

Must workers die for seeking fair wages?

The manner in which RMG unrest is being handled defies logic

Amid the death of another garment worker, we fail to comprehend the absurdity of how factory owners and government authorities are approaching ongoing protests over the minimum wage for workers—which, far from quelling them, is only sowing seeds of further unrest. Jalal Uddin, supervisor of a factory in Gazipur's Konabari, was shot by police on November 8 after he was returning home following the closure of his factory, and succumbed to injuries on Saturday night. He was among the four people to have died since protests began—three of them in police shootings, including Anjuara Khatun from the same factory. This is totally outrageous.

After Jalal's death, his wife rightly asked: "Why did they [cops] shoot? Couldn't they disperse the [protesting] workers in any other way?" We also share these questions. Reportedly, Jalal's abdominal region had scars from at least 60 pellets lodged inside, and there were more on other body parts. Why did the police have to be so violent, and upon whose orders have they shot agitating workers? Apparently, the factory where both Jalal and Anjuara used to work is owned by Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Atiqul Islam. Can he and other owners avoid responsibility for these incidents?

The minimum wage board, too, must share the responsibility for failing to fix an acceptable wage. It has increased the starting salary from Tk 8,000 to Tk 12,500, which is far less than the Tk 20,393 proposed by workers' representatives. If you consider the current value of the dollar, the new wage amounts to a little more than the existing one. It was only logical then that workers felt compelled to get back to the streets demanding a higher wage, to a brutal response so far. At least 35 cases have been registered in Gazipur and Ashulia, and around 19,500 people have been accused in these cases. Moreover, many owners have shut down factories, meaning no pay for their workers, which is also concerning.

The question is, why do those in charge must always let things descend to a point where desperate measures need to be taken? Why can't they be reasonable about the very legitimate concerns of workers? RMG exports have reportedly increased 24 times over the past three decades, and the country in general benefitted from it, but aren't workers entitled to some benefits as well? Why must they toil for so little? A reasonable solution is all the more necessary given concerns about timely delivery of shipments as well as fears that buyers may not place fresh orders amid ongoing unrest. We hope the authorities will stop antagonising and victimising workers, and instead set a wage that brings lasting solutions.

Gaza battlefields extend to hospitals

World leaders must put an end to this onslaught

Amid the dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza, brought upon by a belligerent Israeli government, major hospitals in the enclave are increasingly unable to treat the many patients coming in daily, as Israel is targeting these facilities, weaponising allegations of them being centres for Hamas fighters. It is shocking that despite the global outcry, the healthcare system of a country is being decimated right before our eyes, with no repercussions whatsoever. With more than 11,000 already dead—40 percent of whom are children—how many more innocents must face meaningless deaths or succumb to injuries without treatment?

According to news reports, thousands of Palestinians were trapped in these facilities with little means of medical care. As the bombs keep dropping on Gaza, the question is where will those who survive the onslaught go to treat their wounds. It almost seems like Israel's goal is to ensure that people have no option for treatment. As per Gaza officials, hundreds of patients at al-Shifa Hospital were at risk, as Israeli forces are forcibly evicting the injured onto streets. Six premature babies and nine patients have died at the facility, amid fuel shortages and intense fighting between Israeli troops and Hamas fighters. Meanwhile, al-Quds Hospital, where hundreds of patients stayed trapped and 14,000 were sheltering, has effectively shut down due to lack of fuel, electricity, medicine, food and water. Even the sole medical centre for paediatric cancer, al-Rantisi Specialized Hospital for Children, was not spared, as Israeli forces destroyed its ground floor.

Overall, 23 of Gaza's 35 hospitals have reportedly stopped operating. According to UN agencies, there have been 137 attacks on healthcare facilities in Gaza since the fighting began, resulting in 521 people killed and 686 others injured; 16 healthcare workers have been killed and 38 injured while on duty. If Israel continues its offence, there just might be no one/facility left to provide care in Gaza.

Not that there has been no push against it from global leaders. Amid calls by UN agencies for decisive international action and immediate ceasefire, some EU countries are against Israeli aggression, a prime example being the French president who stated that Israel is killing women and children. Yet, Benjamin Netanyahu has shown little to no sign of considering humanitarian pleas, one major reason being the overwhelming military, financial and diplomatic backing of the US. But given the present state of Gaza, it is imperative that world powers, especially the US, take meaningful rather than symbolic actions to stop what it is evidently a textbook example of genocide.

Unravelling wage disparities in our RMG industry



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Over the past three decades, minimum wage has increased eightfold, and export earnings in local currency have surged more than 60 times. Despite this, Bangladesh struggles to compete internationally, and the blame is often placed on unproductive labour—who are hired at a base wage of \$72-\$75 a month. But the productivity challenges faced by the clothing industry in Bangladesh are multi-faceted and require a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play.

Ironically, industry-affiliated intellectuals and policymakers don't seem to care much about the base price for electricity and fuel, the cost of traffic jams, rent-seeking in the form of administration, and political extortion. There are high passive costs for transport, rent, expat managers hired to ensure high productivity of workers, bureaucratic bribery, lobbying, and more. The direct and indirect rent-seeking costs including out-of-pocket public health expenses of the workers are ignored too.

To note, the garment industry indiscriminately pollutes the environment, not to mention without investing in environmental treatment, and is still unable to compete internationally. Despite being the second-largest global exporter of garments, Bangladesh misses global productivity benchmarks. And this is due to policy shortcomings, not the productivity level of its workforce.

According to the Asian Productivity Organization, the hourly productivity of a Bangladeshi garment worker in terms of value stands at \$3.4. In Myanmar, this rate of productivity stands at \$4.1, in India it's \$7.5, in the Philippines it's \$8.7, in China it's over \$11, and in Sri Lanka about \$16.

Even with low productivity, a Bangladeshi worker working an average of 14-15 hours a day produces \$1,400 or more a month. So, a wage of \$140, including overtime of \$30-\$40, against an output of \$1,400 is a bargain. What exactly is the point of complaint for owners?

With automation prevalent in many aspects of RMG production, the true issue lies in the lack of spending on training and development. The miserly factory owners often neglect investing in the skills of their predominantly underprivileged workforce, perpetuating a "helper culture" that hinders overall productivity, thus increasing headcounts. The absence of training and skill development centres underscores a critical gap in the industry's education and research landscape, contributing to a stagnant, imitative system. A holistic approach is required to unlock the true potential of this vital industry, from a more nuanced understanding of cost

dynamics to investing in training and development, and from fostering a humane work environment to implementing comprehensive human resource management reforms.

The underprivileged labourer is not a machine that will suck up productivity gains. There are no training centres to develop industrial technical skills of two million workers. Why do we expect high productivity with such a "monkey

dealt with via a more humanistic wage structure, better work-life balance, allowances and benefits, and a friendly hour structure.

The prevailing practice of overburdening workers, denying leave, and providing subpar working conditions results in a lack of motivation and efficiency. A shift towards a more humane approach—encompassing fair wages, balanced work hours, transport subsidy, food and nutrition subsidy, proper child care, and improved working conditions—is essential for enhancing overall productivity.

Addressing wage disparities

In the global landscape of garment manufacturing, Bangladesh faces a considerable wage gap compared to its counterparts. While countries like China, Indonesia, Cambodia,

based wages, aiming to compete with countries like India or Vietnam, where the minimum wage stands at \$170. The relatively lower cost of daily products in these countries, suggests a minimum wage of \$160-\$170 in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is second in the world when it comes to garment manufacturing, and it wants to be the first. Yet, our RMG factory owners do not want to pay fair wages. The proposal to raise the monthly wage encounters reluctance, with a stipulation that it will remain unchanged for the next five years. This approach, however, is unsustainable in the face of rising inflation and decreasing purchasing power, making a compelling case for a minimum wage of Tk 20,000 to counter the persistent cycle of labour exploitation and discrimination. A dollar-based dynamic wage structure that is adjusted annually is essential to address the evolving economic landscape.

Furthermore, the wage crisis is exacerbated by the artificial exchange rate of the dollar, impacting the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) of the Bangladeshi taka. Bruegel's October report indicates a fluctuation in the REER between Tk 154.73 and Tk 173.17, suggesting that a \$150 salary should equate to Tk 23,000 taka in terms of purchasing power.

A win-win proposition

The International Trade Administration's Office of Textiles and Apparel (OTEXA) reports a notable 8.55 percent increase in the unit price of readymade garments during the period from January to September 2023, rising from \$3.02 to \$3.27 compared to the same period in 2022.

Simultaneously, a positive shift is observed in the stance of global fashion brands towards paying higher prices for garments sourced from Bangladesh. The American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA), a prominent US-based global consumer organisation, has committed to covering the additional five to six percent production costs resulting from a minimum wage hike in Bangladesh.

So, an increase in production costs due to a rise in minimum wage is expected to be absorbed by these brands. Considering that labour expenses typically constitute a maximum of 10-13 percent of the total cost in the labour-intensive RMG industry, the adjustment in wages should be deemed manageable.

Moreover, the period from 2018-2023 has witnessed a notable boost in the dollar to taka exchange rate, thus adding to the income of garment industry owners. This financial upswing contradicts their claims of economic constraints that hinder wage increments.

Thus, with unit price rising, the exchange rate increasing, and the AAFA assuring compensation for a cost inflation from raising the minimum wage, the crocodile tears of Bangladesh's RMG factory owners must stop and the wage demanded by the workers must be accepted.



ARTWORK: DEBASHISH CHAKRABARTY

see, monkey do" system?

With the rising cost of living in the cities, workers are fleeing to the countryside, where there are jobless marches and pseudo-unemployment. But even during long periods of high inflation, there is no year-end wage adjustment. In the face of violent attacks by the law enforcement and pro-regime thugs, loss of life, bloodshed, and casualties in the wage movement, a wage rise of \$35 has been proposed, totalling \$100-105 monthly. But low productivity cannot be overcome unless systemically exploitative issues in the industry's human resource management are

India, and Vietnam boast average wages ranging from \$170 to \$303, Bangladesh lags behind with an average wage of \$72-\$75. Workers have advocated for a minimum wage of Tk 23,000-Tk 25,000, equivalent to \$208-\$227 today.

The Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has conducted an in-depth analysis, recommending a minimum wage of Tk 17,568 in the garment industry, translating to \$150 at the official government rate, but only \$140-142 at the current curb market rate. The depreciation of the taka's purchasing power prompts export-oriented industries to consider dollar-

A plea for common humanity



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On a trip to the United States a couple of years ago, I visited a spectacular national park with a friend. The day was absurdly windy, but we struggled to go down a trail to see more of the park. As we were descending, we noticed a man in a MAGA (Make America Great Again) t-shirt sitting on a bench. I'm sure he had no difficulty discerning our political persuasion (the opposite of his), as political parties in the US tend to come with their own dress codes. I tried guessing whether people are Democrats or Republicans just after Trump was elected; it was discomfitingly easy.

As we passed, the man cracked a joke about being on guard to keep the wind from stealing people, or some such. What was important was that my friend and I both looked at this Trump supporter and laughed. We exchanged warm smiles with him and continued walking.

None of that should be remarkable. Complete strangers exchanging a word or two, acknowledging that we have a shared humanity, and then moving on. Except that the US has become so polarised that such mild interactions have become a rarity. Families are torn apart, friendships destroyed, and workplaces can become toxic over political differences.

It's easy from a distance to recognise the craziness of it all; but too many of us get caught up in it. Political differences can at least involve a difference in perspective based on people's deeply held beliefs. Other differences are less malleable: the colour of our skin, the amount of money we have, the religion we practise and, of course, our gender. And yet, any of those differences can serve as a pretext for mistreating others, for regarding them as "other," as different, and as unworthy of our friendship or respect.

Attitudes that insist on finding differences rather than commonalities are troubling because they limit our ability to lead full lives that are exposed to a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. They also make it difficult or impossible to solve big crises.

Take the climate crisis, for example. Given its severity and the fact that it is caused by burning fossil fuel, you might imagine that different political parties would agree on a common goal of ending the use of fossil fuel while having very different approaches on how to do so. They could have widely divergent strategies on incentives to travel and consume less. They could have different ideas of how to end the \$5.9-trillion-per-year (\$11 million per minute) subsidy to fossil fuel corporations. They could differ on how to utilise carbon taxes or how to elicit international collaboration and reparations. There is plenty of room for disagreement on solutions within a shared understanding that the crisis is upon us, and that our time to remedy it is rapidly running out.

Instead, in the US, we have one party that seeks remedies and one party that denies the existence of a climate crisis. And denialism is not unique to the US.

Part of me says that when people

act so unaware, we have no choice but to be divisive, throw up our hands, and try to work around them. My wiser part says that calling each other crazy is no way to solve problems jointly.

And perhaps the differences aren't always as great as they seem. After all, when we look at the essentials, people all want the same things. People desire a safe environment for themselves and their children; good jobs, education, and healthcare; satisfying and well-paying work; recognition for all we do; love and friendship, and so on.

We may have difficulty connecting our actions to their consequences. We certainly don't always wish to work with others who disagree with us. We will always have our disagreements. But is it possible to overcome those disagreements enough to work together on shared goals—on creating the conditions that allow people and other creatures to live safely, to thrive (not just survive) on this planet?

It's easy to get discouraged. But the fact that we can still, on occasion, reach across the political aisle—or across the other differences that separate us—and be reminded of our shared humanity gives me hope for a future where we work together. Which is important because it's the only hope we have.