

Bangladesh's ever-neglected working class



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The basis of May Day, which is observed worldwide on May 1 to commemorate the historic struggles and gains of workers, are demands for fair wages against eight working hours and for a safe working environment. But even after half a century of independence, most of the working people in Bangladesh are far from enjoying these rights.

The trajectory of the country's economic growth has been such that most working people are employed in the informal sector. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) Labour Force Survey 2022, 84.9 percent of employed people are working in the informal sector, where there is no guarantee of labour rights including minimum wage, fixed working hours, paid leave, health insurance, etc. Even the holiday of May Day cannot be enjoyed by most workers in the informal sector.

The latest addition to the unprotected workforce are gig economy workers who have no fixed wage or salary. Nearly one lakh people in the country are providing online freelancing, outsourcing, ride sharing, and delivery services while lacking a fixed income, job security, and any insurance against work-related injuries.

Then again, many formal sector workers also do not have any job security and can be fired without notice. Due to the new prevalence of outsourcing and contractual employment, even the formal sector is being informalised in certain ways. Moreover, there are various obstacles in the way of workers unionising and so most are unorganised.

Meanwhile, there is no national minimum

wage. And though minimum wages are fixed in 42 sectors, the amounts are also very low compared to the cost of living. According to data from the Minimum Wage Board, minimum wages in 11 sectors, including hotels and restaurants, iron foundries and engineering workshops, ayurvedic medicine factories, match factories, tea gardens, and tailoring workshops, are less than Tk 5,000. Meanwhile, the minimum wages in salt crushing, cold storage, soap and cosmetics, cotton textile, bakeries and confectioneries, automobile workshops, and shrimp processing are between Tk 5,000 and Tk 7,000.

Even the recently fixed Tk 12,500 minimum wage for workers in the ready-made garment sector, Bangladesh's largest export sector, is half of what the workers demanded and not enough to allow workers a life above the poverty line. Specifically, the daily caloric requirement for a healthy worker living above the poverty line is at least 2,200 kcal, but with the recently announced minimum wage, it will not be possible for RMG workers to live above the poverty line because a family of four needs at least Tk 23,000 for food alone each month.

Plus, many factory owners don't actually pay workers the fixed minimum wage. According to a report by The Daily Star, many sawmill workers are paid between Tk 5,000 and Tk 12,000 a month, far below the minimum of Tk 17,900 set by the government.

In a 2022 study, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) measured the minimum wages of workers from 21 industrial and service sectors against the minimum food cost of a

family of four living in the centre of Dhaka, and found that, in 15 sectors, the minimum wage is not enough to cover the food cost even if the family's diet is compromised. It's no wonder that BBS' Food Security Statistics 2023 showed that 21.23 percent of the country's working population is suffering from moderate or severe food insecurity.

Due to extremely low wages, workers' families are forced to also send their children

9,263 people have been killed in the workplace between 2013 and 2023. The number of deaths was 1,432 in 2023 alone, of which 1,103 were in the informal economy while 329 were in the formal sector. The highest number of workplace deaths last year, 637, was reported in the transport sector, while the day labourers' sector, construction sector, agricultural sector, and manufacturing sector witnessed 220, 149, 146, and 94 deaths, respectively.

Even though workers are being killed regularly in horrific industrial accidents due to the negligence of factory owners, the government seems uninterested in punishing them. It is a sad reality that, over the last two decades, there has been no precedent of factory owners being punished in any of the incidents of workers dying due to owners' negligence—not even after the Rana Plaza collapse or Tazreen Fashions factory fire, the devastation of which reverberated globally.

The meagre amount of compensation stipulated in the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (amended in 2018) for accidental death and disability proves how little a worker's life is valued by the ruling elite. According to the law, if a worker dies in a workplace accident, his family will get a lump sum compensation of only Tk 2 lakh, and in case of permanent disability the compensation will be Tk 2.5 lakh. But even this small amount of compensation does not reach the family of injured or killed workers in many cases. According to a study by Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), based on the analysis of 80 compensation cases filed under the BLA between 2008 and 2019 at different labour courts, the court awarded compensation in 35 of the 80 cases—of which compensation was successfully recovered in only 19 cases. The average time taken for the court to order an award of compensation from the date of application was found to be 630 days, despite the statutorily prescribed time limit of 60 days. According to a report by Prothom Alo, as many as 21,617 lawsuits were pending in the labour courts as of November 2023. Of these, some 16,141 cases have been pending for more than six months.

As living wages and safe workplaces are not ensured for the workers of Bangladesh, every year an increasing number of Bangladeshi youths desperately migrate abroad, at times risking their lives across seas, jungles, and deserts. So, as long as quality employment, living wages, and a safe working environment remain absent within the country, sustainable development will remain an illusion.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

to work. According to National Child Labour Survey 2022, around 17.8 lakh children are trapped in child labour in Bangladesh, and of them, 10.7 lakh are engaged in hazardous work.

Meanwhile, workers' deaths due to unsafe working conditions is too common a phenomenon. There is no institutional arrangement to ensure the safety of workers in many sectors such as transport, construction, agriculture, day labourers, steel, ship breaking, stone breaking, etc. According to a report by Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health, and Environment (OSHE) Foundation, at least

Apart from accidents at work, many workers die every year and suffer from ill health chronically due to an unhealthy working environment in brick kilns, saw mills, steel factories, ship breaking yards, chemical and plastic factories, leather sector, stone quarries, etc. For example, many stone crushers contract silicosis, a long-term lung disease, due to breathing in tiny bits of silica found in sand, quartz, and many types of rocks. As per one estimate, over the past decade, about 65 workers died due to silicosis while 200 have been affected in the Burimari land port area alone.

Labour, Life, and Liberation The emancipatory significance of May Day



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"As long as the struggle of the workers against the bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands."

—Rosa Luxemburg

On May Day—also known as International Workers' Day—we pay tribute to the achievements and sacrifices of labour—labour out of which "came villages and the towns that grew cities," as the Black socialist poet Langston Hughes tells us. And to the extent that "events are the real dialectics of history"—to use the Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci's words—May Day emerged from a crucial concatenation of historical events, propelled significantly by the international socialist movement, as a day of unity and solidarity with workers, and, by extension, with the exploited and the oppressed even on a global scale.

It is not for nothing that this May Day, several organisations, collectives, and groups across the world have strongly prioritised supporting the besieged Palestinian people in their ongoing struggle against US-backed Israeli genocide and Zionist settler colonialism. One crucial, if not the only, significance of May Day resonantly resides in forging connections among oppressed subjects, sites, and scenes across the world in the interest of what Karl Marx calls "human emancipation" in its entirety.

Now May Day is customarily credited with originating in 1886 from the eight-hour workday movement in the United States, but the Polish-German Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg provides a distinct perspective on its genesis. As she puts it in her piece called "What Are the Origins of May Day?" (1894), "The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia. The workers there decided in 1856 to organise a day of complete stoppage together with meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favour of the 8-hour day. [...] The first to follow the example of the Australian workers were the Americans. In 1886, they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage."

And, indeed, what has come to be known as the Haymarket massacre of 1886 is widely recognised and remembered today. May 1, 1886 marked the beginning of a vibrant nationwide movement in the United States demanding an eight-hour workday. In Chicago—which at that time constituted the centre of a militant left-wing labour movement—worker strikes and protests continued to gather fierce momentum, met with escalating police violence. On May 4, roughly 1,200 workers

came together in Chicago's Haymarket Square to protest police brutality perpetrated on a meeting of striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works on May 3, where six workers were killed and many injured. That rally was peaceful; but as it was about to end, an agent provocateur hurled a bomb at police officers. The police then opened fire, killing several people and injuring hundreds.

Following the incident, the city government and police launched a campaign of terror, increasingly homing in on workers, immigrants, and radical activists. Eight anarchist labour leaders—Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, Samuel Fielden, Louis Lingg, Adolph Fischer, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab—were unjustly convicted exclusively for their political affiliations. Four were executed, one committed suicide, and the remaining three were later freed and exonerated six years afterward owing to an international defense movement.

But, of course, the fight for the shorter workday—as a distinct mode of class struggle—began neither in 1856 nor in 1886. One may trace it to at least as early as the threshold of the age of industrial capitalism itself when—as Alexander Trachtenberg rightly put it—"during the conspiracy trial against the leaders of striking cordwainers in 1806, it was brought out that workers were employed as long as nineteen and even twenty hours a day."

Indeed, contestations over temporalities have crucially characterised class struggles under industrial capitalism, which Karl Marx theorises in *Capital*, Vol. 1. And in its famous chapter called "The Working Day," Marx spotlights the inauguration of the eight-hour workday movement by the National Labor Union, maintaining, "The first fruit of the Civil War was an agitation for the 8-hour day—a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California." In fact, over time, that movement became truly global amid the combined and uneven development of capitalism across the world; while later, of course, VI Lenin broadened the horizon of the very significance of May Day by decidedly zeroing in on the question of "liberation" itself, predicated as it was on the intersection between class politics and mass politics; for him, thus, May Day turned out to be a rallying point for "the irrepressible struggle for the political liberation of the Russian people" and for "the class development of the proletariat and its open struggle for socialism," to use Lenin's own words.

And, throughout the 20th century, Lenin's emancipatory, socialist position was significantly rehearsed, applied, expanded, and even nuanced by a whole host of revolutionaries from Asia, Africa, Latin America—from the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui to the Caribbean Marxist CLR James and the African revolutionary Amílcar Cabral, to our own Maulana Bhasani—who variously foregrounded the agendas of what the African-American Marxist philosopher-activist WEB Du Bois instructively called the "dark proletariat," by bringing up—on various May Days, of course—the questions of working-class struggles against capitalism, racism, imperialism, and (neo)colonialism, profoundly interconnected as they are, making the point that the working class struggle for emancipation cannot but embody and enact the dialectics of intersectionality.

But what about the "female proletariat" as such? Indeed, the fact that women's labour-power was organically integrated into the system of capitalist exploitation right from the get-go as well as women's central roles in labour movements and in numerous areas tend to be overlooked even in progressive political practices. And we'd do well to heed the Egyptian Marxist feminist Nawal El Saadawi's contention—shared by Angela Davis, among many others—that there is no emancipation of humanity without the emancipation of working-class women, all women, and all genders. But, to be specific, despite the longstanding tradition of May Day commemorations spanning 140 years, today we still witness women—who make up roughly half of the world's population—routinely working more than eight hours a day in many parts of the world.

Let me now fast-forward to my own home

country, Bangladesh, characterised as it was by the Egyptian political economist Samir Amin as the "periphery of periphery" under global capitalism. In her short but useful piece titled "The Leave Trap," the Bangladeshi Marxist-feminist activist and writer Taslima Akhter dwells on the historical significance of May Day vis-à-vis labour rights and the ongoing challenges encountered by workers, specifically in the garment sector in "fast-industrialising" countries like Bangladesh. The legal recognition of standard work hours and leave entitlements notwithstanding, workers often experience extended workdays far beyond legal limits and struggle to claim their entitled leaves due to various pressures and deceptive practices by their employers. Akhter's piece calls attention to the deleterious effects of these practices on workers' health, productivity, and ability to organise for their rights, accentuating the urgent need for labour movements to address these issues.

Indeed, in Bangladesh, women workers are among the worst sufferers while indeed the country has the largest number of workers in its informal sector—ones who are mostly temporary, part-time, contractual—ones who are simultaneously unorganised and subject to the worst vulnerabilities or precarities. And Bangladesh's foremost political economist Anu Muhammad rightly points out, "The gross domestic product and per capita income have increased manifold but without any corresponding improvement in the lives of the general people, who mostly live in poverty. Farmers, garment workers and expatriate workers run the engine of our economy but are deprived of its benefits. The costs of education, healthcare and daily essentials continue to rise." While the government of Bangladesh revels in mobilising

its own narratives of "progress," the reality from the standpoint of labour, particularly in the aftermath of the tragic Rana Plaza massacre of April 2013, provides a distinctly different perspective. This disaster—the deadliest garment factory incident in history—claimed the lives of at least 1,136 predominantly garment workers, with over 2,500 others sustaining injuries. For these individuals and for survivors who have so far been denied justice, "progress is history's dirty joke," to use the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's words from another context.

I have hitherto cited only a few examples and events while there are many. But hopefully the point comes out clearly: the three distinct principles of our Liberation War of 1971—equality, human dignity, and social justice—have remained radically unrealised in Bangladesh. Given all this, then, May Day can certainly serve as a day of historicising our people's struggles and envisioning the direction of a new, emancipatory politics that relentlessly centralises the agendas of the majority of the people that include all kinds of workers in alliance with poor peasants, women, religious and ethnic and linguistic minorities in Bangladesh, ones who cannot but relate to the Palestinians at this crucial historical juncture. And with Palestine solidarity movements building globally and with even student solidarity encampments remarkably underway throughout the US, I think we would do well to heed the call of Palestinian labour unions themselves and rally together on May Day. Let's continue to unite workers, students, and common people in a movement against genocide, against repression, against Zionist settler colonialism, against all forms and forces of exploitation and oppression, and for a free Palestine.

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e-Tender Notice

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP system Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of

Sl. No.	Tender Notice No & Tender ID No.	Description of Work	Document Last Selling Date & Time	Closing Date & Time
01.	11/e-GP/KRD/2023-2024 (Tender ID: 978021)	Supplying Necessary spare parts of Bedford Truck No. Khulna-Ta-433 And Mitsubishi Truck No. Khulna-Metro-U-11-0022 under Road Division, Khulna during the year 2023-2024.	12-May-2024 at 17:00	13-May-2024 at 13:00
02.	13/e-GP/KRD/2023-2024 (Tender ID: 978234)	Supplying spare parts of Ittefaq Road Roller, China Road Roller and Seed Road Roller under Road Division, Khulna during the year 2023-2024.	13-May-2024 at 17:00	14-May-2024 at 13:00
03.	14/e-GP/KRD/2023-2024 (Tender ID: 978338)	Supplying Necessary spare parts and Fitting of Mitsubishi Pajero Jeep No. Dhaka Metro-Gha-11-2227 under Road Division, Khulna during the year 2023-2024.	13-May-2024 at 17:00	14-May-2024 at 13:00
04.	15/e-GP/KRD/2023-2024 (Tender ID: 978470)	Supplying Necessary spare parts of Mitsubishi Pickup No. Dhaka Metro-Tha-13-7432 under Road Division, Khulna during the year 2023-2024.	13-May-2024 at 17:00	14-May-2024 at 13:00
05.	17/e-GP/KRD/2023-2024 (Tender ID: 978441)	Construction of 01 nos Single Vent 3.50m (Clear) Length, 3.00m (Clear) Height, 10.25m width RCC-Box Culvert at Ch: 2+262km on Dighollan (Ralligate)-Arua-Gazirhat-Terokhada (Z-7040) road & Construction of 01 No R.C.C. Box Culvert (1 Box-1.00m(L)x1.50m(H)x11.00m) at Ch: 00+800 (Sheikh Para) of Khulna-Chuknagar-Satkhira (R-760) Road under Road Division, Khulna during the year 2023-2024.	13-May-2024 at 17:00	14-May-2024 at 13:00

This is an online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

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