



Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity, a labour rights organisation, has been demanding Tk 25,000 as minimum wage. PHOTO: BGWS

TK 25,000 FOR RMG WORKERS

## Don't they deserve a dignified life?



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TASLIMA AKHTER

Over 40 lakh of the workers in our country's readymade garments sector are waiting for a welcome change. Whether that change will come and bring relief is still in question. On one side, we have the workers protesting for a minimum wage of Tk 25,000, and on the other, those in power are concocting ways to thwart this mission.

In recent years, the country has faced all kinds of adversities – from Covid-19 and inflation to the Russia-Ukraine war. But despite all this, the RMG sector has remained the economy's lifeline. The blood and sweat of RMG workers contribute to 84 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings. In the last five years, the sector raked in between \$33 billion and \$46 billion, raising exports by 35 percent to new markets. Everyone knows the current wage does not reflect the market's growth or the factory owners' profits.

Due to the taka's depreciation, garment factory owners enjoyed an additional Tk 90,000 crore last year, a striking level of growth. One may wonder, will the workers get a share of the profits? Will they finally be rid of a life that barely chugs along with Tk 8,000? Will they get a taste of eggs, fish, and meat? Will they finally stop being disposable human capital and get to know what it's like to be a respected citizen?

Hearing the demands, factory owners and their supporters may think the workers are asking for way too much and that such demands are downright criminal. They might even say, "Surely, vested quarters are behind all this. This is a conspiracy against the sector." They fail to realise that these demands from the workers – who are humans, not machines – are only natural. Right now, they are speaking up for one thing: a wage that will pave the way for ensuring basic rights, such as food.

Food inflation has been the highest in the last 12 years. According to government data, it was 12.54 percent in August, while overall inflation was at almost 10 percent. This has had the worst impact on low-income workers, as they had to reduce their food intake to make ends meet. Recently, economist Anu Muhammad, using prices from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh from September 2018 to September 2023, showed how the prices of daily essentials have skyrocketed. The price of lentils has gone up by 120 percent, that of flour by 88, potatoes by 80, and fish by 100 percent. Judging by the numbers, a family of four needs to spend Tk 23,000 per month just to meet their daily caloric requirement. There are families rationing their already scant meals amid rising gas and electricity bills. Racking up debts, using up savings, not sending their kids to school. But nothing seems to be helping now.

Many studies have found that a worker needs around Tk 40,000 per month to live a somewhat dignified life. Taking productivity, wages in other countries, production costs, owners' profits, inflation, and daily expenses into account, there's no doubt that the wages of our workers should be much higher. Even then, the 11 workers' association alliance has demanded Tk 25,000.

Ignoring the workers' plight, the owners are once again using the same old rhetoric, saying how it's impossible to meet this demand, just so the profits don't reach workers. Government and international data show that this sector has boomed in the last five years. In fiscal year 2022-23, Bangladesh exported 133 crore kg of garments to the EU, and saw 36.38 percent growth in the US market. From 2010 to 2022, Bangladesh was one of the top 10 garment exporters to the US. Even 10 years ago, our country had only one green factory, but that number has now jumped to 200. Owners are eyeing an \$100 billion industry in the future. Amid all the exports, over Tk 821 has been laundered abroad, an issue customs officials have termed to be a small show of a grander crime. And still, with money floating above the factory skies, the owners refuse to provide a living wage.

While the numbers are inconsistent, Bangladesh's per capita income is \$2,775, which translates to Tk 25,523 per month. But for the workers, these numbers remain just numbers. Compared to wages of many other sectors, the workers make do with a paltry amount. At present, fourth-grade government employees make Tk 16,950, the cleaning staff of

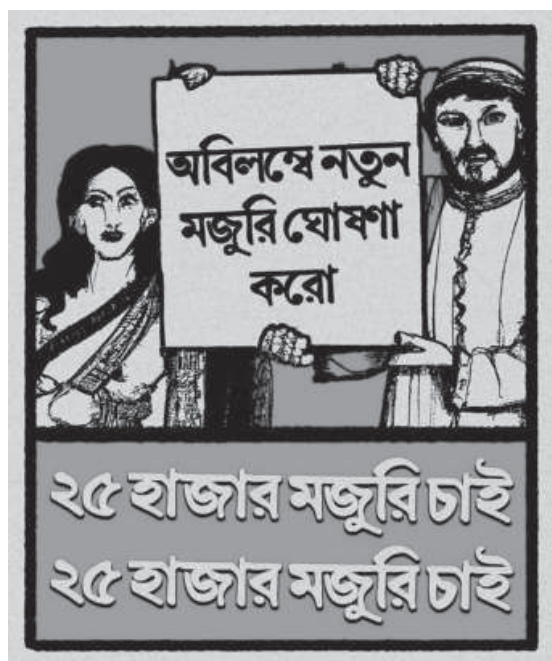
banks make Tk 24,000, saw mill workers get Tk 17,900, and ship breakers get Tk 16,000. And what do garment workers get? Just Tk 8,000.

Right now, RMG workers in China make around Tk 24,890 and Vietnamese workers get Tk 15,660. In Türkiye, the minimum wage is Tk 29,165, while workers in Malaysia get Tk 25,935, and those in the Philippines make around Tk 23,180. Recently, the wage in Cambodia was set at Tk 22,587. Bangladesh is the second-largest garment exporting country, surpassing Vietnam. But while the country is proudly proclaiming this, it can't let go of its cheap wages.

Recently, the BGMEA president sent a letter urging buyers to raise prices, mentioning that wages are going to rise, and so prices should follow suit. But what share of the price hike will translate into higher wages is still unknown. If the demands are heard, it will be beneficial for both the workers and the industry. Not only will Tk 25,000 ensure decent living, but it will also give factory owners the leverage to negotiate with buyers. On top of that, the country's image will improve. However, past experiences show that these factors are usually ignored.

In 2018, garment workers demanded for the minimum wage to be raised to Tk 16,000, from Tk 5,300. Ignoring the demands, the owners proposed increasing it by only Tk 1,060 through the wage board, taking the wage to Tk 6,360. After much negotiation, owners vehemently opposed raising the wage above Tk 7,000. Finally, with the prime minister's intervention, it was raised to Tk 8,000. We cannot bear to deal with this same drama again.

The workers are quite anxious about their fate, as newspapers and social media are abuzz with hearsay



ARTWORK: DEBASHISH CHAKRABORTY

that the owners are going to propose a nominal increase. The workers' representatives may demand Tk 20,000 and owners may settle for Tk 12,000 or 13,000. This strategy to appease the workers will do nothing but further dispirit them.

Alongside raising wages, the need for changing the wage-determining structure has also come to the fore – an issue ignored by the wage board in the past. Nearly all workers' associations have raised their concerns about bringing changes to how the basic salary, grade and increments are determined. The proportion of basic salary has actually declined in the last 10 years; in 1994, the basic was 65 percent of the total wage of Tk 930, and in 2018, it came down to 51 percent of Tk 8,000. The monetary amounts of a number of benefits – like overtime, gratuity, maternity benefits, and cashing out leaves – are calculated based on the basic salary. So, a larger basic means more benefits. Therefore, the wage structure should be changed to ensure that basic salary goes back to being 65 percent of the total. Additionally, there should be five grades (instead of seven), and a 10 percent increment.

Without movements from workers, wages have never been raised substantially, and we have seen many tactics to thwart such endeavours. Fear, abuse, rhetoric – all have been used to suppress workers. The people haven't forgotten what happened in 2018. A majority of the workers' leaders were arrested; many were charged with treason. The efforts to distract agitators – by keeping the leadership busy, sending them on pleasure trips or suppressing them – will occur this time around as well. But the workers will keep the fight going for the wages they rightly deserve.

## 'Book down,' indeed!



KNOT SO TRUE

Dr Rubana Huq is the vice-chancellor of Asian University for Women.

RUBANA HUQ

"Peace is never an option when there are 11 groups hence, they fight among themselves constantly... Sometimes the students, after an incident, cut the pipes of the shuttle train so that the connection between the city and the campus is severed."

– "How student politics impacts the lives of students," The Daily Star (July 6, 2023)

Dear Mr Book Down,  
Last Friday, on September 29, in a huge auditorium in Dhaka, you, a veteran leader and a lawmaker, in the presence of the pro-vice-chancellor of a public university, asked students to practise "Book Down" ("book" in Bangla meaning "chest") and declared that even Devils would not dare an appearance in that audience to fight these young people who had given up books and decided to toe your line.

I was intrigued by your "book down" suggestion, Mr Book Down, and I must confess that right after reading that article, I googled the benefits of the "chest down" exercise. The results listed four specific benefits: a regular chest down routine increases muscle thickness, contributes to upper body strength output, improves posture, and offers greater caloric expenditure.

After all, with the atmosphere heating up, we will indeed need an army of well-built students to be ready as "kormis" of parties, in order to become our sacrificial goats at their altar. They would either slay or be slain, to further the cause of democracy in the country. Who are we to question that, right?

Mr Book Down,  
So far, our student wings of the political parties have ignominiously contributed to the culture of ignominy by celebrating raping the 100th girl (1999, Jahangirnagar University), through harassing women on Pahela Baishakh (MC College, 2015), raping a tourist in Cox's Bazar (December 2021), blackmailing young students and threatening to send their photos and videos to male party leaders and high-ups (Eden College, September 2022), abducting and gang-raping a schoolgirl (Narayanganj, January 2020), raping a housewife (Bogura, August 2022), raping a speech-impaired teen (Lakshmipur, December 2022). The list doesn't end with rape. It stretches to the brutal murders of shopkeeper Nahid Hossain (New Market, January 2022), Abrar Fahad of Buet (2019), tailor Biswajit Das (December 2012), and extends to extreme political violence at educational institutions (SUST, March 2018), attacking journalists (Dhaka City Corporation election, 2020), leading communal violence (Rangpur and Chandpur, 2021), and killing students in "torture cells" in public university dorms (where around 129 students have been reportedly killed in between 2014-2018).

These are only a few examples of the very recent atrocities.

It's my turn to assure you now. No, you certainly aren't the only perpetrator as students in the past also practised enough "book downs," before they shot Sony in 2002. Remember Sony, a brilliant student of Buet, who died in a shootout between two factions of the now opposition (on the streets) political party's student wing? The list runs long and includes assault on political opponents (2015) in Sylhet, attacking Proshika, the NGO, in 2004, vandalising the office of the Dhaka University Teachers' Association president (September 2004), obstructing justice in 2013 while protesting the execution of a senior leader of their party, building a bomb (March 2015), and trading yaba in Patuakhali the same year. All these were part of the continuing culture of violence, audacity and impunity resulting from our collective greed leading to national failure.

Had we truly been by their side, they wouldn't have had to serve our interests in exchange of being rewarded with preferential access to hall seats, earning extra bullying privileges, eating for free in the dining hall, securing sure seats on university transport, getting inflated grades and finally receiving diplomas way before anyone else after graduation, or even becoming incipient elites for a limited period of time. Little do they know that, after a while, because of the fragility of leadership, they too will become expendable.

Mr Book Down,  
I hope someday you will have the wisdom to look around our neighbouring states and learn lessons. For instance, have you ever heard of "Milk Tea Alliance," which is an anti-authoritarian platform, a pan-Asian democracy movement for activists, subscribed to by students from Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan, Philippines, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Belarus, and Iran, which protests and proactively promotes reform? If you have the slightest

interest in history, maybe, just maybe, you may remember that in Indonesia, Suharto was forced to resign in 1998 after 32 long years in power? In spite of being beaten, jailed, and kidnapped en masse, the students, through their reformist movement in 1998, had enough steam to stir the people and make way for the first democratic election since 1955.

Remember the June Democratic Struggle in South Korea in 1987, or the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989? Or "March for the Beloved," a song sung by a million Koreans in 2017 when they protested against their president, soon to be followed by the Hongkongers with the same Korean song in 2019 in the streets, in Chater Garden, being sung in Korean, and in Chinese, strung on a guitar, in iconic protest even after being tear-gassed?

The young are still setting examples and yet being crucified, like Syed Saddiq, the youngest cabinet minister in Malaysia, and Sarah Elago in Philippines, the youngest ever female lawmaker; they were both conveniently discredited by the authorities in 2021. Saddiq was charged for allegedly misappropriating funds and Elago had consistently been targeted by a misinformation campaign. But these young leaders have paved the way for more fearless activists. Today, activists from Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, and Myanmar have come together and formed the Asia Democracy Network, through which they enrich their network, enhance their profiles, and grow stronger amidst even the fiercest of attacks. This could be a replicable model for you and your *kormi bahini*, Mr Book Down.

I want to share another anecdote with you. In one of the political programmes that I was slightly involved in, we were expecting a hall full of students. That hall was huge and I was doubtful about attendance. But I was soon proven wrong as the hall couldn't accommodate even an extra fly as capacity was filled to the brim. I took one quick look at the audience and saw 700 faces staring at the stage blankly. They were only *kormis*, workers of the political party ranging between 24 and 60 years of age.

Quite ironically, the leader himself was a 50-year-old politician-turned-businessman who had zero interest in their future. As for the students, approximately half

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of them were wearing reading glasses without probably having read anything at all in their lives. I learnt that it was all part of the stage game, as they wouldn't look "serious and credible" enough otherwise.

As a result, today we have "book downing" practices replacing "book reading," leading to a general disinterest from students resulting in empty, yet fully equipped classrooms.

We also have difficulty recruiting students who are officially "eligible" but unemployable in real offices, just because most of them can barely write even one page of English without making mistakes.

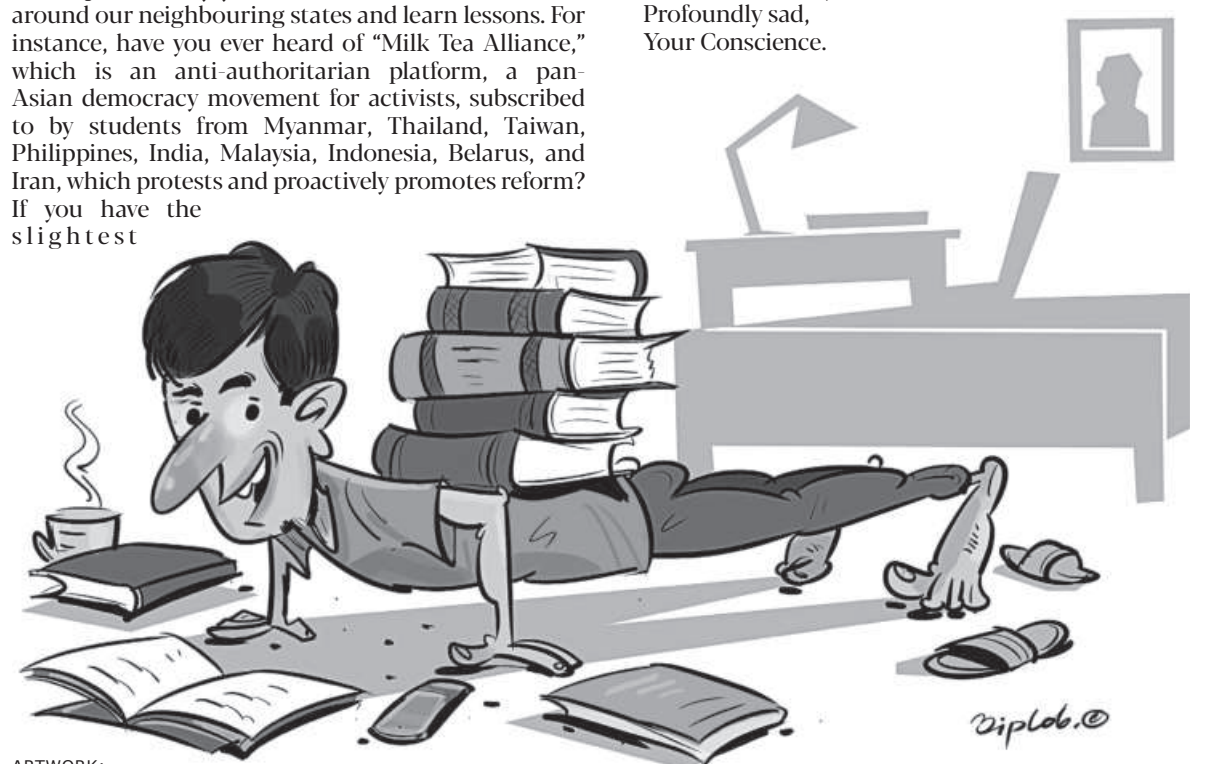
Mr Book Down,  
There was a story in a Bangla daily the other day of children having to cross two rivers to reach their school in a village called Goradigha, where there are 4,000 people living in 690 houses. There are no rickshaws, no vans.

They only have boats to ply. Do you happen to know of this village, Mr Book Down?

Are you able to gauge their level of aspiration? And yes, do you even remember losing Sony in 2002 and Abrar in 2019? Between the two deaths and thousands more, Mr Book Down, do you think anything has really changed in Bangladesh?

And yes, the last question, finally: Once upon a time, you were awarded the third-highest award for gallantry for your contributions during our Liberation War... between then and now, what made you stop being the hero that you once were?

Profoundly sad,  
Your Conscience.



ARTWORK: BIPOLOB CHAKRABORTY