

The Struggle for Justice and Dignity

A historical timeline of the labour movement in Bangladesh



Sashipada Banerjee, founder of Working Men's Club (1870)



Dead body of Tajul Islam, trade union leader of Adamjee Jute Mill.



Dead body of Tajul Islam, trade union leader of Adamjee Jute Mill.

The labour movement in Bangladesh has a rich and complex history that dates back to the 19th century. From the struggle for independence from British colonial rule to the fight for workers' rights and better working conditions, the labour movement has played a critical role in shaping the country's political and economic landscape.

Here is a comprehensive timeline of the labour movement in Bangladesh, highlighting key events and milestones that have shaped the movement's trajectory. From the early days of colonial rule to the present day, the timeline documents the challenges and successes faced by workers in their quest for justice and dignity. By examining the historical context of the labour movement, we hope to shed light on the ongoing struggles faced by workers in Bangladesh and inspire further action towards a more equitable future.

—Priyam Paul & Shamsuddoza Sajen, *The Daily Star*

April 16, 1853
The beginning of the modern industrial worker in the Indian Subcontinent is marked by the inauguration of the railway line from Mumbai to Thane.

April-May, 1862
Indian railway men of Howrah Railway Station joined the first ever strike demanding an 8-hours-a-day working hour.

1870
Sashipada Banerjee established the Working Men's Club which is considered to be the first labour organization in Bengal. In the same year, he started publishing *Bharat Sramajibi* (Indian Laborers), a journal exclusively devoted to the labourers, from Kolkata.

in Kushtia, East Bengal, with the Swadeshi spirit.

1911
The Indian Factories Act underwent an amendment that introduced the first legislative restrictions on men's working hours, fixing a 12-hour workday. Additionally, the amended act emphasized the significance of ensuring the health and safety of workers. It is worth noting that these positive changes were a direct result of the workers' long struggle.

1919
ILO adopted its first convention on limited hours of work and adequate rest periods for workers.

October 17, 1920
Indian Communist Party was established in Tashkent.



Tea labourers demand that May 20 be recognized by the state as Tea Workers' Day.

October 31, 1920
All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was established. It provided an early backbone to trade unions in East Bengal.

May-August, 1921
Mulluk Cholo Movement. On May 20, 1921, colonial troops brutally attacked tea workers who were stranded at Chandpur railway station, reminiscent of the Jallianwala Bag massacre. The workers, seeking to escape serfdom, abandoned the tea estates in Chargola and Longlai valleys in Sylhet and marched en masse towards their hometowns. This mass exodus caused political upheaval for nearly three months, from May 3 to August 3, 1921. The tea workers' widespread strike was soon followed by equally significant strikes by workers of the Assam Bengal Railways and Inland Steamer Navigation.

December, 1922
MN Roy presented a programme of action which included the following demands: (1) Establishment of minimum wages in all industries through legislation; (2) Implementation of an eight-hour workday, limited to five and a half days a week, for male adults. Special regulations would be put in place for women and child labour; (3) Employers would be legally required to provide workers with a certain standard of comfort in regards to housing, working conditions, and medical aid; (4) Protective legislation would be enacted to provide old age, sickness, and unemployment insurance for all industries; (5) Recognition of labour organisations as legal entities, with workers' right to strike in order to enforce their demands; (6) Establishment of workers' councils in all major industries to defend labour rights, with the state providing protection for their function; and (7) Introduction of profit-sharing schemes in all large industries.

1923
The Workmen's Compensation Act was enacted, which required businesses to provide compensation to employees who suffer work-related injuries resulting in disability or death.

1926
The Trade Unions Act was passed, which made provisions for the registration of trade unions and defined the law related to registered trade unions in certain respects.

Nov-Dec, 1907
Railway Strike in Bengal demanding wage increase. They succeeded to get a famine allowance.

1908
The Mohini Cotton Mill was established

industry.
1939
The Maternity Benefit Act was passed, which prohibits the employment of a female worker for six weeks before and six weeks after delivery.

1945
Sreehatta Zilla Cha Sramik Union (Tea Estates) was established as a member union of AITUC.

May, 1946
Faridpur District Cycle Rickshaw Drivers Union was formed. September 28, 1947 the Eastern Pakistan Trade Union Federation (EPTUF) was formed with Dr. AM Malik as president and Faiz Ahmad as secretary. The EPTUF was created based on a resolution adopted by the AITUC General Council



Rana Plaza Tragedy, 2013.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

collective bargaining.

June 7, 1966
The Awami League's Six-Point Programme was widely supported in the industrial areas of Narayanganj, Tejgaon, Tongi, and Chittagong, leading to widespread protests and strikes. Police resorted to firing in these areas, resulting in the deaths of several workers. In defiance of the imposition of Section 144, workers from the Narayanganj industrial area organized a procession towards Dhaka.

1969
The workers in East Pakistan played a significant role in the Gherao Movement and the mass uprising that resulted in the downfall of Ayub Khan's dictatorship.

1970
Nur Khan labour policy introduced.

THE RAILWAY STRIKE IN BENGAL.
Calcutta, Thursday.—Popular impression prevails that the East Indian Railway Company intends to lock-out the strikers within twenty-four hours. The guards on the Bengal-Nagpur Railway may strike again. The railway administration asserts that ninety drivers have come in at Assam, and normal traffic will be resumed to-morrow.—Berita.

On November 29, 1907, the Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette, a Scottish newspaper, published a report on the railway strike in Bengal.

FACTORIES ACT FOR INDIA.
TWELVE HOURS' DAY FOR ADULTS.
CALCUTTA, March 21.
With the support of all the provincial Governments, the Viceroy's Council yesterday passed a Factories Act, establishing a maximum of 12 hours' work a day for all adults, and six hours for children, thus introducing for the first time direct legislative restrictions on the hours of men's labor, notwithstanding the continuous opposition of the Bombay cotton and Calcutta jute firms.

On March 25, 1911, the Advertiser, an Australian newspaper, published news about the recently amended Indian Factories Act. The report placed particular emphasis on the new 12-hour working day for adult workers.

1971
Workers played a pivotal role in the Liberation War. The ILO/SIDA Mission Report (1973) observed: The bulk of the labour force had joined the war of liberation as the working class had come to realise that the key to their true emancipation was the liberation of their motherland from the monopoly rule of the "22 families" and they fought the enemy successfully. The success in their struggle for liberation was accompanied with a high sense of expectation.

March, 1972
Bangladesh Government nationalised all the major industries in the country.

June 1, 1973
The government established wage commission.

January, 1975
The government imposed a ban on all strikes and lockouts.

May, 1976
Workers' agitation in Dhaka and

Comilla region. Gherao at Meghna Textile.

July 26, 1980
Restriction put on non-workers to being members of trade unions through amendment of the Industrial Relations Ordinance.

March 24, 1982
General Ershad seized power and bans all kind of political activities including trade union activism.

April 13, 1983
In a significant move, twelve trade unions came together to establish the Sramik Karmachari Oikko Parishad (SKOP). This alliance played a crucial role in the Anti-Ershad movement and exerted pressure on the military government to lift the embargo on trade union activities. As a result of SKOP's efforts, the Ershad regime was compelled to permit trade union activities once again.

March 1, 1984
The government agents killed Tajul Islam, the trade union leader of Adamjee Jute Mill. In response to this murder, a complete strike was observed in Adamjee Jute Mill.

December 6, 1990
Fall of the dictatorial rule of Ershad. Workers play a crucial role in the anti-Ershad movement.

January 7, 1995
SKOP issues 8-point demands that urges the government to respect and implement the agreement signed on July 6, 1992 and later with the labour organisation of different industries.

June 20, 2000
SKOP called 24-hour strike demanding national minimum wage structure which is yet to be formed.

2006
Enactment of Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006

November 24, 2012
At least 117 killed in a fire in Tazreen Fashion factory.

April 24, 2013
The collapse of Rana Plaza resulted in the deaths of 1,132 people and injuries to over 2,500 others. Consequently, the USA suspended GSP for Bangladesh due to severe deficiencies in workplace safety and labor rights.

2018
A wage board was formed for RMG workers, which fixed a minimum wage of Tk 8000.

July 1, 2020
The government announced the closure of 25 state-owned jute mills, rendering thousands of workers unemployed. Since the announcement, the jute mill workers have been protesting against the decision.

July 2021
Massive fire at Shezan Juice Factory claims 52 lives

27 August, 2022
After a nationwide demonstration by tea workers, their daily wage was set at Tk 170.

April 9, 2023
The government has established a new wage board to assess the minimum monthly wages of garment workers, as labour organizations demand Tk 25,000 due to the high inflation in the country.

The bulk of the labour force had joined the war of liberation as the working class had come to realise that the key to their true emancipation was the liberation of their motherland from the monopoly rule of the "22 families" and they fought the enemy successfully. The success in their struggle for liberation was accompanied with a high sense of expectation.

1881
With the aim of improving the working conditions of laborers, the Indian Factories Act was enacted. The Act prohibited the employment of children below the age of 7 and set a limit of nine hours for their daily work. It was enforced on July 1, 1881.

1891
The Indian Factories Act of 1881 underwent an amendment that included a provision for a weekly holiday. The revised Act also restricted the employment of women and children to the period between 5 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock in the evening, with a maximum daily working period of eleven hours for women. The minimum age for child labor was raised from 7 to 9 years, and the maximum daily working hours for children were capped at seven.

1905
The Swadeshi movement, which arose in protest of the Partition of Bengal, provided a significant boost to the development of local industries in the region. Swadeshi workers urged people to refrain from using cloth made in Lancashire or Manchester Cotton Mills. This period also saw the emergence of labour activism, with some leaders championing the cause of industrial workers to advance political agitation. In 1905, the Printers' Union was established in Calcutta. A series of strikes erupted in various mills and railways, particularly in the Eastern Bengal State Railways.

Nov-Dec, 1907
Railway Strike in Bengal demanding wage increase. They succeeded to get a famine allowance.

1908
The Mohini Cotton Mill was established



(1) MN Roy, marked with a red dot, can be seen in this photograph taken during the second conference of the Communist International in 1920, along with Lenin and other delegates. (2) Mohini Mill, Kushtia (3) Entrance of Adamjee Jute Mills in 1950. (4) A procession during the 1969 mass uprising against the Pakistan government is led by a street child in Dhaka. Photographer: Rashid Talukder

