

MAY DAY

# Capital, precarious labour, and the changing face of our working class



Anu Muhammad is former professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University.

ANU MUHAMMAD

The emergence and development of the wage labourer is deeply linked to the emergence and development of capitalism. The existence and expansion of capitalism are impossible without the growth of the wage-earning class. Therefore, during the industrial revolution in Europe, while the capitalists established dominance, the working class was simultaneously formed. The picture was much the same in the United States. As working hours and wages were not fixed, numerous protests and demonstrations broke out, and organisations were formed to change the unspeakable living conditions of workers, including women and children. Following the labour movements of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, a massive rally in Chicago was attacked on May 1, 1886, during a strike involving over 300,000 workers. Workers were killed in the firing, and later, labour organisers were hanged following a farcical trial. This sacrifice did not go in vain. The demands that were once labelled as terrorism and counter-development were eventually accepted by the whole world, and May Day became known worldwide.

One of the major changes in Bangladesh's society and economy over the last few decades is the shift in the composition of the working class. In the name of economic reforms, many state-owned enterprises have been declared closed since the 1980s. Adamjee Jute Mills was closed in 2002, and all remaining jute and sugar mills followed. Until the 80s, the state-owned sector's workers were primarily the organised segment of the country's industrial workforce. The closing of state-owned factories, regardless of the government in power, was not merely a process of privatising state assets; it was simultaneously part of a long-term project to break the organised strength of industrial workers.

The garment industry now dominates as an export-oriented sector and employs the highest number of industrial workers. Despite the significant attention this sector enjoys, the number of unions is negligible, and the state of other workers' organisations is weak.

Thousands of predatory billionaires have emerged during Bangladesh's economic reform in the last few decades. Various state institutions actively protect them. Rather than continuing and developing productive processes, their primary task is the rapid concentration of wealth through hyper-

exploitation, occupation, plunder, and money laundering, and to ensure this by crushing the democratic rights of the public, especially the working people. The politics and economy of Bangladesh are primarily under their control. For this reason, the largest portion of the population—workers—are deprived of their minimum democratic rights. In most industrial factories, the minimum living wage, eight-hour workday, appointment letters, weekly holidays, and safety at work and working environment are either entirely or mostly absent. Establishing trade unions remains a struggle against continuous oppression and deception.

Incidents of arrests, attacks, and harassment for working on trade union rights occur frequently. Among those that exist, "pocket unions" are predominant.

With the development of the garment industry, there has been a significant gender shift in the composition of the working class. The majority of workers in this sector are women. Beyond this, women's participation has increased in various other professions. We hear many stories of women's empowerment. But the news of insecurity, murder, rape, and harassment of these working women that appears in daily newspapers reflects only a fraction of the reality. In facing continuous deprivation and oppression, women workers have turned into a new, protestive social force.

Driven by the evolving demands and structural shifts of modern capital, precarious employment—including temporary, daily, part-time, and informal work—is surging across nearly every sector. Workers in the informal sector are completely unorganised, and their lives are a struggle for survival amidst extreme uncertainty. The number of online workers is also rising rapidly, and

their uncertainty is even greater. These include riders, people in food delivery, and outsourcing work, known as gig workers. The core demand of May Day—eight hours of work with a wage sufficient for a decent living—remains far out of reach for workers across all sectors in Bangladesh, including labourers, the toiling masses, and even these educated, online-based earners.

The opportunity to organise is also very slim for educated working people. Consequently, even banks, insurance, media, NGOs, private schools, colleges, universities, clinics, or the online sectors lack work or income security. There is little institutional mechanism for redress against the arbitrary dismissal or injustice faced by people working in these places. The relevant authorities often appear as silent spectators. There are few systems as ineffective as Bangladesh's legal and institutional monitoring systems when it comes to protecting the interests of the majority.

While the majority of people live in poverty and deprivation, Bangladesh's GDP and average per capita income have increased manifold without any significant

improvement in their lives. The cruelty remains hidden behind statistical deceit. The high rate of growth is built on the blood and sweat of farmers, garment workers, and migrant workers. On the other hand, the cost of education and healthcare has increased due to commercialisation. Transport costs and house rents have risen. In the last few years, most people have faced hardship in work and income, resulting in increased unemployment and poverty. To finance massive infrastructure projects and sustain an import-heavy economy, the government continually raises taxes, fees, and utility prices. At the same time, runaway inflation on essential goods is steadily shrinking the real income of the average citizen. By ruining the livelihoods of the people and destroying the river systems, life, nature, and environment of Bangladesh, the GDP has increased, but permanent, stable, and environment-friendly decent work opportunities have not.

In the capitalist world, the message of May Day repeatedly arises in the struggle for the existence of the majority. May Day highlights the challenges workers face in organising politically to combat exploitation. Bangladesh serves as a stark reminder of how deeply the working class suffers when this organised resistance is weak. The structural killing of workers in the 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy laid bare these weaknesses. Even after such a disaster, the state of safety, wages, and the right to organise in the country reflects the same fragility. Because of this weakness, factories repeatedly turn into mass graves as a result of the limitless greed of local looter billionaires and international profiteers and their political influence. In recent years, preventable disasters in places like Rugganj, Sitakunda, and Old Dhaka have claimed the lives of well over a hundred labourers. Working-class people continually remain the primary victims of these deadly fires, building collapses, and chemical explosions. Construction workers are regularly killed or injured at their workplaces. In recent years, many working people lost everything in fires in various places, including the Korail slum, Bangabazar, and New Market. There are reasonable grounds to believe that many such fire incidents are part of the development projects of certain groups.

Driven by capitalism, the number of wage earners is growing globally and expanding across all social classes. How capitalism operates today cannot be truly understood if only factory workers are pictured. Technology has transformed the workforce, forcing many degree-holders into jobs that seem middle-class but are actually highly precarious. Because of this, the solidarity of May Day speaks to 99 percent of the population. The global rallying cry of "We are the 99%" is simply the modern-day continuation of the May Day legacy.

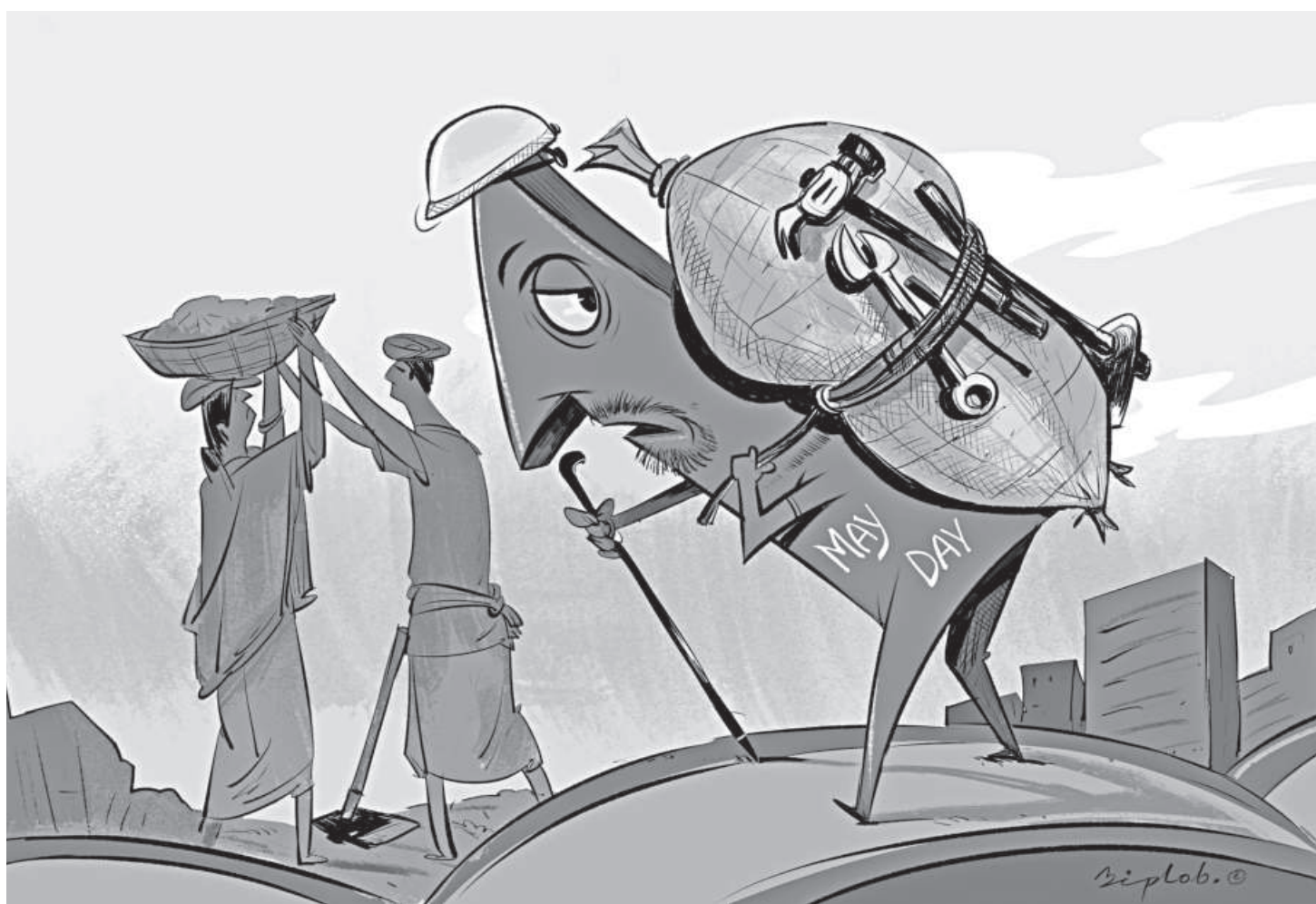


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

## The unfinished promise of decent work



Kalpona Akter is executive director at Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS).

KALPONA AKTER

May Day today is not just a commemoration. It is a checkpoint. It forces us to ask whether the country's economic growth has translated into dignity for the common people, whether labour laws have become lived realities, and whether workers—especially women—are any closer to justice. Bangladesh stands as one of the world's largest garment exporters, powered by over four million workers, the majority of them women. However, behind this rosy picture lies a complex reality where progress is constrained by resistance to change as well as deep inequalities.

Over the past decade or so, Bangladesh has taken some important steps in labour governance. The legacy of the Rana Plaza collapse remains a defining moment, one that forced both national and global actors to confront the consequences of weak regulation. Since then, there have been notable improvements in factory inspections, building safety, and compliance frameworks, due in large part to private initiatives like the Accord that pushed for meaningful changes. More recently, Bangladesh under the interim government made a landmark move by ratifying three key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions: Convention 155 on Occupational Safety and Health, Convention 187 on Promotional Framework for OSH, and Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment. These ratifications position the country as a regional leader in formal commitments to international labour standards.

At the national level, ongoing labour law reforms and the work of the interim-

era Labour Reform Commission have added momentum to discussions around decent work. The commission emphasised strengthening labour inspection, expanding worker protections—including for domestic workers—and improving access to justice and social protection systems. These developments have created a framework for future progress, but frameworks alone do not change lives.

If there is one issue that has persistently defined the gap between our reality and expectations, it is wages. The current minimum wage for entry-level workers in the readymade garment (RMG) sector stands at Tk 12,500 per month. Set in 2023, this was an increase from the previous minimum of Tk 8,000, but it remains far below what workers need to sustain a basic standard of living. Trade unions and labour rights groups have repeatedly called for a minimum wage in the range of Tk 23,000 to 25,000, based on basic cost-of-living calculations. The gap between the current and expected figures reflects, among other things, the imbalance of power in the wage-setting processes.

Inflation further complicates this reality. In recent years, inflation in Bangladesh has hovered around 10-11 percent, eroding the real value of wages. Even with some recent easing in inflation as well as annual wage increments of around 9 percent, many workers find that their purchasing power has stagnated or declined. For many, survival still depends on overtime, debt, or cutting essential expenses. This raises a fundamental question: can an economy be considered successful if its workers remain trapped in a

cycle of low wages?

Labour rights are not only about wages, however. They are also about voice. The labour law recognises the right to form trade unions, and recent reforms have attempted to ease some restrictions. However, in practice, challenges remain. Workers continue to report barriers to union registration, and cases of intimidation and retaliation are not uncommon. Without effective freedom of association, labour reforms risk becoming procedural rather than transformative.

Workers, therefore, must be able to negotiate collectively, raise grievances, and participate meaningfully in shaping their working conditions. The ILO has

**Labour rights are not just about wages, but also about voice. The labour law recognises the right to form trade unions, and recent reforms have attempted to ease some restrictions. However, in practice, challenges remain. Workers continue to report barriers to union registration, and cases of intimidation and retaliation are not uncommon. Without effective freedom of association, labour reforms risk becoming procedural rather than transformative.**

repeatedly emphasised the importance of social dialogue in wage setting and labour governance practices. Without this, policies risk being disconnected from reality. There is no effective substitute for genuine social dialogue and collective bargaining through trade unions.

We should also talk about workplace safety, which has improved since Rana Plaza, but risks persist. Reports indicate that hundreds of workers still lose their lives each year

due to workplace accidents across various sectors. This highlights that compliance systems exist but enforcement remains inconsistent. Against this backdrop, ratifying all 11 ILO fundamental instruments as the first Asian country to do so is an important step, but as labour advocates often remind us, ratification does not automatically lead to protection. Implementation—through sustained inspections, accountability, and worker participation—is what ultimately matters.

Beyond the RMG and other industrial sectors, the majority of Bangladesh's workforce operates in the informal economy. Domestic workers, construction labourers, transport workers, and agricultural workers often lack written contracts, social protection, and access to legal remedies. The Labour Reform Commission acknowledged the need to extend protections to these workers, but translating this into an enforceable policy remains a major challenge. A labour system that protects only the formal sector, leaving millions behind, is not inclusive, and we must strive to change this reality.

Another emerging reality is the intersection of labour and climate. Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Heatwaves, floods, and other extreme weather events are already affecting people's productivity, health, and livelihoods. Workers in factories and informal sectors are increasingly exposed to dangerous conditions. Despite that, climate resilience has not been fully integrated into labour policies. Basic protections such as rest breaks, access to water, and safe working conditions during extreme heat are not consistently enforced. The future of work in Bangladesh will be shaped by how well our policymakers respond to the challenges of climate change, automation, and economic transitions.

Let's get back to women workers, who remain at the centre of Bangladesh's economic success but continue to face structural inequalities. The ratification of ILO Convention 190 is a significant milestone in addressing workplace violence

and harassment, but implementation, again, has been a key challenge. Gender-based discrimination, unequal pay, and limited leadership opportunities persist. Ensuring gender justice requires more than legal provisions; it requires institutional commitment, workplace accountability, and cultural change.

So, what is the way forward for us? Bangladesh does not need to start from scratch. The foundations—laws, institutions, and international commitments—are already in place. What is needed is delivery.

First, the wage-setting exercise must accommodate a living wage framework that reflects real costs of living. This will require not only national policy changes but also responsible purchasing practices from global brands. Second, freedom of association must be ensured on the ground; simplifying union registration and protecting worker leaders are critical steps. Third, labour protections must extend to all informal workers, supported by social protection systems and legal recognition.

Fourth, climate resilience must be integrated into labour policies, ensuring that workers are protected from emerging risks. Fifth, creating safe and women-friendly workplaces must be a priority. Women workers must be able to work free from harassment, discrimination, and insecurity. This requires effective implementation of protections against violence and harassment, equal pay, access to functional grievance mechanisms, and real opportunities for leadership and advancement. Finally, proper enforcement of all policies and conventions must be a top priority. Without implementation, even the strongest laws remain symbolic.

Over the years, Bangladesh's workers have built industries, sustained families, and contributed to global supply chains. Their role in the country's economic success is undeniable. The question is whether that success will translate into lasting gains. May Day reminds us that labour rights cannot be static; they must be continuously fought for, negotiated, and realised over time.