by the government and factory owners are insufficient in covering the losses of the workers. After the lockdown was extended in April, the workers were not given clear instructions about factory closures. Hence, they returned to the city in large groups, risking more transmission of the virus.

During this time, the workers should at least be paid an amount that is sufficient to run their households. Workers cannot be laid off at this time or be forced to work in an unsafe environment.



NAIMUL AHSAN JEWEL,
Joint Convener, SKOP
and Member, Advisory
Council, BILS

12 percent of our labour population consists of shop workers, amounting to around four million people. The shop owners' association has claimed that they are at a loss of 10.47 billion taka per month. These workers contribute 13 percent to our country's GDP. In the context of May Day, we should acknowledge how neglected these workers have been during this pandemic. These shop workers are not being benefitted by the labour law and hence cannot form trade unions. As a result, they are unable to assert their rights. After shop closures, these workers did not receive their salaries, and no one considered how these people and their families would get by during this time. Precise steps need to be taken to help these people.



MD ABDUR RAZZAK
General Secretary,
Imarat Nirman Sramik
Union Bangladesh

There are around 3.5 to four million construction workers in our country. According to government directives, these construction workers were supposed to receive their payments via digital transactions. Since these workers do not have any official papers, they have been facing myriads of problems to get their wages. The construction sector is highly unorganised, and to date, we still do not know how all these workers will be paid their due wages.



ABUL HOSSAIN
Coordinator (Acting),
Domestic Workers
Rights Network
(DWRN)

Domestic workers have always been our most neglected population, which is more clearly proven at a time like this. Bangladesh has around 2.5 million domestic workers of all ages.

There are currently two kinds of domestic workers in the country: permanent housekeepers and those who work in multiple houses throughout the day while living in their own places. This second kind of domestic worker is mostly left unemployed due to this lockdown.

The state-directed stimulus or relief packages were not able to reach the domestic workers since they do not have any organised committee which can reach out for help on their behalf. Consequently, these workers have almost been left starving even after our Honourable Prime Minister directed that not a single person should go hungry.



**RAZEKUZZAMAN
RATAN,** President,
Samajtantrik Shramik
Front

Laws in other countries concerning our migrant workers will tighten as their own workers will suffer from unemployment concerns. We need to utilise our expatriate welfare funds to reduce all sorts of burdens on workers who will return to Bangladesh. We can check if they can take loans to start small businesses. We also need to think of those who have already escaped their job uncertainties and returned to Bangladesh.

During the post-COVID-19 situation, we should facilitate different types of training, especially in the IT sector. Or else, we will not be able to send our workers abroad. We also need a proper database showcasing the actual number of workers who are coming from and going abroad.



**DR WAJEDUL ISLAM
KHAN,** General
Secretary, Trade Union
Centre & It. Secretary
General, BILS

Adequate protection in the RMG sector must be ensured since many garment factories have opened now. For example, work can be done in two shifts to maintain social distancing. The RMG workers' representatives can discuss among themselves and take the lead on behalf of the workers to help solve the crisis they are facing.

We also need to resolve the complications related to relief disbursement. I would request to disburse relief in the form of packages to the workers to ease the procedures. Besides, an adequate number of area-based ambulances should also be arranged so that these workers can be hospitalised in the shortest possible time if they fall prey to COVID-19.



INSUR ALI, General
Secretary, Jatiya
Rickshaw-Van Sramik
League

Since the general holiday across the country from March 26, 2020, around 10 million workers are sitting idle, including workers from all sorts of transportation facilities. Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Sramik Federation, which leads the Bangladesh transportation workers, collects around 2,500 crore taka yearly for the welfare of the transportation workers. Still, we are not seeing them being fully supportive of these workers now. I would request the councillors of individual areas to prevent any sort of inequality arising in area-based relief distribution.



K M AZAM KHASRU,
General Secretary,
Jatiya Sramik League

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and the Ministry of Food have undertaken initiatives as per the directives of

- For Government**
- Engage TUs with other stakeholders in terms of decision-making in industrial/services sectors
 - Initiate effective social dialogue with a view to determine which sectors to reopen and to what extent
 - Take necessary steps through social dialogue for development and implementation of the “COVID-19 Health Safety Rules” in the following issues:
 - Number of workers in a floor
 - Distance between two workers
 - PPE items
 - Measures of checking for COVID-19 at entry
 - Hand washing and sanitising arrangements
 - Transport arrangements
 - Treatment facilities when affected
 - Activate the Tripartite Consultative Committee, Crisis Management Committee and the Tripartite Forum on Occupational Health and Safety
 - Establish a dedicated cell in the Ministry for quick response to industrial and workers' crises
 - Engage experts and develop and execute a decent and direct cash assistance programme. Secure workers urgently, who are employed in the industrial/services sectors, which are shut down
 - Involve TUs to prepare victim workers' list up to divisional level; however, the industrial zone-wise list is preferred in this regard
 - Ensure sector-based worker representation in all relief distribution committees
 - Ensure that the 'Workers Welfare Fund' is responsive to workers' need
 - Ensure that the transport workers are supported by their collective fund
 - Reintroduce the ration card and ration shop system
 - Reduce the money transfer fee to 1 taka per 1,000 taka
 - Employ the needy workers in the haor regions for harvesting work, provide agricultural workers with appropriate PPEs and ensure uninterrupted supply chain and fair prices for agro-products
 - Protect returnee migrant workers from cruelties/rights violations and ensure their food, income and living
 - Channel resources in the next budget for ensuring social protection and health insurance for workers
 - Constitute a tripartite watch committee to monitor workers' safety, working conditions, wage disputes and retrenchment
 - Register informal workers with a view to issue cards for them, which might help provide economic support for them and consequently, a database could be prepared
 - Register returnee migrant workers to help them reintegrate. Formulate effective plans to utilise their skills in our country because it might be tough for them to go back again
 - Ensure sanitation in washrooms at the factory level and in workers' living areas like mess, dormitories, slum areas etc.
- For Employers**
- Respect the social dialogue and prioritise tripartite solutions for managing emerging crises

our Honourable Prime Minister to help the underprivileged people during this crisis. Recently, the concerned ministries were provided with the details of the beneficiaries who will be provided with QR code-embedded relief cards. Besides, the special OMS Food Friendly Programme (FFP) will be effective very soon, which will help 6.25 million families.

Therefore, we need to think collectively about how we can help our government more and ensure the smooth operation of all the relevant procedures. We also need to consider whether we can help our workers through our workers' welfare fund. The privileged people should also come forward to help.



ANWAR HOSSAIN,
President, Bangladesh
Jatiyatabadi Sramik
Dal and Vice
Chairman, BILS

RMG workers are now moving around helplessly, akin to the refugees during the liberation war of 1971. We need to ensure all incentives reach workers effectively. Proper monitoring of whether these incentives are adequately benefitting the workers is also required. Bangladesh has a track record of speedy post-disaster rehabilitation, if survival of the population is ensured. Therefore, day labourers and daily wage workers must be given that hope of survival.



**SHAH MOHAMMAD
ABU ZAFAR,** President,
Bangladesh Labour
Federation, Member,
Advisory Council,
BILS and Member,
Bangladesh Labour
Welfare Foundation

We have created lists of those who are most in need of relief, but the Deputy Commissioner and mayoral offices stated that they have no instructions to provide relief based on these lists. Who, then, are eligible for the aid? If relief is to reach workers adequately, then sector-based worker representatives must be present in all relief distribution committees. The government should ensure all

CALL TO ACTION

- Disburse wages and Eid bonus timely. Refrain from factory lay-off and workers' retrenchment during this pandemic
 - Communicate with brands/buyers with a view to resolve supply-chain issues
 - Ensure appropriate protection for workers at workplaces, especially for the reopened factories
 - Provide PPEs to both workers and employers
 - Ensure free COVID-19 treatment, institutional quarantine and isolation facilities for Coronavirus-affected workers, because they have no scope of maintaining health-safety at their homes
 - Ensure compensation for Coronavirus deaths
 - Pursue brands and buyers to contribute to central fund
 - Establish living quarters for RMG workers near factories
- For Brands/Buyers**
- Practice ethical buying policy
 - Move away from cancellation/suspension of buying orders misusing 'force majeure' clause
 - Consider not imposing cost reduction on an earlier placed order
 - Pay export prices on time
 - Ensure that workers in the sourcing factories are protected against COVID-19
 - Contribute to the central fund aimed at helping workers infected with Coronavirus
 - Consider lead time for shipment.
- For Trade Unions**
- Raise voice to continue the social dialogue in case of industrial crises
 - Link up with the regional and global TUs. Identify the brands/buyers who are cancelling orders and are offering less or delayed payment. Carry out campaigns in these cases
 - Continue communication and follow-up to ensure that workers and TU members are supported in times of vulnerability and have access to proper treatment during COVID-19 emergencies
 - Update workers with required information so that they can act properly
 - Monitor workers' awareness about COVID-19 and the respective response in case of abiding by health-safety rules
 - Ensure that:
 - Workers are not terminated illegally
 - Factories do not lay-off workers unlawfully
 - Workers are not deprived of wages/facilities
 - List the most vulnerable workers and, if possible, ensure relief for them
 - Keep records on irregularities associated with the factories and workers and inform concerned authorities about these
 - Raise voice unitedly about workers' safety, wages, retrenchment and compensation during this Coronavirus crisis
 - Form a trade union monitoring team, collect information, and act
 - Maintain regular correspondence with the government and employers about any dispute
 - Establish a secretariat to collect, maintain and correspond properly
 - Appoint volunteers from trade unions to perform COVID-19 contact tracing of workers



**DR RASHED AL
MAHMUD TITUMIR,**
Professor, Department
of Development
Studies, University of
Dhaka

The government has announced loan packages for export-oriented businesses. It would not be possible for marginal, small businesses to avail these packages since the same interest will be charged for both large and small businesses. Equal interest will not generate high profits for banks; therefore, banks will not be incentivised to provide these loans.

A three-year reformatory plan should be formulated by the government, given the current weak state of the economy. The budget should be announced under this three-year plan, after reviewing what changes are required, in terms of allocation, to aid workers' welfare.

Since a vast majority of the population is facing financial shortages, universal basic income grants are now a necessity. The government has not arranged this yet. Bangladesh's average expenditure per household is 15,402 taka; hence the universal basic income grant should amount to 15,000 taka per household.

Additional funds must be allocated to the public healthcare system. National health cards, which people can use to avail healthcare, should be launched. Social security programmes catering to children, young adults, mothers, etc., should be formed.



SOHRAB HOSSAIN,
Joint Editor, Prothom
Alo

Numerous workers have been unfairly laid off, and a majority of them have faced wage cuts, even though barely a month of lockdown has passed. Most of the support packages are meant for people who have some sort of regular shelter facilities. What about the floating people? The government should actively think about how to reach these marginalised people with assistance.

There are so many digital innovations that can be used to help people in need, but the government is yet to take any fruitful initiative in this regard.



SHIB NATH ROY,
Inspector General,
Department of
Inspection for Factories
and Establishments

Since the issue of reopening factories emerged after a while, BGMEA submitted a health and safety guideline to the factories and us after consulting with ILO. We let BGMEA know that factories could be opened without an influx of workers to avoid crowding. The health safety of the workers should also be considered once they rejoin the factories. The factory owners agreed to not lay off any worker in the process and ensure full salaries for those who join work and 60 percent salaries for those who would not be able to join in April.

We have formed a crisis management committee with DIFE to ensure the health, safety and any other concerns of workers. This committee will also prepare a list of all workers who are not getting any aid and send that list to the Deputy Commissioners. The committee will submit a weekly report to us, which we will present to the ministry to help make further decisions regarding the workers.



**MD. HABIBUR
RAHMAN SHIRAZ,**
Chairman, BILS

Our current Prime Minister is trying her best to improve the condition of the workers. She is likewise worried about the safety of the workers during this pandemic. The government announced a stimulus package of 5,000 crore taka for export-oriented industries to pay the salaries and wages of workers and employees. It is unfortunate that despite such a well-timed initiative taken by the government, a large number of workers remain unpaid till date. The owners' associations such as BGMEA and BKMEA owe a sincere explanation to the government and people as to who is responsible for this suffering of the workers.



**DR HAMEEDA
HOSSAIN,** Coordinator,
Sramik Nirapotta
Forum-SNF

Living quarters should be established for RMG workers near the factories. Schools, madrasas, community centres, and health complexes can be transformed into temporary living spaces for the workers. This will help reduce the risk of infection during their commute to and from their homes, which are usually far from their workplaces.

Trade union committees should be formed for each factory to ensure equal focus on workers from all factories. Trade unions should appoint worker volunteers to carry out contact tracing – identifying the people with whom COVID-19 infected workers were in contact. This will help reduce the spread of COVID-19 among workers. Trade union volunteers could also create lists of daily wage workers at Upazila or union-level, and plan how they can be assisted.



**MESBAHUDDIN
AHMED,** President,
Jatiya Sramik Jote and
Member, Advisory
Council, BILS

Agriculture significantly contributes to our production and economic development. Therefore, farmers should be adequately supported. Besides, additional investment is required in the public health sector since we do not have sufficient resources to tackle the current health crisis.

I believe the RMG sector will be able to recover from this financial crisis swiftly since the global demand for inexpensive clothing will increase after the pandemic, and hence, exports will rise.