

Why must the poor be collateral damage?

Political parties must find a constructive way to end this impasse

As the ruling Awami League moves ahead with its plans to hold an election in January—amid mass arrests and convictions of BNP leaders and activists—it seems unlikely that the ongoing blockades will be called off in the foreseeable future, particularly with the government suggesting it will take an even tougher stance on the BNP in the days to come. In the glaring absence of any possibility of a consensus between the two parties, it is, as always, the ordinary people who are paying the highest price. In particular, low-income groups, who were already suffering immensely due to the unprecedented cost-of-living crisis in the country, are now on the verge of destitution.

A recent report by this daily has painted a harrowing picture of the agonies of day labourers, long-route bus workers, ride-sharing service providers, rickshaws, and CNG-run auto-rickshaw drivers, to name a few of the most affected groups. Take Shuily Begum, for instance, who could not find any work for the past 10 days due to the back-to-back blockades and hartals, even after reducing her day rate to Tk 400 from Tk 600. Ilias, a carpenter, who could only find work on two days in the past month, has been unable to pay rent or buy essentials for his family. The situation is equally bleak for most of Dhaka's informal labourers, who make up a significant portion of the capital's population. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) calculated that a family of four needs Tk 22,664 for food alone per month in Dhaka. That amount has gone up even further, with food inflation breaking all records over the past few months. Surviving amid an increasingly harsh economic climate was a challenge to begin with; now, with low-income groups earning half or even less than that due to the ongoing political programmes, how are they supposed to make do?

At this point, the BNP must re-evaluate whether its current strategy is really working. Is it deterring the ruling party from moving ahead with its plans to hold a one-sided election or ease the crackdown on its activists? If not, what does the party hope to achieve by making ordinary people suffer day in and day out? We have repeatedly urged the BNP to wage a movement that takes the people along with them—not one that alienates them.

As for the government, it is clear that they don't care about the opposition's demands or the national and international concerns about another controversial election. But does it not care about the vulnerabilities to the economy as a result of the ongoing blockades, as well as the suffering of ordinary people? Foreclosing any possibility of a compromise will only worsen the situation further, bringing untold miseries to low-income groups who have been dealt a heavy blow by the government's inadequate actions to contain inflation.

We urge both parties, once again, to see reason and prioritise the people on whose behalf they are supposedly waging their respective battles.

Shipbreaking yards or graves for workers?

Workers' safety must be a priority

In a country where labour rights are often ignored and violated by the owners of different industries, it comes as no surprise that workers in our shipbreaking yards are being forced to work in unsafe conditions, which often lead to major accidents and even deaths. According to the latest report by NGO Shipbreaking Platform, all the shipbreaking accidents that happened between July and September this year across the world—there were four of them—took place in Bangladesh. During this period, a total of 111 ships were dismantled across the world, around half of which—54, to be exact—were scrapped in Bangladesh. While this means a lot of profit for the owners, for the workers who toil from dawn to dusk in these toxic and hazardous ships, this means precious little.

In all the four accidents that occurred between July and September, the workers fell off the ships they were dismantling. While three of the workers died, one survived with leg injuries. Such sheer negligence on the owners' part regarding workers' safety is unthinkable. According to NGO Shipbreaking Platform, 249 people were killed in accidents in the shipbreaking yards in Sitakunda upazila, Chattogram between 2005 and 2022. Workers are also exposed to toxic chemicals when dismantling these end-of-life ships. Moreover, the mushrooming shipbreaking yards in Sitakunda are polluting the surrounding environment as well as the sea. While international rules say that owners must remove toxic elements from a ship before bringing it to our shore for breaking, most owners do not abide by this. Many of the shipbreaking yards also dump oil in the sea, which is also prohibited by law.

Sadly, rather than ensuring workers' safety and environmental protection, the Bangladesh Ship Breakers and Recyclers Association is reportedly putting pressure on the government to recategorise this industry from "red" to "orange," so that they are no longer required to obtain environmental impact assessments. This is ridiculous.

The shipbreaking industry is one of the most hazardous industries in the world. Therefore, the owners of this industry must abide by the existing national and international regulations to ensure environmental protection and safe ship recycling. They must also take steps to protect their workers' lives from avoidable accidents, which we should really call structural murders. There needs to be a robust overseeing mechanism from the government to ensure all this.

New Message

To

Subject

Have things to say? Want your thoughts about current events to be published in The Daily Star? Send us a letter (100 - 300 words) with your name and area!

Write to us: letters@thedailystar.net

US LABOUR POLICY

We wouldn't be worried if we upheld labour rights



Kalpona Akter
is a labour rights activist and president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation.

KALPONA AKTER

The recent memorandum on labour rights issued by the United States is grounded in their foreign labour policy. This policy is not targeted at any specific country, but, according to them, will be applied wherever labour rights are disregarded.

We don't know if this policy will be implemented immediately, but countries with widespread labour rights violations should be wary of its potential impact. Therefore, it is crucial for our own country to examine its labour rights record, and the focus should be on ensuring that labour rights are upheld, instead of external rhetoric or potential sanctions.

We cannot deny the fact that labour rights are routinely violated in Bangladesh. There is a blatant infringement of workers' freedom of association. Even with the ILO Convention and existing labour rights laws, workers struggle to freely exercise their union rights. Joining a union often carries the stigma of criminality, and workers' attempts to advocate for their rights are met with retaliation and intimidation. Despite many reassurances by the Bangladesh government, it has repeatedly failed to keep its promises, including appropriate amendment of our labour law.

The recent wage movement by RMG workers serves as a stark evidence of what happens when healthy union practices are suppressed and workers' unionisation rights are restricted. Had these workers had a platform for dialogue and collective bargaining within their respective factories, they would not be compelled to resort to protests. The brutal police crackdown on these protests, the evident political involvement, and the tragic loss of workers' lives would not have occurred if workers enjoyed the freedom to exercise their union rights. This constitutes another, severe labour rights violation.

When labour rights violations occur or unfair labour practices take place, we are supposed to go to court, right? But the workers cannot file complaints under such circumstances, per Section 195 of the labour law. As workers cannot directly approach the courts to file a case, they must first navigate the bureaucratic maze of the Department of Labour (DoL). The DoL often engages in protracted meetings, prolonging the complaint process. Out of 100 complaints lodged with



Why should workers have to die to get the wages they deserve?

FILE PHOTO: AFP

the DoL, barely two receive approval for court proceedings. In those court proceedings, the DoL's performance is noticeably dismal: in 90 percent of the cases, they fail to win a conviction against the employer. DoL's failure to protect the union leaders from being victimised by the employers and its inability to enforce reinstatement of terminated union leaders have virtually destroyed the leaders' ability to meaningfully represent the workers.

The practice of running industries while paying workers abysmally low wages is another flagrant violation of labour rights. With the wages they get, they cannot afford adequate nutrition, yet they are expected to maintain or even increase production levels. It is unreasonable to expect optimal productivity from workers who are denied proper sustenance.

Within the RMG sector alone, approximately 40-42 lakh workers are employed, yet their children's education needs are largely neglected. Most of their children are deprived of education opportunities due to financial constraints. Neither the industry owners nor the government have taken any steps to ensure better educational prospects for workers' children. Gender-based violence in the workplace is another pervasive issue, yet

Everything but Arms (EBA) status under Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) for the European market, but this agreement also comes with stringent rules and regulations. If the current conditions persist, there is a risk of restrictions on multiple fronts.

While we have made significant strides in ensuring workers' safety in the RMG sector since the Rana Plaza tragedy, our ability to confidently declare our RMG factories safe remains limited. Beyond this industry, the situation is far bleaker, as evidenced by incidents like the Hashem Food Factory fire, where workers, including many children, were burnt to death.

Now, coming to the mention of my name in the context of the US memorandum, it is crucial to acknowledge the hardships that our organisation, colleagues and I have endured. We have faced lawsuits, imprisonment, and harassment related to our organisational registration. In 2012, one of my colleagues went missing, and his dead body was found later, but the real perpetrators are yet to be brought to justice. Six months ago, another colleague was brutally beaten to death while assisting workers in reclaiming their unpaid wages.

During the wage movement in 2016, my colleague was imprisoned

issues that they mentioned my name. However, I believe that there is no need for any government or foreign entity to seek our individual opinions on the situation. They have the resources and capacity to observe and analyse the realities of our industry and workers' conditions. The notion that the US is making decisions based solely on our statements is highly unlikely.

We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the plight of workers when the evidence of labour rights violations is in plain sight. We must create an environment where workers can freely exercise their rights, receive fair wages, and work in safe and dignified conditions. Only then can we build a sustainable industry that truly benefits our nation and the people who power it.

It should also be understood that when workers are vulnerable and facing challenges in upholding their rights, and as the government is bound by promises to uphold workers' rights, there is nothing wrong with the workers seeking support and solidarity from external allies to promote and enforce their rights. This is an acceptable practice worldwide.

As told to Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

Curriculum and textbooks as weapons



Rubaiya Murshed
is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She is also a lecturer (on study leave) at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka.

RUBAIYA MURSHED

There's a famous Arab folklore on minimalism that goes like this: a group of students visit their elderly teacher years after having left his classroom. The chase for success has brought much stress into their adult lives, and they admit to their teacher that success is not making them happier. The teacher silently leaves to get coffee, which he serves on a tray of various cups—some crystal, some silver, some cheap plastic cups. He asks his students to each take a cup of coffee, and most of them reach for the shiny expensive cups. Their teacher smiles and points out that regardless of the cup, expensive or cheap, the coffee is the same. He explains to his students that if social status is like the cup, life is the coffee. Why try so hard to drink from a fancy cup when all you want is good coffee?

If it were up to me, this is the type of stories I would include in textbooks for children in our primary and secondary schools. I would strive to decolonise the curriculum and content from Western dominance, because it is now more

than ever that children need to learn about who they are, where they come from, about our heritage and history. Otherwise, where would our next generations of writers and thinkers come from?

What has won me over about the new recent reforms in the Bangla medium curriculum at school level is that it seems to be shifting the trajectory of educational goals by, for example, including a focus on life skills. But what saddens me is that the process of change remains unchanged. Historically, the Bangla medium curriculum has undergone many experiments, and every time, it's the same lack of transparency that leaves the general public oblivious to how the change came about. Who are these experts that decide our curriculum and choose the content of our textbooks at school and college levels? How do they make the choices they make?

At the end of the day, a curriculum is a weapon; it can be deadly in shaping an entire generation's mindset. It's

the trigger that can set off change in the rest of the education system, and it's a good place to start—only if the rest of the components follow suit. If, for example, someone wanted to yield an obedient and disciplined student population, what would be the first thing they would do? Include and filter curriculum content. They would erase stories about revolutions, events where people stood up together against their oppressors. They would make sure there was no content that had a chance of producing free thinkers, because what powerful entity wants its students to have minds of their own?

With the new curriculum taking the Bangladesh social media world by storm, one overarching argument that I see is that students will not be learning "enough" anymore, especially science and maths. But how much is enough? What "knowledge," and how much, does a child carry on from school to higher levels of education in the first place? Does "simplifying" the curriculum really guarantee that children will not be able to pace themselves in higher studies? Did the old curriculum really make the process easier because it "taught" so much? Nobel laureate Esther Duflo calls this the "tyranny of the curriculum"—putting the burden of an immense syllabus on children, which often backfires—ending up with much exam-passing but less true learning.

Does pushing endless information and knowledge on children assure excellence? Are children able to absorb

and truly learn what we throw at them? I don't know, really. All I know is that the main goal of a curriculum at the school level should also be to create a thirst for knowledge, curiosity and passion for a subject. It's not meant to give students only a base prerequisite understanding of a particular subject. It's meant to give them insight into a subject to figure out whether they are interested in it or not, so that when they go to college and university, they can make better informed choices in regard to which subject ignites their passion.

I still remember one of the very first things we had been told when starting college: to forget everything we had learnt till then, to unlearn all our learnings. What a waste of energy, we had thought. It was infuriating, and it still is, which is why I am hoping for a good change with the new reforms. These are just my opinions, and I would much prefer a system where I get to conduct research so that my opinions can be backed, or reshaped, by evidence. Those who are opposing the new curriculum, similarly, really don't know whether these changes will bring about more bad than good. Frankly, the government should look to make a team of educationists who are passionate about the nation's education system—a team of varying voices who have actual expertise, knowledge and research on education systems and its components. I want a seat at the table, but for now, here are my thoughts in the boundaries of this column.