

Villains or victims?

The oft-neglected issue of transport worker rights



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IN Dhaka’s urban transport system, buses, including minibuses, employ over five million people and account for almost half of the passenger trips. But the bus workers, who constitute a large share of the transport workers in Bangladesh, are not the most highly regarded members of society. This is not without reason.

Most Dhaka residents—both pedestrians and users of vehicles other than buses—have very likely had at least one perilous encounter with bus drivers at some point. Bus drivers are notorious for negligence on the road; moving buses running over civilians is a common occurrence in the city. Bus drivers’ driving skills, or lack thereof, are constantly criticised. Moreover, we have all heard of their drug abuse on duty, whether to stay awake while driving at odd hours of the night or simply for recreational purposes. These factors make it hard to hold much sympathy for the bus drivers.

Dhaka’s public transport system is far worse than those in most other metropolitans around the world, even though the capital is one of the most populous cities on earth. The sector is regulated and enforced primarily by six different governing bodies, and it is highly disorganised, giving rise to many problems on the road. This article focuses on the issues relevant to the bus transport workers: drivers and helpers.

If one has ever had to endure catching a bus to go from Point A to Point B within Dhaka, one would know what an ordeal it is—long waits, long lines, long commutes, and the uncertainties and risks in the entire process. We are aware of the structural limitations of Dhaka’s transport system—for example, limited roads and high concentration of population. However, often we blame bus drivers and helpers for much of our woes on the road. But how much do we know about their realities?

Firstly, there is a complete lack of coordination among the bus services and their routes with no centralised schedule. At the highest level, companies purchase route permits from the government, which they sell to different bus owners to operate as many buses as they choose to

on the specified routes, under an umbrella company name. The bus owners then rent out the buses to independent drivers. There is no track of how many buses are being commissioned by different owners under the same company or on the same route. The lack of an integrated route system and the lack of coordination among bus owners and drivers mean that



no buses follow a set schedule, which directly impacts the passengers who use the services. Therefore, multiple buses can be seen operating from one stop at almost the same time, and at other times, there is no bus for a long time from another busy area. It is easy to blame the bus drivers in this case, but as can be understood, the situation is beyond their control.

Second, it is evident that passengers’ convenience or safety are not priorities for the drivers. Instead, their focus is on outrunning other buses, as well as other smaller vehicles, on the streets. This is even more dangerous given that designated bus stops are few and far in between, and that there are no bus lanes on the narrow roads. But why do the bus drivers in Dhaka drive so recklessly? Transport is a formal sector, and yet transport workers, even the bus drivers, do not have formal contracts. To maximise their profit, bus owners offer no formal employment contracts to transport workers and rather rent out the buses and charge as high as three-fourths of the drivers’ total revenue. The

▲
The economic impact of Covid lockdowns on Dhaka bus drivers was grave.

FILE PHOTO:
REUTERS

and little regard for traffic rules among the public, these tendencies make the buses extremely dangerous for both bus passengers and other commuters on the road, as the driver speeds through the unruly Dhaka traffic and lets passengers in and out while on the move.

Bus drivers receive little to no social protection and have no labour rights. Though new minimum wages were set for workers in the transport sector in 2019, its implementation remains a challenge because workers, except for BRTC employees, do not have formal contracts. Apart from BRTC buses, most public buses operating in the city are privately owned. The situation was even more dire for the bus workers when the pandemic hit, as they had no income and

had little savings. The economic impact of lockdowns on bus drivers was grave. With no formal contracts to begin with, they did not really receive any support from their employers, let alone the government. A lot of them thus had to resort to alternative means of subsistence.

Even though bus drivers’ trade unions and owners’ associations collect some funds from transport workers as part of their welfare fund, workers have never reaped the benefits from the fund. This practice has been going on since before Covid, seemingly being saved for a rainy day. When the rainy day did eventually arrive during the pandemic, those funds were nowhere to be found. Neither the owners’ association, nor the transport workers’ federations provided any support to the workers. We also found that trade union leaders and owners of the transports are often the same, meaning the bus owners essentially run the trade unions themselves. Therefore, workers’ independent unionism without the influence of bus owners does not seem to work in the transport sector.

We see bus drivers and helpers on the roads driving recklessly, risking passengers’ lives, crashing into other vehicles. But they are helpless in the crux of a mafia-like system that is the bus transport sector. If they had decent working hours and working conditions, perhaps they would not be falling asleep behind the wheels or taking drugs to stay awake while doing night duty. If they were not pitted against each other to put food on the table at home at the end of the day, maybe they would not drive so recklessly, trying to fight the bus next to them to get to their destination faster. If they had formal contracts with proper wages instead of the current mechanism, which makes them spread themselves thin and be reckless, maybe they would be more conscious and responsible drivers.

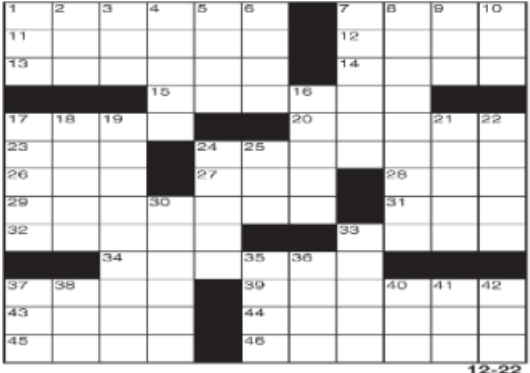
Bangladesh is undergoing rapid growth, developing massive infrastructures, and building new roads, railways, and highways to upgrade the transport system, improve people’s commute, and alleviate traffic congestion. But these improvements in the transport ecosystem are likely to be futile if the transport workers are deprived of their basic rights.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Christmas trim
7 "...Bearing gifts we traverse —"
11 Baltimore player
12 Metropolis
13 Meal
14 Christmas symbol
15 Save
17 Pert talk
20 Small error
23 Peach center
24 "Take it easy, bro!"
26 "Xanadu" group
27 Like jazz cats
28 French friend
29 Sweet fruit drinks
31 Guest's bed
32 Little kids
33 Vast expanses
- 34 Like Shakespeare's sonnets
37 Charged particles
39 "— Fideles"
43 Olympics sled
44 Warn while driving
45 Santa keeps one
46 Santa's transport

DOWN
1 Craggy hill
2 Angry state
3 Winter air quality
4 Takes to the sky
5 Different
6 "Why don't we!"
7 Real
8 Where to hang
19 Down
- 9 Had dinner
10 Deli bread
16 Trims
17 Wasn't thrify
18 Alvin of dance
19 They're hung at Christmastime
21 Pago pago setting
22 Highway ramps
24 Deep ravine
25 That woman
30 Social service
33 Play part
35 Scrooge cries
36 Revered one
37 Under the weather
38 Arles answer
40 Enjoy Aspen
41 Gift attachment
42 Ordinal number ending

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LAST SATURDAY’S ANSWERS

S	H	E	L	F	S	A	S	H	A
W	A	T	E	R	A	S	T	E	R
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C	E	A	S	E	D	E	B	I	T
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

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INVITATION FOR TENDER

Sealed tender is hereby invited from the manufacturer/wholesaler/supplier for supply of Water Purifier (Arsenic Free) for Upazila Health Complex. As per PPR-2008, terms and conditions are as follows:

KEY INFORMATION								
1 Ministry/Division	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Health Services Division.							
2 Agency	Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), MOHFW.							
3 Procuring Entity	Line Director, Upazila Health Care (UHC), DGHS.							
4 Procuring Entity Code	224330400							
5 Procuring Entity District	Dhaka							
6 Invitation for	Supply of Water Purifier (Arsenic Free) for Upazila Health Complex.							
7 Invitation for offer Ref. No	UHC/Proc./GOB/Water Purifier (Arsenic Free) UHC-27/2021-22/89							
8 Date	28.04.2022							
KEY INFORMATION								
9 Procurement Method	Open Tender Method (OTM)							
FUNDING INFORMATION								
10 Budget and Source of Funds	GOB (Dev).							
11 Developments Partners	None							
PARTICULAR INFORMATION								
12 Project/Program Code	224330400							
13 Project/Program Name	UHC							
14 Tender Package No	UHC/G-GD-16/2021-22							
15 Offer Package Name	Water Purifier (Arsenic Free) for Upazila Health Complex.							
16 Tender Publication Date	29.04.2022							
17 Tender Last Selling Date	12.05.2022 at 5.00 pm							
18 Tender Closing Date and Time	16.05.2022 at 12 pm							
19 Tender Opening Date and Time	16.05.2022 at 2 pm							
20 Name and address of the Office								
a) Selling of Tender Documents	a) Office of the Line Director, UHC, DGHS, BMRC Bhaban (1st floor), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212. b) Central Medical Store Depot (CMSD), Tejgaon, Dhaka.							
b) Receiving of Tender Documents	a) Office of the Line Director, UHC, DGHS, BMRC Bhaban (1st floor), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212. b) Central Medical Store Depot (CMSD), Tejgaon, Dhaka.							
c) Opening of Tender Documents	Office of the Line Director, UHC, DGHS, BMRC Bhaban (1st floor), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.							
INFORMATION FOR TENDERER								
21 Eligibility of Tenderer	As stated in TDS							
22 Brief Description of Goods	Supply of Water Purifier (Arsenic Free) for 143 Upazila Health Complexes.							
23 Price of Tender Documents Taka	TK. 2000 (Two Thousand) only by Treasury Challan (with CTR) Code No. 1-2711-0000-2366 to be deposited Sonali Bank Ltd. or Bangladesh Bank. (Non-refundable).							
24 No	Identification & Name	Location	Tender Security Amounts BDT	Completion time (in weeks)				
Single lot	UHC/G-GD-16/2021-22	UHC office, BMRC Bhaban, (1st floor) Mohakhali, Dhaka.	Tk. 3,00,000 (Three lac) only by Pay Order/Bank Draft or Bank Guarantee in Prescribed format in favour of Line Director, UHC, DGHS.	8 (Eight) weeks from date of signing the contract.				
PROCURING ENTITY DETAIL								
25 Name of Official Inviting Offer	Dr. Md. Rizwanur Rahman							
26 Designation of Official Inviting Offer	Line Director, UHC, DGHS.							
27 Address of Official Inviting Offer	BMRC Bhaban (1st floor), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.							
28 Contact details of Official Inviting Offer	BMRC Bhaban, Mohakhali, Dhaka. Phone: 02-222280785, Fax-02-222282900							
The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject any or all offers.								
(Dr. Md. Rizwanur Rahman) Line Director Upazila Health Care (UHC), DGHS BMRC Bhaban (1st floor), Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212.								

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