The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Listen to the workers before unrest

Govt must establish an effective channel for resolving RMG workers' grievances

Why must factory workers take to the streets, block major thoroughfares, and bring production to a halt before their grievances receive serious attention? This is a question the government and all industry stakeholders must answer as RMG workers continue demonstrating on the streets, pressing for a minimum monthly wage of Tk 30,000. Over the past few days, workers have been protesting at major RMG hubs within and outside Dhaka city, demanding a hike from the current Tk 12,500 minimum wage. This has caused disruption in production and damage to both private and public properties, not to mention immense public suffering.

This demand has reasonable grounds: persistent inflation, rising house rent, transport costs, and other essential expenses have steadily eroded workers' purchasing power. A report by this daily also highlights allegations of arbitrary dismissals and blacklisting of workers. Through their demonstrations, RMG workers are asking for fair pay and labour practices. But why did they have to take to the streets in the first place? The government announced its intention to form the new minimum wage board on October 15, but the process was not completed until Sunday, after workers' agitation had intensified. With the three-year wage-review deadline approaching in December, why was the process not initiated much earlier? Had the government not delayed the wage board formation, the situation might not have escalated this far.

Instead, Sunday's blockade kept the Dhaka-Tangail highway closed for around six hours, while Monday's renewed blockade caused long traffic tailbacks. Police say that, driven by a rumour of some workers' detention, protesters vandalised and torched police vehicles and boxes. Police retaliated with tear gas and water cannons to disperse them. At least 529 RMG factories in Mirpur, Savar, Ashulia, Gazipur, and Mymensingh declared a "holiday", while violence in Gazipur left at least 25 people injured.

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This has again exposed the failure of existing mechanisms for resolving labour disputes. To fill the gap, the government should designate a minister—preferably the labour and employment minister—as a permanent and accessible liaison between RMG workers and factory owners. Workers must have a reliable channel to communicate grievances, seek intervention, and obtain timely responses. They should be encouraged to approach this channel before resorting to street demonstrations. The minister, in turn, must have the authority and willingness to bring employers to the negotiating table. Such a mechanism should not restrict workers' right to peaceful protest, but make it less necessary to exercise that right through disruptive action. Workers must also recognise that violent and aggressive campaigns cannot become a routine means of voicing grievances.

RMG workers are a major driving force behind our export economy. The government and factory owners alike must be sympathetic to their plights and ensure that the new wage board completes its work without unnecessary delay. Equally, workers need effective avenues for negotiation and should use them before taking disputes to the streets. Our industries must be built on fair wages, accountability, and trust.

30 years of the other opinion

Al Jazeera's enduring contribution to journalism deserves recognition

On November 1, 1996, Al Jazeera went on air with a promise: "the opinion... and the other opinion." Launched by Qatar's late Father Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and staffed largely by journalists from the BBC's shuttered Arabic service, Al Jazeera gave the world an authentic Arab voice. Dissidents, Islamists, and Israeli voices appeared on the same screens, airing debates that had been largely absent from the region's media.

Its larger achievement, though, has been global. For decades, news flowed one way, from London and Atlanta to the rest of the world. Al Jazeera reversed that current. For the first time, the BBC and CNN faced a credible rival that questioned their framing and told the Global South's stories from the ground up rather than from distant Global-North capitals. Al Jazeera's coverage of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq challenged Western narratives, foregrounding civilian suffering while many Western journalists reported alongside US troops. Its coverage of the 2011 Arab Spring brought the uprisings to millions worldwide and earned Al Jazeera English a Peabody Award.

Perhaps Al Jazeera's most consequential journalism has been its coverage of Israel's war in Gaza. With Israel barring foreign journalists' independent access, Al Jazeera's Palestinian correspondents have documented the atrocities at great personal risk, several losing their lives. Their reporting has challenged Western media narratives of obscuring Palestinian suffering. A 2024 investigation revealed that The New York Times had instructed its journalists to restrict the use of "genocide" and avoid "occupied territory".

Bangladesh has felt the channel's reach, too. In 2021, at the height of Sheikh Hasina's power, its investigative documentary All the Prime Minister's Men exposed how the brothers of the then-sitting army chief, General Aziz Ahmed, had escaped the law and profited from their proximity to power. And when mobs torched The Daily Star's offices last December, trapping 28 colleagues for four hours, Al Jazeera helped draw international attention to the attack. Al Jazeera has also pioneered new approaches to journalism. Its Investigative Unit gained global recognition for its in-depth exposés, while AJ+, launched in 2014, helped popularise mobile-first, social media-driven news formats.

None of this places Al Jazeera beyond criticism; its Qatari funding and its selective silences deserve scrutiny. But when the world's most powerful newsrooms looked away, Al Jazeera looked closer. The world is better informed because it exists. At 30, we celebrate its steadfast fight to publish "the other opinion".

The RMG sector must balance fair wages and industry competitiveness



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■ **SELIM RAIHAN**

The latest labour unrest in the country's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, factory closures, and the workers' demands for a substantial hike in minimum wages have once again brought an important economic and industrial issue to the fore. More than 500 RMG factories in Mirpur, Savar, Gazipur, Ashulia and Mymensingh have declared a "holiday" due to protests by workers, who are demanding that their monthly minimum wage be raised from Tk 12,500 to Tk 30,000. The protests have been marked by road blocks and sporadic violence in several places, with public property as well as several factories vandalised and set ablaze. The government has responded by deploying law enforcement and forming a new minimum wage board, although no deadline has been set for announcing the new wage structure. As discussion advances, several factors must be taken into account: the erosion of workers' purchasing power due to rising cost of living, the industry's ability to pay, and Bangladesh's competitiveness in the international market.

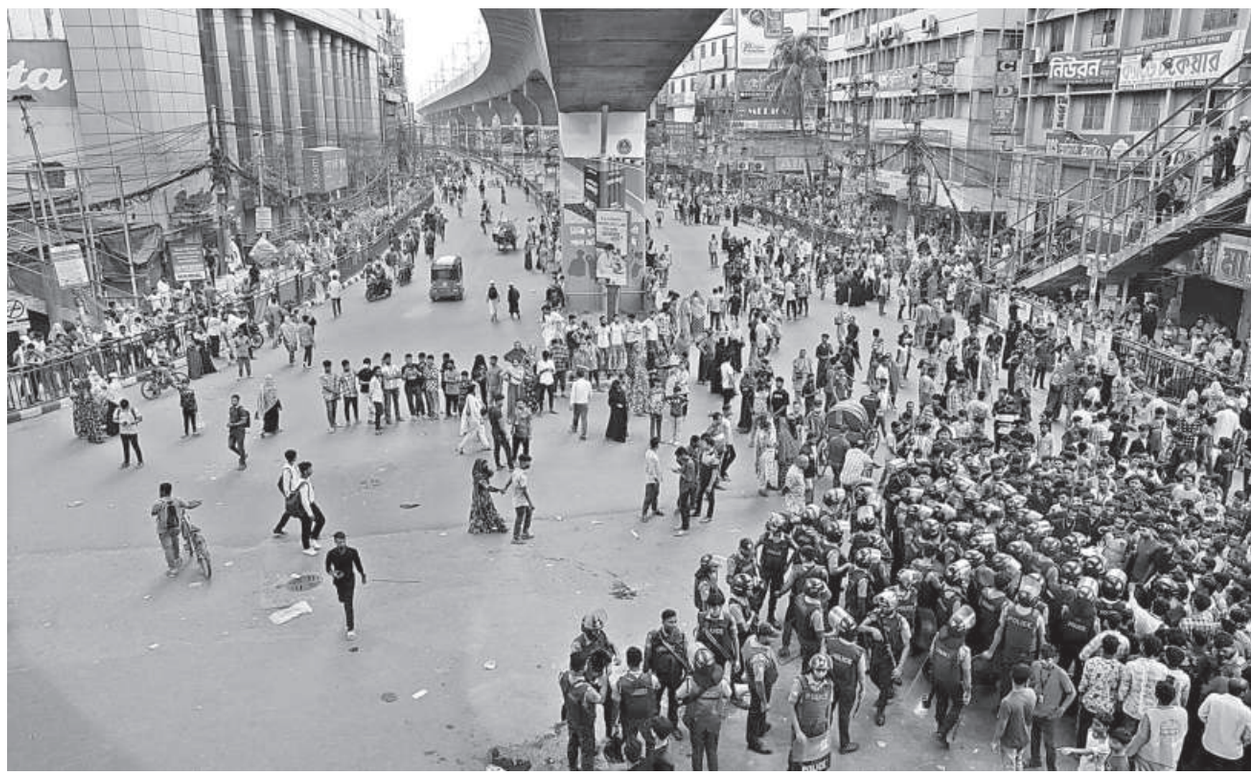
Over the past three years, high inflation and rising prices of food and other essentials have significantly reduced the workers' real incomes and purchasing power. Therefore, their demand for a revised wage structure cannot be seen solely as a request for more money, but rather as an attempt to regain their ability to afford necessities. Besides, since 1985, which was more than four decades ago, wages in this sector have been revised only six times, increasing from Tk 627 to Tk 12,500.

Unlike some of our international competitors in the global RMG manufacturing industry, our minimum wage revision has not been incremental or regular. Over the years, it has been more reactive and often politically charged, with revisions arriving mostly after labour unrest. This time, too, the situation has arisen following a similar pattern. That is why the government's role in this case deserves scrutiny. Although plans to form a new wage board were announced on October 15, meaningful action was delayed. The decision to move forward with the wage board only after protests, road blockades, and factory closures points to shortcomings in the government's ability to anticipate labour disputes and engage effectively with the industry stakeholders. Timely intervention might have prevented the situation from escalating and reduced the resulting disruption to production.

A reasonable balance must be struck between workers' demands for their right to earn a fair wage and the financial ability of the RMG industry to continue operating. In determining what constitutes a fair and sustainable wage, the wage board will have to take into account the actual cost of living, inflation rates, the financial capacity of the RMG industry, and the international competitive environment.

From both economic and industrial perspectives, raising the current minimum wage of Tk 12,500 to Tk 30,000 all at once would put significant financial pressure on RMG product exporters. In particular, small and medium-sized factories with low profit margins would face a substantial increase in production costs. The industry is already under strain due to lower export orders, higher energy costs, the global economic recession, and domestic inflation. Thus, finding a compromise that balances the need for higher wages with the factories' ability to pay them will be challenging.

Increased production costs could push up export prices, potentially weakening the country's price competitiveness against Vietnam, India, Cambodia and other competing countries. Moreover, many international buyers are unwilling to provide additional funding to cover higher production costs, leaving factory owners to absorb most of the additional expenses.



Agitating RMG workers block Mirpur-10 intersection in Dhaka on November 1, 2026. PHOTO: **ANISUR RAHMAN**

While recognising that the industry faces numerous challenges, we cannot overlook the fact that workers' real incomes have continuously declined. Moreover, unresolved labour disputes, work stoppages, factory closures, production delays, and shipping delays would continue to undermine buyer confidence in Bangladesh and ultimately hurt the country's export capabilities.

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Instead of increasing wages rapidly in one large step, a gradual increase over time could be implemented alongside other measures, such as improving worker productivity, investing in new technologies, and strengthening the overall management of factories. Equally important is meaningful engagement with international buyers to secure fairer prices for Bangladeshi products. International brands and retailers also need to accept greater responsibility for ensuring that the costs associated with providing decent wages to workers are incorporated into the prices they pay their suppliers.

In the meantime, the government must stop simply reacting to crises after they occur. Instead, it should establish an ongoing dialogue with workers and employers, review wages periodically, and develop and enforce effective labour laws.

It is important to note that Bangladesh's competitive position in the global RMG industry should not rely solely on maintaining low wages. Rather, the country's ability to remain competitive will increasingly depend on improving productivity, enhancing product quality, managing businesses effectively, and maintaining positive relationships between workers and employers. Ensuring decent living standards for the workers and sustaining industrial growth are not conflicting goals. Both are essential for building a stronger, more responsible, and globally competitive RMG industry in the long run.

How to put idle public assets to work



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■ **ASHFAQ ZAMAN**

In Khalishpur, Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills is being passed to Hamko Group on a 30-year lease. Pran-RFL has taken Star Jute Mills in Khulna and National Jute Mills in Sirajganj, and has already reopened the Rajshahi Textile and Jute Mills under a public-private partnership. Of the 25 jute mills closed in 2020, 14 have been leased and nine are producing again. A single 14.8-acre lease at Narsingdi is expected to draw Tk 1,000 crore of investment, nearly Tk 3,000 crore of annual production and at least 3,000 jobs.

This is asset recycling in action, and the government deserves credit for moving within months of taking office. Invest Bangladesh has published a portfolio of 44 investment opportunities across more than 10,000 acres under five state corporations, from a proposed green steel mill in Bogura to textile, chemical, and agro-processing sites. A draft policy under Section 48 of the Invest Bangladesh Act, 2026 has completed public consultation, promising competitive, transparent transfer of unused assets while the state keeps ownership. The finance minister framed the FY2026-27 budget around stabilisation and private sector-led growth, and the government has signalled that the state should enable investment rather than compete with it. The opportunity now is to scale this into a national strategy.

A recent World Bank study found that state enterprises cost the exchequer nearly Tk 88,200 crore in a single year, with a return on assets of negative 5.2 percent, compared to positive 9.7 percent in India and almost 12 percent in Vietnam. The same study estimated that Bangladesh could mobilise more than Tk 1.2 lakh crore in additional fiscal resources annually if its enterprises earned a 10-percent return. Viewed against the Tk 1.27 lakh crore the budget allocates to interest payments, it is clear that the cure to the debt burden lies in land and factories that already have access to gas, power, and roads.

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Three moves could turn today's promising transactions into that larger programme.

The first is a complete public register. The current portfolio covers industrial corporations, but the wider estate is larger still. Bangladesh Railway's 2021-22 annual report recorded 61,860 acres, of which nearly 12,000 lay unused. With BTCL's exchange plots in Dhaka and Chattogram, BIWTA foreshore land, sugar estates such as Shyampur in Rangpur, idle since 2020, and commercial plots held by ministries and state banks, the recyclable estate plausibly runs to tens of thousands of acres. A geotagged online register, detailing each plot's size, encumbrances, and independent valuation, would allow investors to price opportunities and parliament to scrutinise decisions, in addition to exposing encroachment to all. Adamjee offers a precedent: the jute mill closed in 2002 and its site now generates far more employment and exports as an export processing zone than the mill ever did. The railway acres invite Hong Kong's rail-plus-property model, where development around stations funds the transport itself. Each cluster in the register could carry a designated future, whether human-made fibre at BTMC sites, agro-processing on sugar land, or solar generation on mill estates too remote for industry.

The second move, the one that could most distinguish this programme, is dedicated financing for the domestic firms taking these assets on. Recycling works only if investors can fund the modernisation each site needs; much of the machinery is outdated. Bangladesh Bank has already shown the instinct, unveiling a Tk 60,000 crore stimulus fund with Tk 20,000 crore earmarked for closed industrial enterprises. The government could now go further and create a formal Asset Recycling Refinance Window, modelled on the Export Development Fund. This would be a concessional-rate, long-tenor credit available only against a registered lease of a state asset, with a partial credit guarantee for first-time lessees. Tying cheap money to the register would pull domestic conglomerates and medium-sized firms alike towards recycled sites rather than greenfield land; the lease itself, bankable and state-backed, becomes the collateral.

The third move is to show the public where the money goes. A ring-fenced asset recycling fund at the Finance Division could split proceeds between retiring the costliest domestic debt and co-financing infrastructure, with a published annual statement. Bangladesh has issued sovereign ijarah sukuk since 2020, and because an ijarah requires an underlying asset, registered state property is a natural base for an asset-backed sukuk programme tapping sharia-compliant liquidity. BSEC finalised its REIT rules in 2024; a flagship state-sponsored REIT on rented public property, sold in small units to diaspora savers through the wage earner bond channel, would anchor the capital market while the state keeps the land. In time, digitally registered fractional units piloted through BSEC's sandbox could widen participation further.

If 2,000 of the portfolio's 10,000 acres drew investment at half the Narsingdi intensity of roughly Tk 70 crore per acre, that alone is Tk 70,000 crore of private capital. Add the World Bank's estimated fiscal gains and modest lease and REIT income, and a 10-year programme could plausibly mobilise upwards of Tk 2 lakh crore, without a single distressed sale. Two safeguards would secure legitimacy: settling the dues of workers from closed mills from the earliest proceeds, and publishing every major lease in full. With those in place, the government may find it has begun something larger than reviving old mills: the financing model for Bangladesh's next growth cycle, hiding in plain sight on its own land.

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