

What the new labour ordinance means for workers

In conversation with Taslima Akhter, President of Garments Workers Solidarity and Member of the NTCC and Labour Reform Commission 2024

Several important demands and long-standing aspirations of workers remain unfulfilled. For example, despite repeated calls from workers, the national minimum wage commission and a framework for determining a national minimum wage were not included in the ordinance.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you assess the Labour Ordinance 2025?

Taslima Akhter (TA): A large proportion of those who lost their lives in the 2024 mass uprising were working people. Students, workers, and women – thousands sacrificed their lives, and we believe that the 2024 mass uprising laid the foundation for the Labour Ordinance 2025.

A total of 125 sections have been amended or revised in the ordinance. In my view, the interim government has attempted to strike a balance between the demands of both workers and owners. Although some disagreements remain between the two sides, whatever progress has been achieved is, I believe, significant for workers and for the labour sector as a whole.

For the first time, National Tripartite Consultative Council (NTCC), formed after the mass uprising, had the opportunity, space, and sincerity to work free from political influence. The NTCC brought together the views of workers, employers, and the government. In the past, the NTCC had never spent so much time or held such extensive discussions on labour law.

TDS: How will the Ordinance be implemented?

TA: This Ordinance now functions



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

advancement of workers and the labour sector, the government and both parties – workers and employers – must undertake extensive outreach so the law can be applied properly. The language of the labour law remains so complex that even educated people struggle to understand it, let alone workers. It is urgently necessary to simplify its legal terminology and present the law clearly in Bangla so that everyone can grasp and apply it.

TDS: Do you think the Ordinance will meaningfully expand workers' rights and opportunities?

TA: Let me begin with some of the gains that have received less attention. One of our key proposals was to replace the word *mohila* with *nari* throughout the labour law. The word *mohila* originates from *mohol*, the inner quarters of traditional households, and historically reinforced the notion that women's work holds lesser value. Both employers and workers agreed to this change. In the Labour Ordinance 2025, the word *nari* has now been substituted for *mohila* across the law.

This time, a new clause – 345A – has been introduced to prohibit discrimination against workers. Here, discrimination refers to any form of distinction, exclusion, or lesser treatment based on race, colour, gender, religion, political opinion, nationality, social status, or disability – practices that undermine equality of opportunity and treatment at work. Alongside the existing clause on equal pay for equal work, new clauses 345A, 345B, and 345C have been added to expand and clarify the definitions and forms of discrimination.

Section 332, previously titled Behaviour towards women, has been renamed to emphasise the responsibility of all to prevent violence in the world of work and at the workplace. Although we repeatedly submitted written recommendations to replace subjective terms such as decency, modesty, and obscenity, those changes were not adopted. However, a new section – 332A – establishes committees for the resolution of discrimination, violence, and harassment, in line with the 2009 High Court guidelines and our long-standing demands. In addition, Clause 12(b) of Section 2 has incorporated a definition of gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace. These changes also align with ILO Convention 190.

At the same time, Bangladesh has ratified a total of three ILO conventions – Convention No. 190 and Conventions Nos. 155 and 187 (both of which aim to ensure workers' safety, health, and protection in the workplace, though they differ in emphasis and scope). The core principles of these conventions have also been reflected in our national laws.

TDS: Union registration can now begin with just 20 workers. Employers fear this may create instability. What is your view?

TA: I don't see it that way. In fact, I believe the new Ordinance will enhance workers' freedom of association and help stabilise the labour sector. Workers will be able to negotiate in a more democratic work environment.

It also provides a pathway for Bangladesh to move past longstanding

ILO complaints. Ultimately, a stable workforce and improved workplace relations will encourage foreign investment.

For many years, the workers have demanded easing registration requirements and shifting from percentage-based requirements to a fixed numerical threshold. Under the old law, union registration required the consent of 20% of workers in an establishment and 30% in an industrial group. The entire process had become highly politicised.

The Ordinance now allows union formation across five tiers:

- 20 to 300 workers = 20 members
- 301 to 500 workers = 40 members
- 501 to 1,500 workers = 100 members
- 1,501 to 3,000 workers = 300 members

• Above 3,000 workers = 400 members

Other registration conditions have also been simplified. Although some complexities remain, the process is now far easier than before.

TDS: What other important additions or deletions do you see in the Ordinance?

TA: Several significant changes have been made among the 125 amended sections. Some notable ones include:

• Bangladesh has approximately 7.5-8 crore (75-80 million) workers, of whom only 15% were legally recognised as "workers". The demand for recognising all workers and ensuring social protection was raised in both the Labour Commission and the NTCC, though not fully achieved. However, for the first time, domestic workers have been recognised as workers (Section

2/9B). This is a major step forward, allowing domestic workers to form organisations.

• Section 118(1): Festival holidays have increased from 11 to 13 days.

• Minimum wage, Section 139(6): Instead of revision every five years, wages must now be revised every three years.

• Death compensation (Section 19): Eligibility has been reduced from two years of continuous service to one year.

• Lay-off compensation (Section 16): Previously required one year of continuous service; now workers will qualify after three months.

• Resignation benefits (Section 27/4): Previously, anyone with less than five consecutive years of service received no benefits. Now:

o After one year of service: 7 days' wages per year

o From 3 to 10 years: 15 days' wages per year

o More than 10 years: 30 days' wages per year or gratuity

• Employment Injury Scheme Fund (Section 151A): A new fund will be established for compensation due to workplace accidents.

• Provident Fund is now mandatory in establishments with 100 or more workers. Earlier, it was optional.

• The definition of worker has been expanded, Section 2(65).

TDS: What key issues were left out of the Ordinance?

TA: Several important demands and long-standing aspirations of workers remain unfulfilled. For example, despite repeated calls from workers, the national minimum wage commission and a framework for determining a national minimum wage were not included in the ordinance.

Maternity leave still remains discriminatory across the public and private sectors. Government employees receive 180 days of leave. We had proposed extending maternity leave to 180 days for all workers. Instead, the existing 112 days have been increased to only 120 days – a mere eight-day rise.

Even after the tragedies of Rana Plaza and Tazreen, demands to revise compensation standards were not fulfilled. The current Ordinance has not clearly defined or increased penalties for deaths caused by negligence or for structural killings.

We believe it is unrealistic to expect all demands to be met at once. The amendment of 125 sections is already a major achievement in our legislative history and sets a new precedent. Reforming labour laws is an ongoing process.

The interview was taken by Md Raihan Raju of The Daily Star.

SONGS OF THE SOUL

Baul Binoy Sutradhar's inner world



Baul Binoy Chandra Sutradhar performs with his ensemble during a village music gathering.

songs explored nature, humanity, and love – became his first mentor. After completing his daily carpentry work, Binoy would attend Mannan Chairman's musical gatherings, immersing himself in the songs and their contemplative depth. Years of patient practice eventually made him Mannan Chairman's dedicated violinist, performing beside him at village gatherings – playing the violin, lending his voice, and slowly entering the wider world of music.

Through his mentorship, Binoy absorbed Baul and folk traditions. He also began

taking part in kirtan and Haribasur sessions in village temples. In these gatherings, he learned various classical devotional forms – Chandidas, Dwijkanai, Ramprasad, among others – and soon he began performing in religious assemblies. Encouraged by local admirers who recognised his promise, he pursued studies in grammar and poetics, and with community support attained formal recognition in devotional scholarship, further enriching his musical stature.

Binoy undertook work on the medieval poet Chandidas' padavali kirtan, reviving

several lost compositions. Performing these lyrical masterpieces – rich in literary value and rendered with refined melody, rhythm, and cadence – he earned widespread acclaim from devotees and enthusiasts alike.

The relationship between humanity and nature, Creator and creation, profoundly shaped Binoy's philosophy. Inspired by Mannan Chairman, he began composing his own songs. Themes such as human love, the identity of humankind beyond religious boundaries, communal harmony, universal spirituality, the wonder of creation, and social crises occupy central places in his work.

Among his notable compositions are:

- Keno aslam ei mayar deshe, dinbandhure, keno aslam ei mayar deshe
- Khodar naam roiyacho bhuliya, sonar Adam
- Keu hobe na sange sathi
- Shikkha jatir merudanda, shikkha jatir pran...
- Tumi anadir adi, probhu Niranjan, giyecho brahmand srijiya doyal...

He has written nearly a thousand songs to date, many of which are now performed by his disciples in various cultural gatherings. Yet none of his works have been formally compiled or published – they exist only as handwritten manuscripts. He has expressed his sincere hope that someone with goodwill and initiative will help preserve his oeuvre in book form.

When asked about the philosophy that anchors his life and music, Binoy said that everything begins with recognising the divinity within oneself.

"Divine energy resides within every being," he explained. "Real spiritual attainment begins with knowing oneself. The great

sages – from the charyapad poets to Lalon, and from Nazrul to Tagore, and down to Baul Karim of the Bhati region – all shared one essential teaching: know yourself, recognise yourself, love one another."

His thoughts drifted to the present world – fractured by tension, mistrust, and relentless conflict.

"Today's troubled world is consumed by conflict – communal hatred, interpersonal violence, selfishness, greed. If we can discover our true selves, we discover the Creator, who lives within us. His voice, His tune – these are expressions of our own soul. Our failure to know ourselves is the root of our suffering."

Binoy's spiritual reflections sit alongside the quietly weathered realities of his own life. The father of six children, he spoke candidly of the hardships he endured – the dreams he held for his children, and the financial struggles that shadowed those dreams. Through loans, labour, and sacrifice, he managed to arrange their marriages. What he could not give in wealth, he tried to give in values.

"I only hoped they would grow into good human beings," he said simply.

In the end, when asked what he wished for himself, his answer was characteristically unadorned – a reflection of the man he has always been.

"I am an insignificant man," he said softly. "I want to live by the simple identity of being human. I sing my own songs, compose my own tunes, and try to offer society a message of harmony. I want to continue my musical struggle for a world built on love, peace, and serenity."

Saifur Rabbi is a contributor to Slow Reads, The Daily Star.