

Why the delay in declaring minimum wage for RMG workers?



THE SOUND
& THE FURY

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The tenure of the wage board formed to recommend the minimum wage for ready-made garment (RMG) workers expired on October 9, but, disappointingly, they are yet to come up with a proposal for a much anticipated wage hike. At their third meeting on October 1, the wage board members said they would visit RMG factories across Bangladesh and submit proposals based on their findings, possibly in the third week of the month. A new wage is apparently likely in mid-November.

Amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in over a decade, which is ravaging the life of everyone but the superrich, such delays are no doubt unwelcome by the workers, a majority of whom are living from hand to mouth, racking up huge amounts of debt which they cannot afford to repay with their existing salaries. The urgency is clearly lost on the wage board members, who could only manage to meet three times over the past six months, and, by their own admission, are yet to even visit factories and meet with the workers. Such a lacklustre attitude – at such a volatile and crucial time, with the elections fast approaching – does not beget confidence in the wage board.

As prices of essentials have doubled, tripled and in some cases quadrupled out of reach of even the middle class, the working class has had no option but to cut back on their nutritional needs – and then cut back some more. Most have given up on chicken, beef and big fish for a while, but when eggs cost Tk 12-14 apiece, onions Tk 75 per kg and potatoes Tk 45, how much more can they even cut down? As I struggle to come to terms with my ever-escalating grocery costs, I can't fathom how garment workers are making do with the meagre amount that is left for food after paying house rent, bills and other necessities. At every home I visited last month, the story was much the same. The debts are piling up in the neighbourhood grocery shops, and much-needed treatment has

Will the wage board and our policymakers truly hear the stories of backbreaking work and heartbreaking debt of the garment workers, who have kept the economy going even at its worst phases? No, if the past is any indication. Garment workers' demands for justified wage increases have been met with apathy at best and violence at worst in the past. There are countless examples of workers being beaten indiscriminately by local goons, tear-gassed by law enforcement agencies, and even killed for asking for their dues, no matter which government in power. In fact, that we have a whole police unit whose responsibility is to keep workers on their toes speaks volumes about where our priority, as a nation, really lies.

Mia was allegedly shot and killed during this time.

Neither the 2016 nor the 2018 mass protests were coordinated by the major labour unions – they were spontaneous reactions of workers to an unjust state of affairs. This time around, trade unions have been organising programmes here and there on a limited scale, but we are yet to see a massive showdown of workers to drive home their desperation in any of the industrial belts. As the cost-of-living crisis takes an unbearable turn, one could well ask: why aren't more workers on the streets yet? They say the memories of the last two crackdowns are still fresh in their mind. In this economy, losing a job and getting blacklisted is no less scary than being picked up by law enforcement. The state has become increasingly more repressive since the last elections, with hardly any mass movements taking place over the last five years. BNP's demonstrations in different parts of the country have been met with violence, with thousands of cases filed against its activists and leaders over the past year. The stakes of taking to the streets are higher than ever before.



ILLUSTRATION: DEBASHISH CHAKRABARTY

It is a tried and tested strategy of the government to denote any mobilisation in the RMG sector as “sabotage” or “anti-state” and to conflate the sector’s interests with national interests. But it would be short-sighted – and dangerous – for the government to do so this time around. Anger is slowly but surely building up among the working class, and with the elections around the corner, the government can only push them so far before they realise the workers have nothing left to lose.

been put on hold till “better times” arrive. Women's health, as always, has been the worst-affected, as the opportunity cost of an ultrasound is two weeks' worth of food on the table for their kids. Most are surviving by working an insane amount of hours day in and day out – it is now legal to work up to 12 hours a day, thanks to a circular by the labour ministry – at a great cost to their mental and physical health, on top of taking on additional manual work on their so-called weekend to earn some extra bucks.

Despite the inevitability of backlash, in the absence of effective trade unions in the factories or other credible mechanisms to resolve disputes, workers have had no option except to take to the streets to demand wage hikes – as they did in 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2018. The costs of such protests have only intensified over the years, as the space for any form of dissent has shrunk alarmingly in the country. In 2016, for instance, following the wage protests, at least 1,500 workers were fired and cases were filed against 38 labour leaders and activists. Workers and activists were threatened and harassed, union and NGO offices were forcibly shut down by security forces in Ashulia, Savar and Gazipur, and surveillance on prominent union offices continued for months after the protests ended, as documented by the Worker Rights Consortium and Human Rights Watch.

In 2018, the crackdown was even more severe. More than 11,000 workers were terminated from their jobs, thousands of cases were filed against named and unnamed workers, and at least 50 workers were arrested. The state and owners saw the crackdown following the wage protests as an opportunity to weed out “troublemakers,” with thousands of workers who were vocal about their rights within and outside of the factories being blacklisted from the industrial belts. According to the Human Rights Watch, police resorted to violence to quell the protests, firing rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons at them, raiding homes of garment workers, and even going so far as to shoot at residents with rubber bullets. A worker named Shuman

The political scene is already heating up, with BNP promising to wage unrest from October 28 if Awami League refuses to budge from its position. Under such volatile circumstances, what does the wage board hope to achieve by delaying the announcement to mid-November?

It is a tried and tested strategy of the government to denote any mobilisation in the RMG sector as “sabotage” or “anti-state” and to conflate the sector's interests with national interests. But it would be short-sighted – and dangerous – for the government to do so this time around. Anger is slowly but surely building up among the working class, and with the elections around the corner, the government can only push them so far before they realise the workers have nothing left to lose. The BNP, in its obsession with its one-point demand, has thus far failed to capitalise on people's frustrations with the economy, particularly the cost-of-living crisis. When, if ever, will these parties understand that they need the working class on their side?

We, as a nation, have had no problems standing on the back of our workers – and breaking them if need be. We have taken their so-called resilience for granted, assuming that no matter the injustice, they can somehow sustain on poverty wages, with nothing but cheap vegetables and rice to eat, and work non-stop till their youth give out prematurely. The wage board must do the humane thing – declare Tk 25,000 as the minimum wage – instead of proposing a hike that reflects the desires of the owning class and falls frustratingly short of the workers' demands.



Demonstrators take part in ‘Emergency Rally: Stand with Palestinians Under Siege in Gaza’ at Harvard University in the US on October 14, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The war on error



BLOWIN' IN
THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The title of this essay draws inspiration from the insightful words of Nobel Laureate African-American author Toni Morrison. In her essay, “War on Error,” Morrison alludes to the corrective measures enacted by the Church in the 15th and 16th centuries to rectify those who deviated from the prescribed belief systems. Organised religion, in those times, ensured that apostates were “severed from the world by death” (*The Source of Self-Regard*, Pg 28). This historical discourse remains a part of the monastic curriculum, and we continue to commemorate our graduation ceremonies with its lessons. In her essay, presented at an Amnesty International event, Morrison passionately argues that we are in dire need of another campaign against ignorance – “A deliberately heightened battle against cultivated ignorance, enforced silence, and metastasizing lies.” She maintains that the time has come for a new curriculum to curate “the life of the moral mind” and “free spirit,” asserting, “No more apologies for a bleeding heart when the opposite is no heart at all. Danger of losing our humanity must be met with more humanity. Otherwise, we stand meekly behind Eris [i.e. discord], hold Nemesis's [i.e. revenge] cloak, and genuflect at the feet of Thanatos [i.e. death].”

The call for a revision of the curricula resurfaces in an article in *The New York Times*, titled “The Moral Deficiencies of a Liberal Education.” Its author, Ezekiel Emanuel, is evidently shocked by the support for the Palestinians in many of the liberal arts schools in the US, most notably Columbia University. Emanuel finds a lack in the education of the students, saying, “We have failed to give them the ethical foundation and moral compass to recognize the basics of humanity.” He goes on to add, “What is in our curriculums? What do we think it means to be educated? What moral stands are we taking? The timidity of many university leaders in condemning

the Hamas massacre and antisemitism more generally offers the wrong examples.” Emanuel's solution is to revisit the core mission of liberal arts so that students don't make “patently uneducated and alarmingly immoral declarations.”

Emanuel's response is targeted at the growing protests against the Israeli genocidal counterattack on Gaza, following the terror attack on Israel. The indiscriminate killings of Palestinian civilians, many of whom are children, have drawn heavy criticism from the civil society and campus-based activists. Many Jews who don't identify themselves with the Zionist act and vision of Israel took part in these protests. Two leftist Jewish groups, Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, are campaigning on an avowedly anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian platform. They even blocked the White House, protesting the ongoing “genocide by making use of the Jewish fears of another genocide [against Jews].” Author and social activist Naomi Klein said, “We will not let our fears of antisemitism be manipulated in this way.”

Joining this protest rally, Brant Rosen, a rabbi from Los Angeles, said they were witnessing “one of the most consequential moral moments that any of us will experience in our lifetime... [Future generations would ask] Did we act, or did we stand idly by while genocide was committed in our name?” Rosen is part of a “conscientious” group that has been labelled as “self-hating Jews” or “not Jews” for their moral positions. This group is asking a very political question: “How long is the US going to keep covering up for Israel's crimes and paying for it?”

It is interesting how the war is being waged on two different fronts. On the one side, the vendetta mission is on where Israel has dehumanised the Palestinians as “human animals” to justify their complete eradication. On the other side, the discursive iron dome of Israeli intelligentsia is busy airing defence missiles against any liberal ideas that would see both Israelis

and Palestinians on equal terms. In these divisive times, Gandhi's words of wisdom, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,” seem to have lost their resonance.

The West prefers to have a monocle to measure its moral compass. It believes in constructing consent through lies and tales. I was telling my students about the story of the Western hero Odysseus who blinded the one-eyed monster Polyphemus after getting him drunk. While introducing himself to the cyclops, Odysseus, clever that he was, mentioned his name as “nobody.” When the monster cried out in pain, his friends asked from afar what was going on. Polyphemus could only say, “Nobody is killing me.” His friends took it as a joke, allowing the Greek hero to complete his act of violence.

Five hundred civilians who took shelter in a hospital and a UN refugee school were bombed by the Israelis. Then the discourses changed. Maybe the weapon of mass destruction was a stray Hamas missile. Nobody killed those 500 Palestinians. The total death toll has crossed 4,000 and counting. Israel has confirmed about 1,400 deaths in the Hamas attack on October 7. The world is waiting for the raging revenge to blow off steam. The initial sympathy that it had is likely to lose ground given the disproportionate use of violence.

The root cause of the violence will once again come to the fore once this dust storm is settled. Colonisation. Israel's occupation of territories and desire to parcel all Palestinians as Arabs to the neighbouring countries have become blatantly clear.

The humanitarian response brewed in the liberal arts settings and locations, where true democracy and freedom of expressions are practised, are guided by this moral stance against colonisation. No wonder, Zionism has found its opposition in liberal arts. The veiled threats are to stop free expressions.

We are too afraid to speak up because we don't know when and how a nobody will vilify us as one-eyed monsters, make us drunk with its spirit, and mutilate or mute us in the process. The us and them camps are becoming dangerously hostile. Then again, when a six-year-old boy in Illinois is killed and his mother brutally stabbed by their landlord just because they were Muslims, we wonder who is right, and who is wrong. When will this war on error end?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

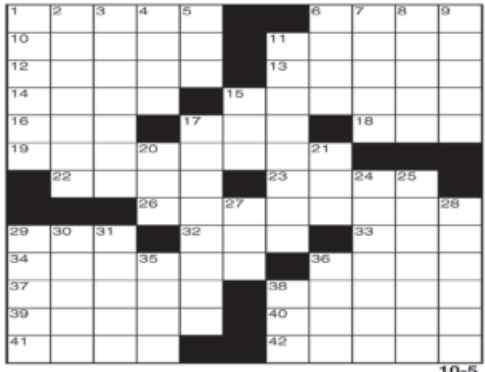
- 1 Print measures
- 6 Affectionate
- 10 Visibly shocked
- 11 Pago Pago location
- 12 More certain
- 13 Prepare to propose
- 14 Spoken
- 15 Move like gelatin
- 16 First número
- 17 Cruise in the movies
- 18 Cart puller
- 19 Be armed
- 22 Cooking mint
- 23 Omen
- 26 Roadster's lack
- 29 “East of Eden” son

DOWN

- 1 Forgo
- 2 Big lizards
- 3 Rio native
- 4 Made fun of
- 5 Church talk: Abbr.
- 6 Viper feature
- 7 Last Greek letter
- 8 Seasonal songs

9 Valleys

- 11 Bank robbers might wear them
- 15 Misery
- 17 San Antonio landmark
- 20 Longtime CIA rival
- 21 “My country – of thee”
- 24 Cry to a freeloader
- 25 Kenya capital
- 27 Playfully shy
- 28 China buy
- 29 Deep sleeps
- 30 Cartoon genre
- 31 Red Square name
- 35 Sail filler
- 36 Took the bus
- 38 Pop



SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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