

Don't short-change teagarden workers

Neither labour nor life should be considered 'cheap'

UNBEKNOWNST to us, we have made labour in Bangladesh undignified by terming it "cheap." We have used this slogan to draw foreign investment, pronouncing the merits of investing here—that "labour comes cheap" in Bangladesh—without realising the damage it has caused to our national image. And this phenomenon, regrettably, has pervaded almost all sectors where production is labour-intensive, especially in the tea sector.

It seems that very little has changed since the day in May, a hundred years ago, when thousands of tea workers from Sylhet region left the tea gardens in protest of the meagre pay that they were being paid and the squalid conditions that they were made to live in. This is more or less still the case even though, over the years, the tea industry has done well, and the condition for everyone else has flourished along with it. The tea workers are the only exception—they have gone from bad to worse. Thus, one finds it rather strange that the minimum wage board for tea workers, which was set up five years too late, would recommend a pay scale that is three years old. The tea workers can't be blamed for rejecting out of hand the recommendations of Tk 117, Tk 118 and Tk 120, made in June this year.

We wonder why the board did not recommend the minimum wage that they had calculated after discussions with the various stakeholders in situ—that of Tk 300 per month—but instead they preferred to stick to the previous scale. We hope that the wage board members were aware of the underlying purpose of constituting the board. A wage board is formed when the administration feels that it is time to revise the pay scale of the employees/workers. Wasn't it a waste of time that, after all the efforts, there is no change in the lot of the tea garden workers? The board didn't even consider the huge spike in prices of essential commodities over the last several years. In fact, the recommended wage is actually lower than the previous wage, given the rate of inflation. What a pity!

The statistics presented by the tea owners' association can be misleading. It claims that they are paying a daily wage of Tk 403 in cash and in kind, which includes facilities like house rent, healthcare, pension, overtime, etc. But, according to the relevant section of the labour law, can it be considered as wage? The actual wage, the amount that a tea labourer gets in hand, is about Tk 200, according to the Society for Environment and Human Development.

The long and short of it is that our tea workers have been given the short shrift by the wage board. The pay scale should be reconsidered to commensurate, at least, with the other labour-intensive sectors. It is not luxury that they demand, but a minimum wage that would give them a modicum of dignity, which the current pay does not.

Govt, cable operators must come to a solution

Consumers should get back the services as early as possible

AS the government took a strong position to stop the broadcast of foreign channels that are not providing advertisement-free content, the cable operators and agents in the country have stopped broadcasting all the foreign channels, including the 17 channels (like BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and Animal Planet) which already have clean feeds—providing content without ads—in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, despite paying for the cable services, crores of our consumers have been deprived of watching foreign news, entertainment, sports, and other channels since October 1.

There is undoubtedly some justification in the government's position, as a huge amount of revenue is lost when foreign channels broadcast ads for local audiences. According to the Television Network Operation law, 2006, foreign channels cannot air their programmes in the country with advertisements. The government discussed this issue with the cable operators and agents many times before, and lately directed them to be compliant with the law by September 30 this year. The cable operators, however, did not comply with this directive. Reportedly, our cable operators currently do not have the capacity, technological advancement, and even investment to ensure clean feed in foreign channels. While service providers in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are able to cut the advertisement content while airing programmes of foreign channels, our operators are incapable of doing so because of a lack of technological capacities and skills.

Under the circumstances, we think the government should move away from their position and give the cable operators some more time. The service providers have sought a year and a half to ensure ad-free programmes. The government can consider their proposal given the complications our operators have been facing. It can also give them the necessary technological support and policy directives. We should also raise this question: Why are the Indian broadcasters not providing us clean-feed content when they are providing ad-free content in all the countries in the Middle East? The government and the Cable Operators' Association of Bangladesh (COAB) must find a solution to this problem.

While they work towards finding a solution—and we hope they do sooner than later—the cable operators should immediately allow the broadcast of the 17 channels that have clean feeds. They must ensure that the consumers who are paying for their services don't suffer from this problem.

WORLD TEACHERS' DAY

Teachers also need support for learning loss recovery



MANZOOR AHMED

was of a scholar who selflessly dispensed knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation, lived a simple life, and was not too concerned about material rewards. They could be looked upon by the young as a mentor—a friend, philosopher, and

WE all can recall from our student days one or more teachers who touched our lives in a special way. They inspired us to aspire higher and served as our role models. The image of a teacher

still try to live by the ideal image, and let each of us do what we can to help more of them live by the values of the noble profession.

On World Teachers' Day last year, in this very space, I wrote: "A comparative disadvantage of Bangladesh along with countries in South Asia—unlike other regions of the world—is that it does not have a well-established, pre-service teacher education programme. Yet, school teaching is the single largest field of employment for college graduates. The common practice is to first recruit college graduates as primary or secondary teachers, and then let them go for one year to 18 months of pedagogy training..."

School teaching is not the first choice

Teachers, along with the rest of society, have suffered from the pandemic-caused health, economic and socio-emotional distress. Media reports have shown how teachers of private schools, known as "kindergarten schools," have resorted to menial work to support their families, when schools were shut down and they lost their income.

Now that schools have reopened (it is not certain if all kindergarten schools can reopen), teachers are faced with the challenge of helping their students to recover from the loss of almost two academic years. There are administrative instructions galore from the central authorities on how the class seating should be arranged, and which group of

and insistence on sticking to the current academic year calendar, and have not been given enough guidance and support about how students can be helped in an unprecedented situation.

Recently, 10 well-known educationists of Bangladesh have jointly proposed some urgent steps for a learning recovery agenda (*The Daily Star*, September 25, 2021). The four points of urgent action they have proposed are: a) Conducting a simple and rapid assessment of students' level of preparedness for their grade focusing on basic skills in language and maths; b) Extending the school year to next June to allow more time for students, teachers, and schools to adapt to the new situation; c) Concentrating on students' readiness to learn and postponing annual and public exams to later in the extended academic year; and d) Supporting teachers to do their job well.

While proposing support for teachers, the educationists in their statement said that, in order to help with learning recovery, guidelines and orientation should be provided to schools and teachers on: a) The use of rapid assessment of grade-level student preparedness; b) Pedagogic steps to assist students by using results of the preparedness assessment; c) Instructional planning to focus on core competencies, aiming to help students become self-reliant learners; and d) Socio-emotional support to students and communicating with students and parents. Online platforms should be used extensively for the guidance and orientation of teachers and to complement classroom teaching for students.

While implementing the recommended urgent actions, critical longer-term measures also should be initiated, according to the educationists. One of these measures is to earnestly begin new thinking about the teachers/education workforce. No system of education can be better than its teachers, they said. While on-the-job training and orientation of teachers are necessary, ways have to be found to attract talented and well-motivated young people to—and retain them in—the profession of educators. Experiences of better performing countries can be lessons in this case. A longer-term plan has to be designed, backed by high-level commitment to see it through.

Let's hope that the crisis in education that we face today, aggravated by the pandemic, will prompt the policymakers to begin new thinking about teachers and teaching.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University.



Without proper support, our teachers cannot help our students to recover from the learning loss caused by the pandemic.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

guide.

This nostalgic view is overdrawn, but bears a strong kernel of truth. Is such an image wholly romantic and unrealistic in contemporary society? It should not be so. Romanticism apart, teachers are still the custodians of the young, and responsible to equip future citizens, leaders and workers with skills, knowledge and values. Teachers have a unique role in society—unlike any other occupation. The significance of this special role can be neglected at grave peril to society and its future.

Today, let's salute the teachers who

as a career for higher education graduates, especially the talented ones. It, therefore, ends up attracting the "bottom of the barrel" of the graduates, I had written. The basic talent gap cannot be remedied by in-service teacher training. The need to think afresh about attracting and keeping talented people in the profession of teaching is a major challenge for improving education system performance.

We have not witnessed any initiative to rethink the teaching profession. Meanwhile, the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made the teacher's job more difficult than ever.

students should come to school for how many hours.

But there is not much guidance about how the students can be helped to recover their learning losses, how the losses can be assessed, and how the students can be helped to prepare for their grade-level instruction. There is a single-minded focus on holding public examinations as soon as possible, at any cost. Thankfully, the PECE and JSC exams have now been scrapped, which many educationists would like to see gone permanently. Teachers have been thrust into a "mission impossible" by the obsession with exams

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The false promise of AUKUS



MARK LEONARD

countries have gone from competing with each other to be China's best friend, to sharing the view that China represents a profound, multifaceted challenge.

For example, on global issues such as climate change, European governments must now find a way to work effectively with a difficult partner. On economic and technological issues such as artificial intelligence, China has emerged as a fierce competitor. And on human rights, democracy, and the role of the state in the economy, it is now seen as a "systemic rival."

In addition to becoming more realistic about China, Europeans are also becoming more engaged with Asia. France led the pack in 2016 by signing a deal to provide Australia with its diesel-powered Barracuda submarines, and by inspiring the rest of Europe to develop a new strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. Its position on China in recent years has been light years away from that of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who supported ending a European Union embargo on arms sales to China and granting the country "market economy status."

But now France has been shoved aside by AUKUS, a new security and technology alliance between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. In Washington and London, this deal to provide Australia with US-made nuclear submarines is being framed as one of the most significant strategic advances in decades, even though it has infuriated France.

For the US, AUKUS comes hot on the heels of its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, and thus is being held up as evidence that the Biden administration is serious, competent, and tough on foreign policy. Furnishing Australia with

a nuclear-powered submarine fleet will significantly extend America's own ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific—hence China's displeasure at the pact.

AUKUS is also the first and (so far) only expression of "Global Britain," the newly empowered global player that was supposed to arise after Brexit. The deal is being touted as proof that the UK's "special relationship" with the US is robust. Even the French could benefit

whatever tactical advances that the US, the UK, and Australia may have made, the strategic gains to be had from AUKUS are dubious at best.

Yes, the Indo-Pacific is central to America's competition with China, and a well-equipped Australia can enhance US naval control over that theatre. But there are other, more important battlegrounds to consider. As we have seen, the China challenge is also about the regulation of

trade interests than are France or other continental Europeans. It is not Australia that can help the UK by providing emergency truck drivers or stemming the flow of migrants across the English Channel.

But the French are not blameless. Most other EU members see France's foreign policy agenda as ultimately anti-American, so the best way to bring them along would be to convince them otherwise. Reducing Europe's dependence on the US thus should be framed as a pro-American project that will help both Europe and the US confront the challenges of the 21st century. By precipitating a major transatlantic spat and confirming EU Atlanticists' suspicion that it harbours anti-American resentment, France has undercut its own goals.

It is not too late to realign the various strategies being pursued by Western powers. France, the UK, and the US may have generated headlines with moves that feel tactically savvy and emotionally satisfying, but China may turn out to be the strategic winner. Rather than fighting over submarines, Western democracies should be exploring how their Indo-Pacific strategies might complement one another on other critical fronts, such as the digital economy, trade, and climate change. Achieving that kind of alignment could provide a foundation for bringing on other major partners, such as Japan, South Korea, and India.

China's response to AUKUS implicitly acknowledges this. It has applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)—a major deal that was originally promoted by the Obama administration to contain China's economic rise. In the decade since its negotiation, the US has lost its interest in trade deals, and China has been exploiting its retreat from the global stage. China's cynical move to take America's place in the CPTPP shows a ruthless pragmatism that could leave Western approaches—including AUKUS—looking flat-footed.

Mark Leonard is co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, and the author of "The Age of Unpeace."

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021
www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to The Daily Star)



Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison meets with US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

from the new arrangement. By pointing to yet another example of American flakiness, France can bolster its own case for pursuing European strategic autonomy.

Since the news of the deal broke, there have been attempts to lower the temperature between Western powers. US President Joe Biden has called French President Emmanuel Macron, admitted that the "situation would have benefited from open consultations among allies," and promised more US support for France's anti-terrorism campaign in the Sahel.

Now that the French have blown off some steam (by temporarily recalling their ambassadors to the US and Australia), many American foreign policy observers seem to think that there will be a return to business as usual. Yet,

artificial intelligence, global finance, and green technologies and infrastructure. On these issues, the EU has far more to contribute than Australia or the UK does.

It is in America's own long-term interest that the EU become more of a sovereign power capable of participating in the defence of shared Western values and interests. By humiliating France, the one EU member state that has openly embraced deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration has made this outcome less likely.

And the UK has been no less myopic. Having left the EU, it is struggling to develop relationships with other countries that have less in common with it than its immediate European neighbours. Even a committed Brexiteer would have trouble arguing that Australia is more important to British military and