

# What was the point of fixing a new wage?

## Death of RMG worker amid rejection of new wage alarming

The reason for hastening the process of fixing a new minimum wage for the RMG sector—after about seven months of relative inactivity by those on the wage board—was to quell raging protests by workers demanding fair wages. Their demonstrations jolted the authorities out of their collective stupor. Factory owners were compelled to improve on their initial offer of Tk 10,400, which had set off the protests, and proposed Tk 12,500, which then was quickly and unquestioningly approved by the board. But far from quelling the protests, it has only reignited them, resulting in the tragic death of a female protester at the hands of police on Wednesday.

What was the point of hastening the wage-setting process then? Indeed, what is point of having a bargaining place for it if the decision heavily favours the owners while sidelining workers' representatives, who had proposed Tk 20,393? What did the government expect would happen after such a farcical exercise? There was nothing unpredictable about the reaction of protesting workers. Not only were their demands rubbished, but they were also effectively excluded from the decision-making process. The government has since tightened security to guard factories in Dhaka and nearby districts. Clearly, it was expecting a violent backlash. If its idea of addressing labour unrest was through applying force, it is doomed to fail eventually.

Workers' demands for higher wages, we must say, are rooted in reality. For too long, they have endured meagre wages, even though it is their hard work that drives this industry. The newly announced minimum wage, although a step forward, still falls significantly short of meeting the minimum requirements for a decent life, as estimated by organisations like the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and the South Asia Network for Modelling (SANEM). Their research suggests that a minimum wage between Tk 17,568 and Tk 26,000, depending on the region, is necessary considering the high inflation and soaring prices of essential commodities.

As the president of a labour organisation pointed out, if the current value of the dollar is considered, the new minimum wage amounts to a little more than the Tk 8,000 wage fixed in 2018. In other words, there has been little increase in practice. We urge the authorities to sincerely consider these issues and address them. There is still time to renegotiate and refix the minimum wage, so we urge them to do so. A living wage for workers is a democratic right that must be respected.

# Rights of inmates must be upheld

## Prolonged trials, political cases overwhelming our prison system

Prison overcrowding, which has long been an issue for Bangladesh, has reportedly taken a turn for the worse of late. As per *Prothom Alo*, the 68 prisons in the country are housing nearly 88,000 inmates, more than double their collective capacity. Given the recent spate of arrests in the country, with police allegedly making elaborate lists of BNP leaders and activists for arrest, one can safely assume that the situation will get even worse in the coming weeks ahead of the upcoming election.

Division-wise statistics show that, except for Sylhet, jails in all the other divisions are housing inmates way beyond their capacity. Dhaka jails are housing 2.3 inmates in the space of one. Chattogram jails have 2.47 prisoners in the space of one. Rajshahi jails are the most overwhelmed, holding triple the number of prisoners that they are equipped for. Resources are already limited in these jails—for example, there are only six doctors for all the jails, against the approved posts of 141, and not one gynaecologist for female prisoners. This paints a horrendous picture of the inhumane conditions inside jails.

What's more alarming is that nearly 76 percent of the inmates—about 67,000—are under trial. In cases under certain laws, the accused are left to rot in prisons. One may recall Khadijatul Kubra, the Jagannath University student who has been languishing in prison for more than a year after being arrested under the Digital Security Act, her bail stayed by the highest court. If a person is innocent until proven guilty, why is such a large number of under-trial people being treated like convicts even before they are declared so?

This cannot be an acceptable state of affairs in a country where the government claims to uphold the rule of law. To uphold the legal and human rights of prison inmates, the authorities must ensure that trials are not dragged out for indefinite periods of time. They should also provide necessary resources so that inmates can live in a humane environment where their physical and mental well-being is ensured.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Food quality in dorms

Students in the country's prominent public universities face various challenges. Among these, the nutrition issue is affecting them the worst. The food that is served at the dining halls is not only of low quality but is also prepared in unhygienic conditions. Therefore, students often get sick. Students who previously relied on outside food now cannot afford it because of inflation. The government and universities must take immediate steps to address this issue, so that quality food can be ensured for students.

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# Who are these nameless, faceless arsonists?

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



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Who, indeed?

As the streets keep throwing up charred vehicles ever since BNP's October 28 rally, politicians and commentators are coming up with descriptions that, frankly, give little away: from "arson terrorism" by BNP, in the words of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to an incomprehensible evil committed by men without conscience. The PM also told her party activists to throw anyone caught red-handed in arson attacks in the same fire, while Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan invited transport workers to beat arsonists to a pulp "for their own survival". But each attempt to describe or prescribe in such absolutist/moralist terms is really a refusal to acknowledge the complexity of what is happening.

The truth is that the recent string of arson attacks is neither straightforward nor likely centrally planned by any single entity: BNP, for example. To simplify what is complicated may help set a narrative—as it did Awami League's—and win political brownie points, but it doesn't make it convincing. Helping this theory is the fact that there has been no conclusive evidence yet connecting BNP as a party with the planning of these attacks in a potential bid to unseat the government. No activist has been caught "red-handed." The police, without citing evidence (except in an isolated case or two)—and quite prematurely, one may add—drew a conclusion that these incidents occurred *after* the opposition camp enforced hartal and communication blockades, making them prime suspects. This may be the case, but again, without evidence, it is merely a conjecture. There have been no CCTV footage, no caught-in-the-act arrests, no reliable confessions, etc.

This lack of conclusive evidence is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it puts to shame our expensively built, state-of-the-art surveillance system. We have seen how the government contained and then dispersed the October 28 gatherings in Dhaka. Why couldn't it use the same expertise and technology in pre-empting arson attacks or catching the masterminds behind them? The police's image as a trained and well-equipped force took a further battering when they basically crowdsourced their task to the public, declaring a bounty of



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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Tk 20,000 for anyone helping to catch an arsonist. It's almost as if they're saying, "We can't do our job, but maybe someone else can." They couldn't even successfully defend themselves against incriminating rumours after it was revealed that two unidentified men riding on a motorbike, and wearing police vests, had set a bus on fire on that fateful Saturday.

Secondly, lack of evidence allows confusion and misconceptions, and leaves a wide margin within which police can act based on suspicions and biases, rather than concrete facts. Already, since the October 28 rally, some 8,000 BNP leaders and activists are said to have been arrested in connection with various crimes, including arson and vandalism. These arrests and cases, it is safe to say, are mostly politically motivated.

Thirdly, such lack of evidence and clarity in an election year can contribute to a rise in the spread of political misinformation and disinformation, as experts have recently shown. Partisan colouring of events can influence not only the result of the upcoming election, if it is held as currently planned, but also

again be hamstrung by the damning portrayal of being "a party of arsonists," like in the aftermath of the 2014 general election.

All this goes to show, contrary to the over-simplistic and rather manipulative narrative of the ruling party, how complicated the situation is. Let me be clear: I'm not saying that BNP is totally right to defend itself against any accusation of arson attacks—for it is obvious that some were indeed committed by its more reckless activists—but nor is Awami League totally innocent of having any stake in said attacks, if its eagerness to jump to a conclusion is any indication. Is there any truth to BNP's claim that Awami League has been secretly pulling the strings? Why do arson attacks continue to happen even after the country has been cloaked in a security blanket with the full force of an all-powerful government—the police, Rab, BGB, and ruling party activists—patrolling the streets? And how will it justify the involvement of a Jubo League leader in torching a truck in Feni?

It is also possible, given how our elections have often been allegedly

To see ongoing arson attacks as a single criminal trend rather than the culmination or outburst of long-suppressed issues is a trap that you don't want to fall into. If BNP, going by Awami League's narrative, is primarily responsible even by way of association, it could argue that it is the latter that primarily benefits from the mass arrests that have followed, leading to claims of a "minus BNP" electoral strategy. So, however incomprehensible and unconscionable the evil is, there is no room for a morally absolutist position for either of the parties. And it ill behoves a government with a long history of political repression and suppression to be suddenly so self-righteous, conveniently blaming an already battered opposition that can hardly defend itself.

These attacks are at once a political issue, a law enforcement issue, and a human rights issue. Political parties will have us prefer one over another, and see it through their own lens. But it is imperative that justice, following impartial investigations, prevails over any moral absolutism based on partial or fabricated truths.

# Can the EU visit tip the scales for workers' dignity?



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The forthcoming visit by the European Union (EU) delegation to Bangladesh comes at a critical juncture. Bangladesh's labour sector is the backbone of its economy and the litmus test for the nation's adherence to international labour standards. The delegation's mission to evaluate the National Action Plan's implementation has coincided with a period marked by considerable labour unrest and the government's recent announcement of a new minimum wage of Tk 12,500 for garment workers. Many labour unions have rejected this proposal, saying that the government's proposed amount is far from adequate. Given the circumstances, the EU visit holds the potential to exert significant influence on the country's economic and labour landscape, especially considering the upcoming national election and the need for social stability.

The proposed minimum wage of Tk 12,500, though a step up from the previous Tk 8,000, has sparked widespread dissent among RMG workers. It's a figure that appears increasingly incompatible with living a dignified life amidst rampant inflation, which currently stands at a staggering

9.63 percent.

According to research by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem), the wage needed to sustain in Bangladesh ranges from Tk 19,200 to Tk 26,000, depending on the area. Given the revised wage of 12,500, there is still a serious gap. Workers, unions, and labour rights organisations suggest a wage closer to Tk 23,000, a figure informed by comprehensive living cost studies.

The EU's visit is thus pivotal, not merely for its potential to review labour conditions but also for its implicit pressure on the Bangladeshi government to align its labour laws with international norms. The EU's influence is profound, given Bangladesh's impending shift from the Everything but Arms (EBA) initiative to the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which requires adherence to 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, the environment, and good governance.

The timing of the visit, amidst labour unrest and pre-election volatility, is particularly significant. It reflects the EU's understanding that economic growth and labour rights

are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing. The delegation's findings will likely resonate beyond the borders of Bangladesh, shaping international perceptions and potentially impacting trade relations. For the EU, which is committed to ethical trade, the treatment of workers and their living conditions are integral to trade negotiations.

The garment industry is an essential pillar of Bangladesh's economy, contributing significantly to our GDP and employment. The EU is a critical trading partner, and its trade policies hugely impact Bangladesh's export-oriented growth. The delegation's assessment might influence the EU's future trade preferences, which could either bolster Bangladesh's economy or place new strains on it, depending on the outcome.

Moreover, the new minimum wage's failure to align with the cost of living and inflation rates may perpetuate a cycle of poverty among workers, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable economic growth. Low wages contribute to low purchasing power, which hinders domestic demand and, by extension, the growth of other economic sectors. The unrest arising from the wage dispute could lead to instability, which is detrimental to investment and the country's overall financial health, particularly as it seeks to attract foreign direct investment in a post-EBA era. Bangladesh has been a WTO member since 1995 and, as a least developed country (LDC), it benefits from the EBA arrangement, which grants duty-free, quota-free access for all exports except arms and

ammunition. However, the fact that Bangladesh will graduate from the LDC category in 2026 makes GSP+ even more important.

The labour-related implications are equally significant. The EU's assessment could catalyse improvements in labour conditions, prompt more frequent and fairer wage revisions, and strengthen labour rights in Bangladesh. This might lead to a more motivated workforce, reduced turnover, and better productivity, which are critical for the long-term viability of the garment sector. There is no denying the fact that the RMG sector is a significant part of the economic growth and journey of development that we have enjoyed in the past decade and more. On the other hand, if the EU finds our labour situation unsatisfactory, it could lead to sanctions or a loss of trade privileges, which would have severe consequences for workers and the economy.

As the nation prepares for our national election, international and domestic audiences will closely watch the government's response to the EU delegation's findings. The decisions made now will determine whether Bangladesh can balance its economic ambitions with its social and moral obligations, and ensure that its progress includes all strata of society, particularly its most vulnerable population. All we can do is hope our government bodies and business leaders acknowledge that developing by itself is no development at all; true progress is inclusive and considers the well-being of every individual in the community.