

# What’s causing the unrest among factory workers?

**Kalpona Akter, labour rights activist and president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, talks to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star about the recent ready-made garments (RMG) workers’ unrest.**

**What is causing the current wave of protests by factory workers?**

Although the government accepted all 18 demands of RMG workers in late September, communication of the announcement, as well as the implementation, remained problematic. For example, demands such as increasing the tiffin allowance have not been adequately communicated to all the factories. Additionally, some factories showed reluctance to comply with the directive. In Ashulia, most factories accepted the directive, but in places like Gazipur and beyond, we noticed that the directive was not properly communicated and owners, too, were reluctant to comply.

Another issue regarding unpaid

is no clear directive regarding who should control these factories, who will pay the wages, or who will uphold workers’ rights. No clear instructions are available either from the factory authorities or from any government office or ministry. There is ambiguity regarding who is responsible—should it be the metropolitan police, the industrial police, or the military personnel, who were recently given temporary magistracy power?

Even though the military has, in many cases, attempted to locate owners and ensure wage payments, they, too, face challenges, as handling such matters is not part of their usual protocol. The industrial and local police, traditionally responsible for these matters, now appear hesitant. They always seem to be waiting for



Kalpona Akter

now hesitate to act due to concerns of retaliation.

**Is there a political aspect influencing these labour issues?**

Many factory owners were previously affiliated with the former ruling party, the Awami League or enjoyed AL’s political shelter. Besides, many use the RMG industry, the largest in Bangladesh, to gain political advantage. By inciting a bit of unrest, one can easily capitalise on this politically or advance specific political goals, by scapegoating the workers. In this sense, workers are being used to further a political agenda, and we have observed such issues arising within the labour

sector.

We see a similar problem in the scrap clothing industry, although the government has tried to mitigate the problems. Recently, disputes have broken out between two factions of the BNP over the scrap-based apparel business and there were similar unrests in Chattogram, Ashulia, and Gazipur. Unless this political conflict is addressed, a third party will continue to exploit workers for its own interests, making effective problem-solving even harder.

**What steps could improve the situation between workers and factory owners?**

Communication between factory owners and workers is essential to bridge the gap. Without clear communication, the distance between workers and owners will only grow. The best approach to reducing this gap is to allow workers to freely exercise their union rights. If workers can unionise freely and exercise their bargaining rights, it would significantly decrease external confrontations, enabling discussions to occur within the factory premises rather than on the streets.

One major unresolved issue remains—the demand for wage re-evaluation. For the past two to two-and-a-half months, workers have been demanding a wage increase. The government has set a deadline until December, and a committee has been established to address this issue. If this committee can work efficiently and produce a viable solution, it may bring calm to the industry in the coming days. I believe that the committee should recommend an increase in wages, taking into account workers’ quality of life as well as the financial capacity of the industry. If the committee can provide a fair recommendation based on these factors, and the owners and government agree to it, then the wage increase may finally bring about the peace that workers seek in the industry.

**Do you feel that any government has proactively supported workers in the past, even before**

**any demands were raised?**

No political party or administration has ever consistently advocated for the working class. When they do, it’s often to appease specific groups or to fulfil their own interests. Throughout my career, I have never witnessed a government that voluntarily stepped up to improve workers’ conditions. No administration has come forward with a dedicated plan to enhance workers’ rights, nor has any government truly addressed workers’ issues beyond verbal promises.

If this interim government disregards the importance of labour issues, they will be making a big mistake. Out of Bangladesh’s 17 to 18 crore people, almost 7.5 crore belong to the labour force, across all levels, including white collar employees. Ignoring their concerns is not an option; the government should sit down and engage in dialogue with representatives of the labour force.

In an ideal world, we would see political representation for workers, similar to the Labour Party in the UK. Though left-leaning groups in our country claim to represent the working class, throughout our history, we have not seen them being vocal in parliament. Labourers still have not reached the point where they can form their own political party or hire political representatives. However, an avenue should exist for workers to have a political voice. Otherwise, those of us in marginalised communities will continue to be left behind.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

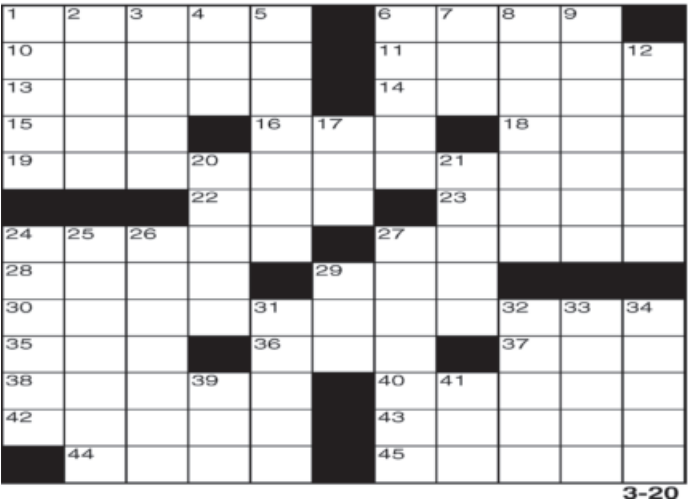
### ACROSS

- 1 Walk proudly
- 6 Rotisserie part
- 10 The ones here
- 11 Diminishes
- 13 Watch a second time
- 14 In the know
- 15 Had lunch
- 16 Total
- 18 Director Spike
- 19 Part of a Swiss timepiece
- 22 Director Howard
- 23 Formerly
- 24 Hitter’s turn
- 27 Ranch animal
- 28 Noggin
- 29 In addition
- 30 Part of a mattress
- 35 Flop
- 36 Lobed organ
- 37 Rawls or Reed
- 38 Make blank
- 40 Coral island
- 42 TV’s Leary
- 43 Fleet-based
- 44 Appointment

### 45 Portents

#### DOWN

- 1 Sipping aid
- 2 Letter before iota
- 3 Stopwatch button
- 4 Take advantage of
- 5 Goller’s start
- 6 Marsh
- 7 Fido’s foot
- 8 Queued up
- 9 Roman dramatist
- 12 Folk’s Pete
- 17 Ensign’s org.
- 20 Origami creation
- 21 Copter part
- 24 Tolerated
- 25 Like some profs
- 26 Colorful kerchief
- 27 Choir member
- 29 Airport screening org.
- 31 Baseball’s Pee Wee
- 32 “– Lucy”
- 33 Pitcher Ryan
- 34 Shore birds
- 39 Plop down
- 41 Scot’s cap



### YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

	P	I	T	A		P	A	S	S	
B	I	S	O	N		A	N	T	E	S
I	N	L	E	T		S	T	A	R	T
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O	R	A	L	S		S	A	V	E	D
N	A	G	A	T		S	T	E	T	S
	K	E	Y	S			E	A	R	S

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# Price hike by business syndicate: Myth or reality?



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In recent weeks, the prices of vegetables have doubled or even tripled, sparking the usual chorus of complaints about price manipulation by so-called “syndicates.” However, the real story behind this spike is far more complex and in this particular case rooted in severe supply shortages.

Bangladesh faced three rounds of floods this year due to untimely rains, which destroyed much of the country’s crops. With supply drastically reduced while demand remained steady, the basic principles of economics took over—prices were bound to rise.

The same pattern occurred with eggs and chicken. Beginning in May, an intense heatwave coupled with high humidity severely affected egg production. Chickens, too, were underweight and in poor condition, further reducing supply. The floods that later devastated the vegetable market also hit the poultry industry, compounding the shortages and leading to inevitable price increases.

When supply drops sharply due to natural disasters, price hikes are unavoidable, regardless of market manipulation. We must understand the underlying causes rather than jump to conclusions about price fixing, especially in situations driven by unpredictable weather events.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh whenever prices rise, public perception often points to price manipulation by sellers. This sentiment, deeply ingrained in the public mind, misses some crucial nuances. Prices don’t just go up—they also come down in the short run, even though the long-term trend may be upward. Yet, consumers rarely notice or remember price drops, especially when it benefits them. This is particularly true for perishable goods such as fish, vegetables, and other similar products, which lack proper storage facilities. For instance, during favourable seasons when weather conditions and other factors influencing agricultural output align for farmers, production surges. The resulting price drops are often so severe that farmers sometimes leave unsold produce in the market or somewhere nearby, as transporting



**Beginning in May, an intense heatwave coupled with high humidity severely affected egg production, leading to an inevitable price hike.**

FILE PHOTO: STAR

it back home and storing it for resale is not profitable. These cases of prices going down are often overlooked by the public, who are quick to focus on price hikes instead.

Price manipulation is nearly impossible in highly competitive markets. Take potatoes, for example. With thousands, if not millions, of sellers in the market, who can realistically believe that they all coordinate to artificially raise prices? In a competitive market, if 10 sellers agree to fix the price at Tk 60 per kilogram when the market rate is Tk 40, the first seller who notices their stock remaining unsold will lower their price. This single act would trigger a chain reaction, as other sellers follow suit. Collusion is incredibly difficult to sustain in such markets, particularly when the product being sold is uniform, offering consumers easy alternatives to switch to other sellers.

over-simplified but also misleading. However, collusion or price-fixing may occur in industries with only a few sellers, such as in the case of imported goods if the number of importers is few. In industries with only two or three dominant importers, price manipulation becomes more feasible because it’s easier for them to coordinate and set higher prices. However, this is not the norm in most markets.

Even if we suspect foul play in the market, proving the existence of a price-fixing syndicate is not easy. It requires thorough research and, at times, pure detective work. In the US, for instance, the FBI once caught an airline CEO colluding with another CEO over the phone to fix ticket prices by phone tapping. Such investigations are rare and complex, and jumping to conclusions about syndicates without evidence can divert attention

Bangladesh may not be as robust as needed.

The media also play a vital role in this issue by shaping public perception, and they must tread carefully. Every time the media declares the presence of a syndicate without proper investigation, it fuels populist rhetoric. It is easy to villainise businesses, and the public, having recently purchased goods at higher prices, will often accept this narrative without question. But the media’s role is to investigate and inform—not simply to echo public sentiment.

In the end, both the media and consumers must approach the issue of price hikes with more maturity. If every instance of rising prices is attributed to a syndicate without proper investigation, it could actually make it harder to identify the real culprits behind any genuine market manipulation cases.