

You can't quell workers' hunger by opening fire on them



THE SOUND & THE FURY

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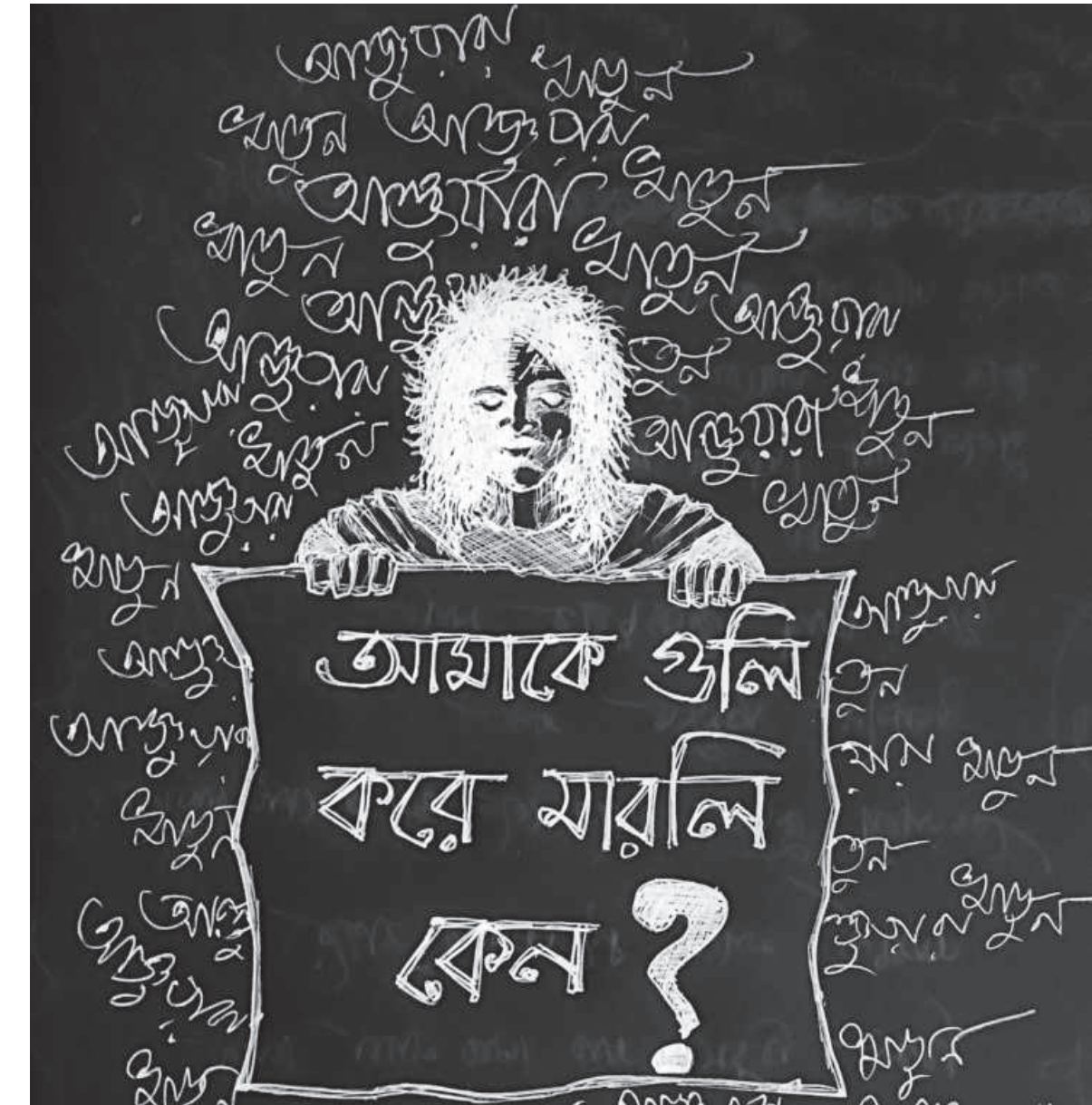
To the outrage of the workers and trade unions who have been demanding a minimum wage of Tk 23,000-25,000, the wage board for the garment sector has announced a pitiful amount—Tk 12,500—as the monthly wage. The announcement came on November 7, hours after garment factory owners reportedly submitted a new proposal on the minimum wage for apparel workers in Bangladesh, revising it from the initially proposed Tk 10,500 to upwards of Tk 12,500. Essentially, the wage board has put forth the same proposal as that of the owners, which makes the answer to the question of “whose interests is the board really protecting?” painfully obvious. The worker's representative who deemed the announced wage “acceptable” was Sirajul Islam Ronny, president of the Bangladesh Garment Workers League, whose affiliation to the ruling party should leave no confusion regarding where his loyalties lie.

What other conclusion can one reach based on the proposed wage anyway? Since the last minimum wage was declared at Tk 8,000 (which was woefully inadequate to begin with, against workers' demands for Tk 16,000), the value of money has depreciated at an alarming rate. We shouldn't have to remind the wage board—yet we must, given that they seem to be inhabiting a different reality—that the prices of essentials have increased manifold during this period. Taking TCB prices into consideration, noted economist Anu Muhammad calculated that, between September 24, 2018 to September 24, 2023, the price for rice has increased by 15 percent, that for lentils by 120 percent, potatoes by 80 percent, salt by 68 percent, eggs by 67 percent, milk by 100 percent, sugar by 120 percent, chicken by 48 percent, and the price for fish has increased by 100 percent. Over the last two months, these prices have risen even higher, with the government seemingly nonplussed

about the raging cost-of-living crisis that has destroyed any prospects of living a nutritious and dignified life for ordinary citizens, particularly for the lower-middle and working classes.

According to a study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in March, the average monthly food expense for a four-member household in Dhaka increased by up to 51 percent over the past four years. Even if a family refrained from eating meat or fish for a whole month, they would have had to spend at least Tk 7,131 in February (which would be close to Tk 8,000 in November, with food inflation at record levels) and around Tk 22,664 if they did include these protein sources in their diet. The wage board, meanwhile, has allocated Tk 1,250 as food allowance. Can we please urge the members of the wage board and their families to live off of their proposed food allowance for a month? Perhaps the factory owners and policymakers think our “resilient” workers don't need protein or vegetables to survive and can simply load up on cheap rice (even that is an oxymoron these days, with coarse rice costing Tk 60 per kg in the industrial belts) and silently meet their ever-increasing production targets on the factory floor. They regularly

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VISUAL: MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

point to Bangladeshi workers' low productivity to justify the low wages. But do they ever stop to wonder how productive a systematically starved population can really be?

In 2018, the minimum wage was \$95. At the current exchange rate, that comes up to around Tk 10,500, which is the amount that the owners (who earned about Tk 90,000 crore, in addition to their usual profits as a result of the inflated dollar price, last year alone) had the audacity to recommend initially to the wage board as the new minimum wage. Is it any surprise, then, that the desperate workers took to the streets to express their deep-rooted frustration upon

hearing this offer?

Rather than assuage the workers by announcing a respectable wage, the wage board has essentially fuelled workers' outrage and made a mockery of the wage negotiation process, after making them wait seven long months. The government and factory owners—whose respective interests have increasingly become inseparable, with almost one-third of MPs having stakes in garment factories—seem to think they can silence the workers with their tried-and-tested method of suppression. A worker of Islam Garments, 28-year-old Anjuara Khatun—mother to a seven-year-old boy and an eight-

year-old girl—was shot dead by law enforcers who opened fire on the protestors in Gazipur a day after the wage announcement. Anjuara and her husband, Jamal, used to earn around Tk 21,000 collectively, but still could not afford to keep their two children with them. As fate would have it, the children had gone to visit them; now, they must leave their parents' home, forever haunted by their mother's pellet-ridden body.

Twenty-six-year-old Rasel Hawlader, an electrician at Design Express Ltd in Gazipur, was shot in the chest by police at close range, according to witnesses. Will anyone ever answer for these extrajudicial

killings? There is no evidence that either Anjuara or Rasel were involved in the vandalism that the police accuse the workers of. But even if they were part of the mob that had thrown bricks at other factories to urge workers to join the protests, would it justify police opening fire on them? Are the factory premises really so much more valuable to the state and the owners than the lives of the workers who hold up Bangladesh's RMG industry?

Let's face it: the state only notices the workers when they supposedly engage in violence—when they block the roads, disrupt our mobility, and allegedly attack heavily-insured factory premises. For the rest of the months, or years, our policymakers remain blissfully oblivious of the toll to workers' mental and physical well-being and of their repeated pleas to bring food prices down. Come wind or storm, come Covid or economic crisis, our workers keep their heads down and quietly meet their production targets. But anytime they dare to speak up, they are fired, threatened, beaten, and even killed, by hired goons or state machineries, if need be. At least seven cases have already been filed against tens of thousands of unnamed workers; and hundreds—if not thousands—of them will likely be fired and blacklisted in the coming days for participating in the strikes. Who knows how many more will be attacked, beaten, maimed, or even killed before the protests are quelled?

Perhaps it is true that some workers engaged in vandalism during the protests, and maybe some of them were misguided by other parties who had bigger stakes in the game in the current volatile political climate. But the wage board, garment factory owners, and the government have only themselves to blame for pushing the workers to the extreme. The government has categorically failed to rein in inflation, and has paid no attention to workers' demands to be provided with rations or bring down food prices if it is indeed unable to increase their wages to the desired amount. Instead, the government has sent a loud and clear message to the workers: that it has no respect for their lives or their lived realities, and that it would rather use bullets than bargain with them.

But for how long can bullets suppress hunger, or the workers' demand for a dignified life?

Where our national cricket teams stand



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The Bangladesh women's national cricket team levelled the ODI series against Pakistan on November 7, in a nail-biting finish. The Tigresses emerged on top in the battle of nerves—an experience their captain believes is an invaluable learning opportunity for the team. In the post-match conference, she shared that the team may have to face these kinds of situations in higher-pressure matches, like during a World Cup. Batting first, the Tigresses posted a total of 169 runs for a loss of nine wickets, which could be judged as a below-par score at the halfway mark. Captain Nigar Sultana led from the front with the only half century scored in the match. The Bangladeshi bowlers did their job with enough faith in the defendable score. Rabeya Khan picked up three wickets—which included Pakistan's top scorer—and had an economy rate of 2.90. The match was tied as the 10th Pakistani batter was run out while trying to take the match-winning run. In the super over, Pakistan posted seven runs. Here, too, Sultana played a crucial role as Bangladesh needed two off the last ball to win and the skipper hit a four off the only delivery she faced in the super over. As wicketkeeper, Sultana picked up two stumpings and was crowned player of the match.

After defeating Pakistan 2-1 in the T20 series, the Bangladesh women's team began the ODI series rather meekly, with their batting order crumbling for a mere 81 runs, which Pakistan chased down in under 25 overs and with five wickets remaining. Instead of succumbing to a mental setback after a crushing loss, the Tigresses came back with a fighting attitude, bearing no imprint of the previous match's mistakes. All eyes will be on them to see if they can complete another series victory. After the Pakistan



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

The frustrations caused by the performance of Bangladesh men's cricket team have moved many to direct their love of the sport towards the Tigresses.

tour is done, the Bangladesh women's team is scheduled to tour South Africa in December. There, too, they will play a T20 series and an ODI series. And next year, Bangladesh is set to host the ICC Women's T20 World Cup, for which they have automatically qualified. This will be Bangladesh's first time hosting a women's World Cup.

Meanwhile, the other Bangladeshi cricket team ended its six-match losing streak at the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup by beating Sri Lanka on November 6. It can be assumed that Bangladesh fancied their chances in this match since they had beaten this Sri Lankan team in the World Cup preparatory match, and had done so without Shakib Al Hasan. After being well and truly placed out of the running for the semifinals and culminating as much disappointment as was possible, the Tigers

seemed to play with a much more relaxed and intentional demeanour. The Sri Lankan team has also had a poor World Cup campaign and were fresh off the humiliating defeat against India where, for the second time this year, they scored less than 60 runs. Shakib was awarded player of the match for a blistering 82 runs that he scored off just 65 deliveries. He also picked up two wickets during Sri

of the game is used as a weak excuse for a mistake that the opposition is justly allowed to take advantage of. While no one is probably going out of their way to admire Shakib for his on-field decision to appeal, his words, “I felt like I was at war,” and the sentiment behind them makes sense for the situation the Bangladesh team has been in. He also admitted that the incident probably helped light a fire in him that saw him deliver a match-winning performance.

Bangladesh has had what can be said to be their worst World Cup campaign as of yet, especially since expectations from the team were high. They have been seen as a reasonably strong team in the ODI format in recent years and, before the World Cup, were judged by many to have a good combination of world-class senior cricketers and promising youngsters who have graduated from the Under-19 World Cup winning team. However, the men's team coach had hinted that disappointment may be imminent for those with exceedingly high hopes.

There may not be a lot of time for the Bangladesh team and management to reflect on their mistakes and course-correct since the ICC Men's T20 World Cup is set to take place next June. After the last match, Shakib has been ruled out of the World Cup due to a fractured finger, which means that we have seen the last of one of the finest all-rounders at this stage. Bangladesh look to finish in the top eight so that they can qualify for the ICC Champions Trophy. This depends on a combination of the result of their match against Australia as well as the results of the other three teams (Netherlands, England, and Sri Lanka), who are also vying for the same qualification.

The frustrations caused by the performance of the Bangladesh men's cricket team have moved many to direct their love of the sport towards the Tigresses. The country deserves to see more coverage of the women's team. This change depends on a systemic redistribution of resources within the Bangladesh Cricket Board, but also relies on the general population's willingness to unlearn the conditioning that makes us value men's sports more than women's.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Hound's hands
- 5 Loft setting
- 9 Staggering
- 11 Indian coin
- 12 Furious
- 13 Skip the ceremony
- 14 — Angeles
- 15 Joined a bee
- 17 Ballooned
- 19 Place down
- 20 Done in
- 21 Barracks bed
- 22 None too smart
- 24 Sun setting
- 26 Permit
- 29 King beater
- 30 Got wind of

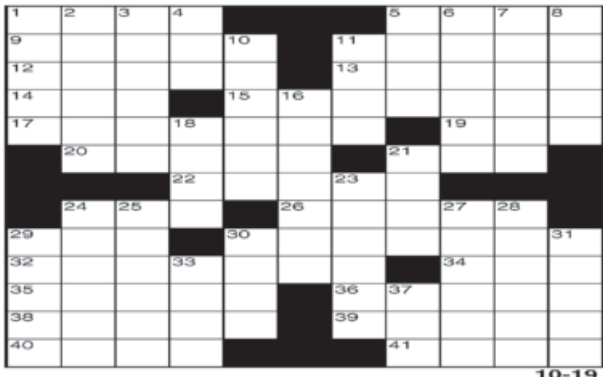
DOWN

- 1 Beach toys
- 2 Quiver stock
- 3 Mink's cousin
- 4 Match part
- 5 Male moose
- 6 Moon mission
- 7 Iterate
- 8 High-maintenance
- 10 Caron of

“Gigi”

- 11 Oboe part
- 16 Mark Twain, for one
- 18 Lord's wife
- 21 Jail division
- 23 Hammer type
- 24 Plot
- 25 Not release
- 27 Geriatrics topic
- 28 Gardener, at times
- 29 Useful skill
- 30 Murder
- 31 Plow pioneer
- John
- 33 Airy tune
- 37 Pet perch

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WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

R	A	D	I	S	H		S	P	A	T
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