

# MAKING LABOUR VOICES HEARD IN IMPENDING INDUSTRIAL CRISIS- THE GARMENT INDUSTRY OF BANGLADESH

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## **Abstract:**

*“Capital is dead labour, that, vampire- like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks”  
Karl Marx, (Capital, Volume 1, Chapter 10)*

*The above quote by Marx perhaps aptly defines the condition of Bangladesh’s key export division and major foreign exchange earner industry- The Garments Industry.*

*The independence of Bangladesh came at the time when global capital was already facing a profitability crisis, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and a cartelization of OPEC countries. Bangladesh's urge to industrialize and establish an independent economy amidst a turbulent local political scenario made it fall in the grips of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). The IFIs in the 1970s were desperately trying to consolidate their position globally, ushering a new accumulation regime based on financialisation (a global networking through finance) and post-fordist (flexibilist) industrialization. The former made the local economies vulnerable to the demands of the IFIs and other transnational agencies, while the latter disarmed labour through contractualisation and casualisation of work – increased labour market segmentation, thus marginalizing the working classes' capacity to influence industrial relations. Only by persuading the developing economies to adopt an export-oriented development approach, the IFIs could bring these economies to their arena of sustained control and influence. Through various financial instruments like aid agreements, this persuasion could become successful in the developing world. The export processing zones (EPZs) were the result of an integration of developing economies in the new accumulation regime that was emerging internationally.*

*Since the 1970s, various other factors such as the Multi Fiber Arrangement, a quota system used as a means of controlling the increasing imports to the West from developing countries in Asia and South America, which Bangladesh did not ratify, gave the developed countries open access to the economy of Bangladesh as no quota was imposed on how much Bangladesh could export. All these factors, along with the formation of Export Processing Zones, collaborated, and allowed the garment industry to emerge as the single largest manufacturing unit in Bangladesh. 80% of the country's \$18 billion export earnings come from the readymade garment sector. 3.5 million People (40% of industrial workforce) are employed in this sector and 85% of them are women.*

*The integration of the 'peripheral' Third World economies in the new global accumulation regime (known as neoliberalism) smoothened the entry-exit of multinational capital, which could economise on production cost by exploiting cheap labour and other resources of these economies. The intricacies of industrial relations in the garment industry of Bangladesh can be understood within this context. Workers in this industry are highly vulnerable obtaining low wages (Bangladeshi garment workers get the lowest wages in the world!) and facing unhealthy working conditions. Trade unions and organizing of women labour force are openly countered with state assistance. Minimal industrial regulations available are flouted openly.*

*However, lately the garment industry has witnessed a tremendous rise in industrial conflicts. While suffering from extreme exploitation, the growing resentment of workers in this industry is now reflected in spontaneous labour unionization and movement. Mapping the working conditions, leading to a class conflict ridden industry is essential to understand this sudden upsurge. The legal framework that binds these conflicts must be taken into account. Examination of responses of factory owners, trade union leaders, worker leaders, state, and labour also become central for any study of the course and direction of the movement. This paper tries to understand the essential character of the movement, whilst outlining the indicators of globalized capitalist development in Bangladesh. In a nutshell, this paper tries to understand the emergence of these conflicts and mechanisms utilized for redress by putting them in the larger political economic context.*

## 1) A 'PERIPHERAL GLOBAL' BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has witnessed rapid changes in its labour market as well as perspectives on workers protection since its independence in 1971. In order to facilitate the process of industrialization with an aim to achieve an independent economy and subsequent acceleration of growth, the government was desperate to attract inward investment, seek private capital and technical know-how. It is interesting to note that this need of Bangladesh came into direct interest of the global changes taking place in the mid 70's. This was the time when due to neo-liberalism and globalization, North and South countries, were integrating especially in terms of production, consumption and distribution. There was an internationalization of product markets, introduction of new techniques of management, changes in demand for consumption that led to the development for a new industrial strategy termed as flexible specialization and dynamics of contractual relations.

Just after liberation, all medium and big sized industries were nationalized to back up socialist economic order, leading to a halt in the development of individual entrepreneurship. But from 1973-74, post liberation rulers started favouring the former hostile position towards USA at a global level stressing on private entrepreneurship and the process became stronger under the military rule after 1975. The period after 1980's, can be seen as that which has set the path of the new economic development in Bangladesh. Owing to the autocratic (military) rule, an extremely cooperative State and the re entry of the International Financial Institutions, that pressured for adoption of their 'ready-made' policies of economic development, it became very easy for a smooth entry of global capital into Bangladesh's economy. And soon Bangladesh also came to be termed as a major resource periphery nation, being one of the most critical sites of production in the contemporary world amongst the third world countries.

But this state of Bangladesh came at a cost, whereby Bangladesh adopted an export oriented policy after India's adoption of the same, under the influence of Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. At one end it ensured the entry of enough Foreign Direct Investment, but at the other, the previous dependence of economy on its primary commodities like the textile or jute industry stopped, leading to denationalization of all these public sector units. This was the beginning of important structural transformations within the economy of Bangladesh, where international trade, transformation of employment dynamics seen in increasing feminization of labour, in formalization and flexibilisation of work and work standards ushered in.

Prior to liberation there was only one garment industry, but many textile industries, the largest being the world renowned Adamjee Jute Factory, but with the growing stress of the government, post liberation, on the transfer of state ownership to individual ownership, there came about the development of a class of rich individual propertied capitalists, who took to the garment export business in the mid 70's (Mohammed, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The period of 1978, brought about the real birth of the Ready Made Garment Industry and a class of garment factory owners in Bangladesh, as the prime manufacturing export oriented industry and those enjoying State patronization.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with eminent economist Prof. Anu Mohammed.

Liberalization of the export policy, the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), and the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA) of the European Union - a system to control imports from developing countries barring the poorest which included Bangladesh, to the West, were ushered in. Bangladesh like many other Least Developing countries came under the purview of the markets of Europe and North America as they quietly hopped the quota. This acted as the main source behind acquainting the Ready Made Garment Products to the global markets of the above mentioned countries. Though the MFA now has been phased out, but the European GSP still provides its tariff free access to the EU markets. Bangladesh's Ready Made Garment Industry (RMG) today has earned the mark of a competitive and standard RMG source to international garments, where it accounts for more than 75% of the country's total export, forming the backbone of the economy.

Seeing the availability of conducive conditions, a visit by the Chairman of the World Bank, brought in the concept of Economic Processing Zones (EPZ's) in the 80's. The growth of EPZs in export oriented regimes may be explained within the realm of new growth theory, neo institutionalism and the developmental state theory evolved in the 1980s (Baissac, 2003). These theories reaffirm that economic, social and political institutions have a key role to play in the development process.<sup>2</sup> Owing to the production failures of the textile industry and other bottlenecks, EPZ came to be one of the state led policies designed to address its growing list of problems seen in its ability to attract capital investment, employment generation, transfer of technology, earning of foreign exchange and to accelerate the process of industrialization. They aim to create individual industrial entrepreneurs who would then get institutional support, special infrastructure and support facilities, non fiscal and fiscal incentives and free trade environment to aid in the process of development of the economy. The first EPZ became operational in 1983 under the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA Act) at Chittagong. The second was set up in Savar near the capital city Dhaka in 1993-94. Encouraged by the success of these zones, the government recently set up four more EPZs in industrially backward regions and two more EPZs came up in developed regions near Dhaka (Adamjee Jute mill) and Chittagong ( Steel mill). At present there are more than 4,000 RMG firms in Bangladesh and more than 95 percent of these firms are located outside the Export Processing Zones (Gonzales, 2002). The basic difference between these two lies in the fact that the Export Processing Zones have a separate act under which its labour policies are regulated. However the nature of employment is similar to that outside the EPZ areas, thus making it highly unlikely that additional skills would be created and transferred to the domestic economy.<sup>3</sup> For the same set of labour- mostly unskilled women workers, of a particular industry one has the existence of two separate laws. In the beginning, the Government had expelled these EPZ areas from three major labour laws. These included the Factories Act, the Industrial Dispute Act and the Employment of Labour (standing orders) Act. These were replaced by two instructions: Instruction 1 and Instruction 2. These instructions carried detailed guidelines on the classification of employees, minimum wages, additional benefits to be paid by the employers in general. Further

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.saneinetwork.net/pdf/SANEI\\_VI/SANEI-VI- DeterimantsOfThePerformance ICRIER -FReport-Feb23..pdf](http://www.saneinetwork.net/pdf/SANEI_VI/SANEI-VI- DeterimantsOfThePerformance ICRIER -FReport-Feb23..pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXT/EXPCOMNET/Resources/2463593-1213887855468/13\\_BenefitCostAppraisalsofEPZsASurvey.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXT/EXPCOMNET/Resources/2463593-1213887855468/13_BenefitCostAppraisalsofEPZsASurvey.pdf)

there would be no trade union activity within the premises of the zone. However, after much pressure, labour reforms have been introduced recently in the zones. The new laws require the units to have labour councils and instead of trade unions a workers welfare committee to address the demands of the labour. The details of these shall be discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

## **2) WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT IN BANGLADESH: ON A CONSTANT PROGRESSIVE DECLINE**

The net result of nationalization in one period and subsequent denationalization of most of the enterprises in another, yielded similar results, i.e. capacity underutilization, less diversification, high dependence on state subsidy, low productivity and technological and managerial backwardness.<sup>4</sup> (Muhammad, 2007) Bangladesh though being mainly an agriculture dependent economy lost its significance, mainly because the land reform steps in 1962, 1972 and 1984 could not make any fundamental changes and also there was a gradual shift in the economic equilibrium with an increase in non-farm activities. Further various aid agencies from the West entered and provided subsidies to land owners to move into mono crop cultivation, taking away land from tenant farmers. This created a mass of laborers' who could now not depend upon agriculture. Further the fall of the jute and textile mills that rendered millions of workers unemployed, migration of these surplus laborers' in search of work in other sectors, laid the ground for the availability of cheap unorganized, unskilled labour that could be utilized as per markets terms and conditions. It is through these conditions, that one can trace the start of growing resentment amongst workers seen in the various upsurges of workers since the 1960's. We shall trace these upsurges later in the paper, stressing at the present moment on the condition of this surplus labour, mostly women (85%), who turned towards the largest production industry in Bangladesh, the Ready Made Garment Industry.

### **2.1) Conditions Of The Working Class**

The garment industry has been classified in the international standard classification of the United Nations as "those establishments which cut and/ or stitch/make up garments out of woven or knitted fabrics without being involved in the manufacture of fabrics". The Ready Made Garment Industry of Bangladesh is the largest employer of labour force especially women in the formal manufacturing sector. There are around 3.5 million garment workers functioning in the near about 5000 factories units that cater to mostly international buyers. It is for this reason that this industry is very politically sensitive as well, as it forms a backbone of Bangladesh's economy.

The reason for this massive influx of workers is that it is mainly a labour intensive industry and draws upon labour that is readily available at cheap prices and can be molded into compliant workers. Further it is an industry which can be easily started with a small amount of capital and low cost machineries. Montu Ghosh opined that most of the women who joined this industry were young, unmarried, migrant or divorced women, from rural areas belonging to landless families, who came looking for economic independence or to contribute to their family's income. If seen

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad.A (2007);Development or Destruction? Essays on Global Hegemony Corporate Grabbing and Bangladesh.

positively, the capitalistic development shook the roots of the traditional, conservative, Islamist gender relations, where for the first time, Bangladesh observed, women coming out of their homes. But one also needs to understand the location and working conditions of the factory, who would utilize this female labour under existent gender relations i.e. secluded from public view, behavior strictly monitored, and segregation to maximise productivity. Thus, the factories merely became an extension of their homes, barring they got wages for the work they did.

While talking to a group of garment factory workers, the following work conditions came to be highlighted. They said that they had to work in very poor, restricted, and exploitative conditions. Many of them said that they did not receive any appointment letter; and were kept as temporary workers and are fired at the owners will. The working time is about 9-12 hours and when there is a huge order, the work timings convert to 12-16 hours of work, where many a times they do not get any overtime pay. There are no facilities for crèches, lactating mothers and many a times these women become a victim of the production chain, as a delay by one, reduces the productivity of the other. Thus, any woman on account of ill health is fired if she delays the process of production. They also have to face harassment on part of the owners, which is mental, verbal and physical abuse. The use of slang words is very common, where many a times a woman who has had to go through such an experience has never returned to work. Safety at the workplace is also a question, with no fire exits or malfunctioning machines. If an accident occurs too, most if the times it is not highlighted or the person is given some money to get first aid. One of the workers opined, that since we are women, the owners think they can get away with doing anything with us as we do not have many options in the labour market. When asked what did she personally feel about it, she said, even if the working conditions improve much of the women, like me have to feed our family, we have either the option of working in a respectable job (garments) or in the informal sector (construction, domestic work etc). Thus they prefer to keep silent rather than lose their only source of income.

Though the conditions of the workers remain the same in both the EPZ areas and those outside it, it becomes easier to bargain (if allowed) in the EPZ areas, as they are small in number and form a cluster of industrial units. Also since they cater to extremely well known brands of the international markets, they have stricter regulations, in comparison to the hundreds of units that are functional but unnoticed by the available labour regulation systems.

Further as opined by Ratan Rajekuzaman (Socialist Party of Bangladesh), the garments industry is a 12 billion dollar industry, but on the contrary Bangladesh's wage scale is the lowest in the world where on the one hand, the workers are working day in and out on a miniscule amount despite rising prices of essential commodities; while the garment factory owners earn around 43% profit out of the interest rate. If seen at an international comparative scale, owners in Cambodia earn 31% and China only earns 3%. This gives us a clear picture of the level of corruption within the Ready Made Garments Industry. The above mentioned conditions formed the basis of unrest within the factory premises, which shall be further developed upon in order to trace a trajectory of the various workers movements.

## 2.2) Working Class and its Movement:

The working class movement of Bangladesh can be seen as an amalgamation of various kinds of movements functioning together. On the one hand one finds a distinct trade union movement occurring, where an organization of workers come together to achieve common goals, through the processes of collective bargaining, utilization of strategies of industrial action like strikes and resistance against lockouts, possessing varied political ideologies, and on the other hand one also finds an ongoing struggle in the form of a social movement taking place, which can be defined as any collective action to bring about a change or resist change, thereby either bringing about a new order or changing the existing order.<sup>5</sup> But there are many different perspectives to the same, which bring about varying categories for theorizing a particular style of struggle, whether ongoing or dormant. However recently there has been an emergence of a new theory, which has broken the classical notions of trade union movement being separate from social movements. This theory has been presented by Peter Waterman called the 'Social Movement Unionism' Kim Moody defines social movement unionism in terms of particular characteristics on five separate variables: (1) union governance: 'deeply democratic';(2) approach to collective bargaining: 'militant'; (3) relationship to established political parties: 'independent'; (4) strategy for political action: 'reaching out to other sectors of the class, be they other unions, neighborhood organizations, or other social movements'; and (5) core ethical commitment: 'fights for all the oppressed'<sup>6</sup>. We shall now trace the working class movement in Bangladesh and try to formulate an analysis based on the characteristics found.

The working class movement in Bangladesh can be traced since the 1960's, where workers of the textiles mills and the peasants have constituted to be a major pressure group, which has had significant influence over the political processes<sup>7</sup>. Bangladesh has a huge history of peasant's movement e.g. the Tebhaga movement which stressed upon three share cropping system. This movement under the active support and leadership of leftist groups reached its peak in 1969, where gheraos started being utilized as a tactic to pressure the State machinery. This also influenced the urban industrial workers where they formed a parallel movement along with the Peasant movement to demand for decent wages and just working conditions and discrimination against East Pakistan by the West (owner groups) of Pakistan in the mills. A resultant of this was the formation of the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969. Unfortunately, this movement reached an unnatural death, when post 1969; the leftist movement got divided on ideological grounds and international alignment (Pro- Moscow and the other being Pro-Chinese)<sup>8</sup>. Hence the essential working class character of the movement was lost, instead providing a ground to the Nationalistic Struggle.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://stmmarys.ca/~evanderveen/wvdv/social\\_change/social\\_movement\\_theories.htm](http://stmmarys.ca/~evanderveen/wvdv/social_change/social_movement_theories.htm)

<sup>6</sup> <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~langford/SMU.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Monem.M (...), Reform in a Hot Climate: Privatization and Labour Resistance in Bangladesh, 1975-90.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Prof Anu Muhammad.

Post Liberation and adoption of privatization came about the introduction of the Global Handshake Scheme (GHS), where a good number of public sector employees were sent to voluntary retirement with certain incentive packages. According to an estimate of the Ministry of Industries, between 1985-1995, about 54,633 jobs together in the jute and textile industries were lost because of privatisation (GOB:1996). This scheme created a heightened sense of insecurity among the working class of the public sector enterprises resulting in constant labour trouble. This scheme was vehemently opposed by organised labour unions as they considered it as the “first phase of [the] complete relinquishing process of the public sector” Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra).

But with the imposition of Martial Law in 1982, trade union rights were frozen. In protest of this, 18 national trade union federations came together to form a workers’ conglomerate in 1984. This conglomerate is known as “Sramik Karmachari Oikhya Parishad (SKOP)”. Literally, SKOP stands for the united front of workers and employees. The most important demands of SKOP were (i) to stop further privatisation and labour retrenchment; and (ii) to declare and implement a national minimum wage for public as well as private sector employees.<sup>9</sup> The unionised workers and union leaders from all over the country particularly in Tejgaon, Demra, Tongi, Tarabo, Narayangonj, Narshingdi, Adamjinagar industrial areas, organised rallies and processions to protest against the government decision to privatise public enterprises (extract from an interview with the President of Bangladesh Employers’ Association, 25/1/1998). A resultant of this was a deal signed between the then Ershad Government and SKOP in mid 1984, to stop the process of privatization. But the same did not happen and a threat was made to the Government by the union and workers to take direct action against the Government (The Holiday, 19/10/1984). This was the time when the SKOP also demanded for a tripartite meeting amongst the government, private sector mill owners and workers. In 1985, there was a split created by the ruling party in the SKOP leadership, and hence many of the leaders joined the ruling party’s labour front, thus dividing the movement. But, the unity of the federation of jute and textile labour unions. Their leadership was determined to oppose the government unless the privatisation and labour retrenchment was formally dropped. They announced a 48-hour countrywide strike demanding government’s step-down. Both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League immediately lent support to the strike. The government countered by offering to negotiate bi-laterally with basic units, by-passing the central leadership. The strategy effectively sowed to create division among the jute and textile workers’ unions and many workers groups withdrew support from the strike call (The Dhaka Courier, 23/10/1987).

At a later stage in 1986, the SKOP realized the government’s strategy of dividing leadership, unions and workers and two factions came together, forming a formidable force to strike against the government. The tripartite meeting was held, but instead of discussing issues relating to privatisation and labour retrenchment, minimum wage and increasing public and private sector wages was discussed. This was against the interests of the business leaders and donors as it would entail an increase in private sector wages. The government in order to delay announced that it

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cdrb.org/journal/2002/2/1.pdf>

would increase wages as soon as procedural formalities are completed. Realizing this, the SKOP leadership demanded an immediate pay rise and in the face of SKOP's call for a 24-hour nationwide strike programme, a negotiating talk was carried out by the government. This broke down and prevented SKOP from organizing strike at the level they were threatening to. But in the late 1987, SKOP along with workers called for a 48-hour strike. It was supported by jute and textile workers' unions, but results were mixed.

From the above discussions, one comes to understand that trade union movement had significantly declined in Bangladesh, with major bans imposed upon any kind of organizing, rallies or demonstrations. Besides this the left movement also declined, with the fall of the Soviet Union and their amalgamation with the ruling party. But one also needs to understand that by this time a number of trade unions development, which included a thousand smaller federations that were aligned to different political wings. Soon after elections were held under the caretaker government, trade union activities gained a welfarist character, thus started engaging in activities related to education, conscious development, demand for wage justice etc for the workers.

### 3) **THE GARMENT WORKERS MOVEMENT**

Since the 1990's, there has been an unprecedented increase in small upsurges of workers working under the garments sector- as after the fall of the textile industry, this became the hub of labour movement and activity. The development of EPZ's has also brought about a lot of growing resentment amongst workers.

The period of 1990s saw the development of two phenomenon's in the economy of Bangladesh. While on one side there were more and more garment and other export oriented industries like prawn, construction, cement etc coming up and on the other there was major decrease in the 'working class' trade union movement. This led to the rise of worker militancy as a resultant of frustration for the lack of any form of organized leadership- where movements were more spontaneously organized and were for short term.

This period saw the existence of two remaining left units as well- the ultra left Jono Mukti Party and the Jatiyo Somaj Tantrik Dal, which affiliated the Jatiyo Shramik Dal (trade union). The former started organizing individual garment workers, while the latter's leader Khurshid whose interest lay with the growing population of slum dwellers, started organizing those who were working in the garment factories.<sup>10</sup> Further SKOP also remained active in pressurizing the government for certain reforms in the public sector. The battle within this industry has been grounded at the demand for just wages. Previously the responsibility of defining wages lay with the wage commission, which most of the times was ignored stating low productivity as the reason for having no standard wage. But a major breakthrough came with the SKOP winning a minimum wage agreement for the public sector, in 1993. This set the minimum wage as \$24 a month (950 taka) plus benefits.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmmed, February (2011), Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.



The garments industry wage was set at BDT 930 per month for unskilled workers and BDT 2300 for skilled workers. Despite this, the situation in the garment factories remained elusive, with their wages falling below the total government wage and benefits package. These low wages, along with, poor implementation of the law setting a standard 60-hour workweek with 1 day off and maximum 12 hours of overtime, resulted in an ongoing battle in the garments industry.

With the setting of a standard, the role of various existent unions came into being and the ongoing battle for minimum wages and better work conditions ensued. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand the trajectory of the garment workers movement.

**The development of events:**

On December, 27, 1990, a fire erupted in a factory named 'Saraka', located on the outskirts of the capital Dhaka. The fire which was caused by the non-observance of safety standards as laid down in official regulations, killed at least 25 women and children, and wounded many more. News of the carnage spread like wildfire to other garment factories. Within days, the city saw an explosion of women workers' anger, as thousands of garment labourers marched through the streets demanding proper compensation for the victims of the Saraka incident. The spontaneous outburst, moreover, led to the founding of the first, broad based trade union movement.<sup>11</sup> Several activists were arrested in this event, including the leader of the Jono Mukti Party. According to Ahmmed (Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies), this can be stated to be the initial stage of organizing of workers, where as such there was no institutional platform for workers to affiliate and put across their demands.

After the fall of Ershad regime, the caretaker government under Shahbuddin Ahmed was formed. This was the phase of democratic development in the socio political sphere of Bangladesh as soon the elections were going to take place. This was also the time when with the initial ban on trade union movement, a lot many, such federations started formulating. But none of them wanted to stand against the caretaker government as no one wanted to disturb the democratic forces. This was a helpless situation for activists and trade unionists as all the people stood united for the democratic forces to come.<sup>12</sup>

The period from 1991 to 2000, saw another turning point in the development of the movement. There was a collapse of the Soviet Union, a flow of garment orders and the influx of civil society movement. In 1993, a new approach was developed, by a union called the 'National Garment Workers' Federation'. It combined public campaigns around elementary demands of all garment workers, with support to strikes in individual factories. Thus, we have the influence of international and national civil society movements combining with trade unions to work for women rights, making them allies. An example being that in 1995 as a resultant of a sustained campaign, a movement with the slogan, "No more labour slavery - total leave on Friday is a must", was organized. Amiral Haque Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra), General

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<sup>11</sup> Custer.P (1997): Wage Slavery Amongst Women Garment Workers under the factory system in Bangladesh.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, February (2011), Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

Secretary of the National Garment Workers' Federation said "More than 100 workers were sacked from garment factories in November for their involvement in trade union activities, and more than 400 were dismissed without citing any reason. Ten factories were closed without giving the workers due wages and overtime payments. More than 100 factories had not paid the workers their due wages or overtime payments for the last three to four months." Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra) claimed that garment workers have to work 14-16 hours. "Sometimes workers have to tolerate physical torture and women workers are frequently harassed. They do not have housing, medical or transport facilities."

The period of 1998 onwards, led to debates over increase in wages. This debate was done in relation with the complementary inflation in food prices, rent and other essentials. The rise of spontaneous workers' organization that had been initiated in the 1990s had reached unprecedented heights by 2000. Despite the pressure to increase the minimum wages, there was no effort from the governments end to do the same despite the law stating for a revision of the same every three years.

This was also the time when two owner organizations mainly the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) were formed. These owners associations, very surprisingly were allowed to function even when other forms of organizing, trade union activities were banned. These owner associations in the course of time have become influential lobbyists and a source of providing money to political parties.

The period of 2000 also saw the rise of political left leaders, taking a stand on the issue of garment workers. We can trace the role of two prominent political leaders, who have been actively involved in the recent workers movement; these are Montu Ghosh, Communist Party Leader and senior member of Trade Union Centre and Moshrefa Mishu, President of Garment Workers Unity Forum. It is important to highlight over here, that till now there is no common platform for the workers to address to their demands. Despite them being united on a common issue of garment workers, political parties also formed different trade unions with a different constitution. The difference lies that Moshrefa Mishu, is a radical political leader, who wants workers to be organized under a political banner and Montu Ghosh, essentially being a political union activist, stressed upon the development of unions for the workers to collectively bargain and negotiate.

Thus we have the formation of different kinds of trade unions- those affiliated with international ngo's, that are event based, and are active participants to the civil society campaigns of advocacy; political ideology based trade unions like those of the Mishu and Ghosh; those of ruling and opposition parties, which often have links with the garment owners association (BGMEA and BKMEA) and ITGLWF which an international trade union federation.

A collision for the revision of the minimum wage structure of 1994, called the 930 Policy<sup>13</sup> was formulated in 2005. This was a collision of trade unions, NGO's, the women's wing of the British Council which pressured the government to make changes in the minimum wage. This was also the time when the international civil society started talking about making trade alliances thus taking the form of a rhetoric movement, where everybody was talking about the dismal conditions of wages of the garment sector. The KTS factory and Spectrum Factory fire in 2005 further infuriated the ongoing discourse, where a lot many human rights organization also joined in to talk about the miserable working conditions for the garment workers. Since there was such a huge discourse taking place, the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies became a secretariat for all these organizations and trade union federations to put forth their demands. A series of workshops were held with all forms of trade unions on a common platform irrespective of their political affiliations, to make a common minimum demand. A 10 point demand was formulated with a revised wage of BT 3000 to be the minimum wage, as the foremost demand. But before they declared the 10 point demands in 2006, another agitation took place, namely in the FS Sweater Factory, where the workers were protesting against the arrest of 3 fellow workers. . Mass demonstrations demanded an end to repression, release of arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay for extra work, public holidays, payment of wages due, assurance of safety provisions etc.<sup>14</sup> Women formed the backbone of this movement, with many coming out to demand their basic entitlements for regaining their human dignity.

This put forth a lot of pressure on the government, and also created the space to put forth the one demand i.e. of the revision of wages to BDT 3000 as their basic pay and a gross salary of 5000 BDT. But the garment owners and the government not only refused to increase the wages but also the existent wages were denied. Thus, the workers rose into rebellion and a fierce conflict between the owners and the workers started. The workers were not ready to agree to anything less than their demands and were ready to do anything to achieve that objective. 4000 factories went on a wildcat strike, 16 of them were burnt down and hundred were ransacked. This revolt was not a mere incident but took the form of an almost working class revolution, with workers from other sectors joining this upsurge.<sup>15</sup>

The result of the movement from 1991 to 2005, organized by trade unions, civil society organizations, international forums, media etc resulted in the formation of a Minimum Wage Board, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) being signed for the making of a Tripartite Committee constituting of worker, management and the government.

But this was also the time, that a resultant of so many vested interests and the stress on the formation of trade union federations for organizing workers, let to the spurting of all form of alliances and federations- thus we had genuine trade union movements, some mushrooming trade unions having affiliations with civil society organizations, individual formed trade unions, and some

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<sup>13</sup> 930 policy was named after the existent minimum wage of BDT 930 for unskilled garment workers, and stressed upon the revision of the same.

<sup>14</sup> <http://libcom.org/news/article.php/bangladesh-garment-revolt-140706>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, February (2011), Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

yellow trade unions<sup>16</sup>. Unfortunately it also led to disillusionment where no one, pro worker trade union could be traced and there were rumours that the BGMEA had somehow influenced the trade unions to accept such lowly wages.

In 2007 a state of emergency was declared, and all forms of organizing was banned, but the conditions of the working class did not improve and neither did their wages and neither did the protests end.

In 2008, another incident sparked of labour unrest, where on 30th December 2008, after working for whole night shift Salma, a linking operator of SQ Sweaters Ltd, died early morning at Dhaka Medical Collage Hospital. She was ill for last few days and tried her best to get a gate pass, but the management of the factory did not allow the same. She continued working due to *fear of being fired from the job and died*. The other workers facing similar conditions, demanded immediate compliance and trial, after the incident. But on the other hand they faced a locked factory and out of job. This immediately sparked another protest, where the workers organized themselves to charter out a 6 point demand- compliance for Salma, closing mandatory night duty, 8 hours of working shift, payment of over-time and bonus festival and withdrawal of false cases against workers. Besides this in 2008, the issue of rationing came up, where the owners declared that since the cost of living is increasing they would provide rations to the workers, but this too was not implemented. This struggle was undertaken to remove the restrictions.

In 2009, on 22<sup>nd</sup> February, the Mahajhut, many political parties united front (15 parties) organized a movement on the basis of a 10 point demand. Since the time term to clear the wages demanded was three years, this was one of the main demands of the movement. In June 2009, a dispute over pay and sackings in Ashulia, led to a garment worker being killed by the police- resultant an immediate spread of agitations, not only in here, but in the capital city, and in the industrial zone. Thousands of workers, gathered and set off towards the Export Processing Zones, soon the number of protestors swelled from 20,000 to 50,000. The police tried to block their way leaving 100 workers injured after firing of rubber bullets. A resultant of this massive upsurge was destruction of 8 factories, a huge quantity of ready-made garments, transport and machinery.

The next major upsurge took place last year (2010) when on account of the growing pressure from the workers movement, the government decided to formulate a minimum wage board and declared Takka 2000 as the minimum wage + Takka 800 as the house rent + Takka 200 as minimum allowance. The above mentioned wage rate was not that was demanded i.e. Takka 5000 and hence the workers were very unsatisfied. Further wages in the upper grades were not increased proportionately, and the Wage Board failed to mention the minimum wages in the sweater, knit, and piece rate workers. Moreover, it announced that the new structure would be effective from November 1, which was unusual. This created in a mass uprising where 30 factories were ransacked. This was not the sole reason, in the initial time period saw demonstrations for non-

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<sup>16</sup> Yellow trade unions are a term utilized for those trade unions that are pro employers or owners of garment factories.

payment of conveyance, lunch bills, encashment of casual leaves, low house rent, better supply of gas and water and finally against closure of 3 factories as well.

The period from 2006-2010 thus saw the further splitting of trade union activities on the basis of their vested interests and no specific form of organizing taking place to give shape to the sporadic outbursts of the workers. The reasons as told by Ahmmed (BILS) are the flow of international money for development of unions and gaining a bargaining space with state and owner agencies.

From the above discussion it can be clearly pointed out that barring the militant character of organizing, none of the features of *a social movement unionism theory* can be found in the case of Bangladesh. Though once can see that a positive development of the same can occur if the political conditions are conducive to the emergence of space for such kind of unionism. At present, the working class movement seems to be clearly dominated by reformist forces, where trade unions and political parties are ideologically oriented towards the creation of reforms within the existing framework of capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4) ONSLAUGHT OF IMPERIALISM WITHIN AND WITHOUT: CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS IN BANGLADESH**

It can be rightly placed here what Karl Marx said some 100 years ago-“Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” (*Capital, Volume I, Chapter 10*). Despite the amount of labour that the workers in Bangladesh put in, they not only have to go through dismal conditions of work but also have to bear the worst wages. As opined by Prof. Anu Muhammad, “the workers in Bangladesh are working to provide surplus value to the global capital without any value added to their labour power”. A survey report released by the World Bank in 2010 titled “The Global Apparel Value Chain, Trade and the Crisis (Policy Research Working Paper 5281)” finds that the per hour average wage in garment industry was USD2.44 in Turkey, USD2.17 in Mexico, USD1.44-1.88 in China, USD0.51 in India, USD0.38 in Vietnam, USD0.33 in Cambodia and USD0.31 in Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup> Now with effect of the new minimum wages 2010, per hour average wages of the workers is estimated to be USD 0.39 (BGMEA estimate). This explains the situation of the garment workers vis-à-vis the other Third World or Developing countries.

***The working class movement and the garments movement in Bangladesh has displayed certain broad characteristics. They are:-***

- Impact of International Phenomenon on the movements: International political upheavals like Cold war, Hegemony of USA, the collapse of the Soviet Union, position of China shifting from socialism to capitalism have had severe implications on the working class movements in Bangladesh. These shifts in the international politics had created major ideological crisis among the left led workers movement, resulting in the slow demise of the movement.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.agmarxismus.net/english/english4.htm>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2010/04/27/000158349\\_20100427111841/Rendered/PDF/WPS5281.pdf](http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2010/04/27/000158349_20100427111841/Rendered/PDF/WPS5281.pdf)

- Minimum wage-cross cutting issue in all the movements: The sole agenda of almost all the movements has been to increase the wages, implementation of available labour laws and provisions, democracy instead of military rule., anti- privatization. Thus, stressing on getting their basic legal and economic entitlements. (Annexure on a time line of minimum wages and breakdown of minimum wages 2010)<sup>19</sup>
- Sporadic and spontaneous in Nature: All the uprisings have had a characteristic of being unorganized, spontaneous and sporadic reflexes of on-the-spot events that took place. There has not been much stress on any specific form of working class ideology behind the uprisings, as most of the working class movements have never had the opportunity to gain a full working class character, often getting politicized in the process; either through political gains or through repression generated by the existent political regimes.
- Increase of workers militancy: The form of protest is mostly acts of vandalism, assaults, gheraos, and demonstrations. Taking a militant form, where they last for one or two days. Most of the times the leaders are well hidden and one cannot identify the workers. One of the usual tactics is to block the road which stops the traffic. The idea behind such strikes is to gain strength in number as soon as possible, so that tensions mount, thus pressurizing the government and the owners to take some form of action. This also acts as a threat to the police force as many a times they are also surrounded. Another strategy in this is to prevent victimization of workers.
- International relations of Subcontracting: Bangladesh, in its essential character has become an extremely vulnerable and dependent economy, owing to the forces of having to negotiate constantly with Post Fordist, Neoliberal and transnationalist tendencies. One of the World Bank representatives said “you either export or die”.<sup>20</sup> The garments industry has become a major victim to this as one sees that due to transnationalism and post fordism, more unique products and services, addressed to sophisticated consumption niches products started being produced. Further their overall identity could not be identified, as there was immense amount of sub contracting involved. Where it is not only the buyers who are contracting garment products to Bangladesh factories, but also these very factories, subcontract the products to smaller factories.<sup>21</sup> This in turn increases flexibility. Post fordism eliminates constraints to the free mobility of capital and maximizes its speed of movement. <sup>22</sup>This can be seen in the decentralization of production amongst different owners in various locations

<sup>19</sup> Please find annexure 1 and annexure 2 in the end.

<sup>20</sup>Custer.P (1997): Wage Slavery Amongst Women Garment Workers under the factory system in Bangladesh.

<sup>21</sup> Parvez.A, (2007), “A study on Wage Deprivation and Social Insecurity of Women Labour in Bangladesh”,Nagorik Uddyog and Partnership of Women in Action, Dhaka, Bangaldesh.

<sup>22</sup> Bonanno.A (et.al.): Global Post Fordism and Concepts of the state-

[http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:Gspv7sYKdEcl:www.repository.utl.pt/bitstream/10400.5/1261/1/REP-Moreira.%2520M.B.-6-bonanno\\_etal%2520vol%25204.pdf+&hl=en&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEShjGB2iZLlabN8IkevQh4W0XUVMmdzFVJqfvr5MRORUUUmZ8dNum-wBBYOovZuARqj8tYcRr3k-Y4jBSA0kYFXypNLIKVWF4iA9aa3WwDvunoH1VlvCFsBLs2sGMARIEMWVVIQLB&sig=AHIEtbSVKbMVsK35hZtbBgqiBc22dju8lw&pli=1](http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:Gspv7sYKdEcl:www.repository.utl.pt/bitstream/10400.5/1261/1/REP-Moreira.%2520M.B.-6-bonanno_etal%2520vol%25204.pdf+&hl=en&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEShjGB2iZLlabN8IkevQh4W0XUVMmdzFVJqfvr5MRORUUUmZ8dNum-wBBYOovZuARqj8tYcRr3k-Y4jBSA0kYFXypNLIKVWF4iA9aa3WwDvunoH1VlvCFsBLs2sGMARIEMWVVIQLB&sig=AHIEtbSVKbMVsK35hZtbBgqiBc22dju8lw&pli=1)

as seen in the garment factories of Bangladesh, be it in the EPZ areas or factories outside these industrial zones. This strategy allows for corporate control as by divesting aspects of production process, firms are able to break the bargaining power of unions, transfer risks to other producers, and exploit inexpensive labour or resources of other strategically located firms. It also enhances the leverage of capital in bargaining with the state. Smaller decentralized locations can choose locations where regulatory and welfare costs are low and organized labour is weak.

#### **4.1) DIALECTICS OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT WITHIN THE GARMENT WORKERS MOVEMENT:**

There is an existence of several registered and unregistered trade unions federations and alliances for garment workers, but despite the existence of these, the trade union movement in the garments sector is very weak. The left politics in Bangladesh as well as the union movement became very weak, taking a character which was not what a Tripartite Commission with the representation of labour, management and the government, symbolized. According to Altaf Parvez, the classical notion of these three representatives has been virtually non-existent in the labour movement of Bangladesh. A new middle class too has emerged who are active players in the country's labour policies. This class consists of academicians, consultants, who utilize the ideological strategic apparatus like media, think tanks, and connections with the political parties to justify existent policies. He further said that it was only in 2004 that the debate on a formal trade union under the EPZ Labour Organization and Industry Related Laws was introduced by the USA. But it was never fully implemented. Instead they came up with the concept of a Workers Welfare Committee (WWC).

Ratan Rajekuzaman (Socialist Party Of Bangladesh) has opined that this Worker Welfare Committee acts as a spy to the government and the factory owners, where though a formal election does take place, but the representative is often predetermined by the owner. Further he says that the democratic rights of labour under the ILO convention, 87 and 98- under which the workers have the right to organize, bargain and choose the leader, though being ratified by the State have never been implemented. And as soon as the workers try to form a union, the owners, employers, management and the government drastically curtail their rights. In the words of Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra), the EPZ's are anti fundamental rights of any citizen, they also do not comply with the ILO convention which has been ratified by Bangladesh, which is an international agreement and hence they themselves are in direct violation of the same. But no action is taken as the state itself is involved!

It is interesting to note that almost 2/3 of the women labours have no membership of any of the trade unions, though each federation has a women cell. Interviews with trade unionists reveal resource as a major problem to employ women leaders in the trade unions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Parvez,A, (2007), "A study on Wage Deprivation and Social Insecurity of Women Labour in Bangladesh",Nagorik Uddyog and Partnership of Women in Action, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The history of Bangladesh has been spurred with imposing bans on processions, meetings and hartals, leading to arrest and subsequent torture of a number of labour leaders. A similar response was replicated, when Montu Ghosh, a prominent labour activist and a senior Supreme Court Lawyer, Moshrefa Mishu, President of Garment Workers Unity Forum, and other labour leaders, were arrested for no apparent reasons, barring fabricated charges of directly engaging in acts of vandalism, stirring workers to strike and engage in violent acts, and having links with the banned party- Jammata-E-Islami. Montu Ghosh in an exclusive interview with the author stated that “It is surprising to see how the state perversely involves itself in torture of leaders who raise their voices against existent state policy. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July, I was taken into custody and tortured by the police for two and half months, with no apparent reason, barring the fact that I was considered to be the one who provoked the laborers to start the resistance and finally labeled to be the sole responsible person to be held accountable for all the problems of law and order, occurring as a resultant of the campaign”. The movement was planned for four months, but through systematic torture, the period provided by the State to provide comments on the New Minimum Wage, was used to crush the embryo of the movement. It is not just the leaders but workers too who are suppressed, as those workers who do become a part of trade union are arrested or implicated in cases, many a times of which they are not even a part of. It is surprising that the intelligentsia and the owners do not realize the fact that the workers are the ones who are the main force behind production and earning.

Ratan Rajekuzaman (Socialist Party Of Bangladesh), stated that “in August an industrial police force was formed in order to bring in industrial peace for all the industries which is inclusive of garment industries as well. This police shall be utilized to maintain law and order within the industries. This of course becomes a new weapon for industrial owners.” For the recent strike he exclaimed that “around 500 bullets and 100 tear shells were utilized, depicting how violent the police force is becoming.” He furthered it by saying that “...(the sight of strike) depicted a war like situation and to us it seemed like we were back in the era of the seventies.”

According to Ahhmed (BILS), a lot many conspiracy theories are also coming up with regards to the role of trade unions, where they are often blamed for taking a lot of money, engaging in party politics and working against the interests of the workers. He says that many of these rumours and reports can be said to be true, but it does not undermine the existence of certain very genuine trade unions like with which Montu Ghosh or Mishu are associated with, who shall not compromise with the state or the owners. This is the reason why they come under the scrutiny of the State.

From this we can safely conclude that an industry which essentially means a combination of workers, owners and the state, where the latter is the guardian of the former, workers rights are openly dismissed. The workers right of collecting, organizing and bargaining, with the help of trade unions is faced with stiff resistance. This is a direct violation of not only International standards of Human Rights, but also a blow on the face of principles guaranteed under the constitution.



Clawson (2003) argues that trade unions try to link with the new social movements and finally become a part of them. Fairbrother identifies three critical factors that are essential for the trade unions to have a social movement dimension in the contemporary society. They are the questions of capacity, leadership and ideology. But the real trade union strategy is one that is based on the grass roots and emerges out according to the particular national circumstances and struggle of the working class (Fairbrother & Webster, 2008). But this character is essentially lacking in Bangladesh, due to the dual characteristic and immense proliferation of trade unions that have vested interests. Besides, even if trade unions try to advocate for the rights of the workers, the essential imperialist character of the state, suppresses such attempts, striking simultaneously at the capacity, leadership and ideology of the trade union activities. Thus we can again prove the fact that the character of the working class movement is distorted and is unable to formulate into a social movement having widespread impact of a total change in the conditions of the working class.

**Whose demands are actually articulated: A class analysis of conflicting interests**

Ratan Rajekuzaman (Socialist Party of Bangladesh) states that if we take the entire history of social movements within Bangladesh, we can easily state that the basic demand of all the movements has always been security of life. The workers resist as their basic demand is a right to a decent life which includes the security and stability of a means of livelihood and wage. The workers in the garment factories are demanding for wages; the Phulbari movement is resisting against the loss of their homes- and hence their socio-cultural and economic roots/base, the environment movement is against loss of natural resources which are essential for the mankind; which overall is a reflection of the loss of security of life.<sup>24</sup> The demands started off with the issue of safety (garments workers violence started when the Saraka factory caught fire). But the workers also linked the issue of safety with wage and eventually the issue of decent wage took precedence over all the other issues. The movement does not as such try to address the economic relations between the worker and the employer but to bargain for better wages and co-opt in the existing structure.

A fine grained analysis of the class character in the articulation of demands shows that it has multiple layers which tends to create confusions. There are multiple conflicts between the interest of the petty garment owner and big owners, Skilled workers v/s non-skilled workers, workers working on time rate v/s those working on piece rate. Further according to Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra) (Trade Union Leader), it is the operators who are mostly involved and pioneer in the struggles as it is their salary that is affected the most. Besides this, many leading dailies have reported the confusion between wages versus the employee grading pattern and disproportional increases in wages among the skilled and unskilled workers. The lesser skilled enjoy higher increase in wages, as the upper limit of wages have seen minimum change in comparison to the lower limit. This creates a class conflict among the workers thereby fragmenting the movement. The manifold divisions among the workers marginalize them more and more which makes them vulnerable for the owners and employers to exploit them and maximize profit. The unrest allows for garment owners to compromise on national standards of taxation, closing factories and earning insurance amounts on the pretext of labour unrest. It also creates conditions

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with author at SOCIALIST PARTY OF BANGLADESH office (2011)

to lay off workers and build scope for new workers at lower costs. Many a times the state brands this as a conspiracy against national interest by outsiders forces (mostly neighbouring competing countries), thus undermining the scope of buyers to revert the process of importing from these countries.

From the discussions a few reflections into the differences in the thinking of the various stakeholders came across with respect to the condition of the garment workers and the available mechanisms. Where on the one hand a garment owner (name withheld on account of anonymity) opined that “the garment industry accounts for a very small stake in the entire income source of an owner, and that it amounts to maximum 20% of the profit they earn. Most of us own construction companies and that is the new and major source of earning, thus I am not really bothered about what happens to the labour. What I am interested in is getting profit out of the total production. If I am able to do so at the cost of labour, this is the best option available for me, the next best being, shutting down the factory!”<sup>25</sup> He also stressed on the importance of development of a mid management staff, which would look into the welfare of the workers. But this is a possibility only in the bigger factories who can afford such a person’s salary. If the State is providing for this, then it will surely overlook the thousands of smaller factories, which also have labour problems. He very clearly said that at any cost it will always be a “win-win” situation for the garment owners, as the State shall never allow them to suffer, at the cost of losing an industry which is the backbone of its economy!

They also believe that trade unionism between workers would lead to strikes as some of their demands would remain unfulfilled and hence this would affect the overall productivity. Thus, their means of disciplining workers will get diminished if trade union rights flourish amongst the workers.

It has also been found that out of 300 parliamentarians, maximum of them are the owners of the garment factories. Thus being the ones who run the government as well as altering the rule of the law as per their wishes. This is a perfect example of the rule of power than the power of rule to change conditions that are conducive for a better survival of the laboring class.

The above analysis also leads us to negating the development of any kind of working class movement or a social movement.

## **5) EXPLOITATION OF THE GARMENT WORKERS VIS-À-VIS THE AVAILABLE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS**

We have traced the exploitative conditions of the garment workers in our preceding paragraph and how various legislations have been passed at varying points of time, as a direct result of the pressure created by trade unionists, workers, and other civil society networks. But the conditions have not been conducive to any labour movement in Bangladesh. Despite ratification of ILO’s International Labour Code, that aims at guaranteeing the minimum conditions for workers

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Garment Factory Owner at a hotel (2011)

organizational rights, protecting their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining thus making them legitimate partners in not only improving their working conditions, but recognition of their voices in social dialogues, Bangladesh's garment industry both in the EPZ and outside depict a grim picture.

I shall here try to contextualize the demands of the movements, which have been traced in the timeline of the uprisings under the section of the garment workers movement since the 1990's. In brief the demands have been: to ensure fair wages, specifically proper implementation and payment of minimum wages and revision of the wages by the Minimum Wage Board, establish the worker's rights and human rights, by way of demanding compensation for victims of various accidents and even deaths, caused by fire, sickness allowance, weekly off's, maternity allowance benefits, improving the working condition and environment in working places in the form of demanding of weekly off, having toilet facilities for workers, formation of plant level unions, by way of having the capacity to form trade unions, collectively bargain and negotiate. The demands by way of examples are:

There are very few countries which openly and officially exclude zones from the National Labour Legislation and System of labour-management relations. In Bangladesh section 11A (Power to exempt zones from operation of certain laws) of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority Act provides that:

"The Government may, by notification in the *Official Gazette*, exempt a zone from the operation of all or any of the provisions of all or any of the following enactments, or direct that any such enactment or any provision thereof shall, in its application to a zone, be subject to such modifications or amendments as may be specified therein, namely: the Employment of Labour Act 1965, the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969, the Boilers Act 1923, the Factories Act 1965..."

Thus the EPZs are excluded from the scope of the Industrial Relations Ordinance (1969), which provides for organizing and bargaining rights in other sectors, and the *Guide to investment in Bangladesh* published by the Board of Investment states that the law forbids the formation of any labour union in EPZs. This clearly states how a national law can be availed by a section of workers and the rest cannot, thus having different laws for different parties.

The above restrictions also give a clear cut view of unsatisfactory state of affairs within the garments sector. An ILO report states the conditions of the workers (mainly women) within the EPZ areas. Women not only make up the majority of the EPZ workforce, they tend to suffer more as well, which includes long working hours, low wages, almost total absence of social welfare facilities; where they are viewed as replaceable and their conditions do not receive sufficient attention in labour and social relations.<sup>26</sup> Bangladesh provided a perfect ground where part time women labourers could be hired, made to work to keep the operations continuous and fired according to market conditions without having to pay over time charges.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.mail-archive.com/futurework@dijkstra.uwaterloo.ca/msg01037.html>

This gave progression to a phenomenon, where what the workers are competing for is minimum wages and not high paying jobs or skill development. Thus there has been a huge intensification of labour, where the workers are unable to meet demands to everyday life, owing to low wages, continuous work with no leaves, low job security etc; thereby creating a sense of alienation. Thus the worker is akin to a commodity which can be borrowed and utilized and thrown, as per the will of the owner.

The workers here also understand that higher wage demands or unwillingness to accept cuts will force such 'local operations' to shift and be relocated. Thus there is no certainty that production shall continue in association with Bangladesh. There have been instances of re-run; where production has been shifted from one area to another e.g. the transfers of production from the Newly Industrialized countries like Hong Kong to South Asia.<sup>27</sup> This increases the vulnerability of the workers. If we take into account the Factory Act of 1965, there are several clauses that are openly flouted by the garment owners. To name a few is Clause 51 dealing with a weekly holiday, Clause 53 which deals with the working hours, Clause 65 prohibiting women to work after 8 pm. In an interview with Ratan Rajekuzaman (Socialist Party Of Bangladesh) he stated a study which indicated, that 67 percent of female workers received wages below the minimum wage of unskilled worker fixed by the government. Many of the workers work for 9-12 hours in 54% of factories and 12-16 hours in 46% of factories. In the latter category none of them are able to get any overtime pay for the extra hours of work.

Interviews with Ruhul Amin (Secy, Garment Shramik Trade Union Kendra) and Jolly (Trade Union Leaders), depicted how workers are exploited, where despite protests by trade unions, no implementation of a weekly holiday takes place. The EPZ's and other factories often see gates opening at 11 pm at night for women to go home, often with no conveyance facilities. Thus also empathizing on the extension of the daily work hour, where surplus value is appropriated from the workers through their physical toil to cater to the demands of the market. Another phenomenon is that a system of fines are imposed, where in case of line production, a mistake by one employee, results in a group of workers being penalized with fines, usually the waiver of overtime pay benefits, similarly if a weekly holiday is taken by a labour or if the production target is not met in the stipulated time. Child labour is a big issue, where despite the introduction of the Harkin Bill in 1992, child labour is utilized by the garment owners as helpers to add to production but in the process majorly cutting labour costs, by making children work overtime at miserly costs amounting to 100-200 BDT per month. Besides this many times a new entry into the factory is given the status of a trainee, and this position continues for much longer than the 3 months prescribed in the law.

The above clearly shows that the profit drives the entire production process and the labour is exploited more and more for increasing profits. Thus one can safely conclude that Bangladesh has been able to make a mark in the world market only because of super exploitation of its labour.

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<sup>27</sup> Custer.P (1997): Wage Slavery Amongst Women Garment Workers under the factory system in Bangladesh.

Despite the labour movement in Bangladesh being divided over aims and tactics, where some stress for broad social change, and other focusing on issues related to daily survival and basic entitlements, the aim is to push for changes in the labour laws which are either not being implemented or are non-existent. Thus the continuous struggle on part of trade unions, protests by garment workers, NGO and other civil society groups like media etc, has resulted in bringing about a re-interpretation of existing laws and sometimes the constitution of a new law. This can be seen in the development of the Industrial Relations Ordinance (1969), tripartite commission (80's), Abolition of Child Labour (1992-93), formation of schools and stipends, monitoring of phasing out of child labour, Declaration of Minimum Wage Board (1993), The 930 policy (2005), 10 point charter demanding new wages (2006), Workers Welfare Committee in EPZ areas (2009/10), Revision of minimum Wage Board and declaration of new minimum wages (2010). For all of these demands, specific charters were handed out and negotiations took place with the government and the owners bodies.

However, it is only through the utilization of strategies of wild-strikes, huge demonstrations, campaigning and lobbying on part of the workers and trade unionists, that these changes have been achieved! The process as seen in the preceding paragraphs clearly depicts the hostile situation towards the trade union movement or labor movement in Bangladesh. A free and vibrant trade union movement is one of the pillars of democracy and an indicator of a nation's progressive development. Trade union right is a human right which is protected by international and national treaties. The freedom of association and democracy share the same roots, i.e. of liberty, independence, pluralism and a voice in decision making. But Bangladesh has openly flouted these rights, thereby cutting at the very core of democracy as seen in the various cases where workers, labour leaders have been arrested, thereby curtailing basic civil liberties as well. By forming say a Worker's Welfare Committee or Association and not a union in the EPZ areas, government's are guilty of restricting the rights of those they employ and hence violate the provisions of ILO's Convention 87 on freedom of association!

Ahmed (BILS) opines that "if we go according to the legal framework then for example the demand for collective bargaining is being raised by agents who are outside the premises of the factory. These agents might or might not be representatives of the workers, and put across the demands as per what they think is right for the workers. Thus, we are not adhering to the available legal frameworks as the workers have no right to collectively bargain and demand within the factory premises, as prescribed by the law (Industrial Disputes). And if they do, they immediately face repression, which becomes against the available legal framework." He further opined that "however these demands are genuine in nature, as most of the demands are under the human rights framework and are enshrined under the constitution as well. But these too are met with repression which are anti-law, for example, in case of any disputes; there is no reason for the police to be called for matters that can be settled through negotiation. It is strange that the police arrest people who demand for implementation of law!"

## **6) CHALLENGES OF THE MOVEMENT:**

The biggest challenge that the industrial workers (garment) movement is facing is the lack of an organizational culture and an extended consciousness on part of the workers regarding their situation and how they can handle it. According to Montu Ghosh, this also brings in the role of the trade unionists, where they have to politically build the movement of the workers by building their consciousness through education and development of leadership. He states that there are many federations of trade unions that have come up, which are often those of the workers. The workers having membership of these, are easily misguided, thus sabotaging the building of a workers movement. The above is also a challenge where Amirul Haque Amin, secretary general of the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF). (Daily Star, Sep 14 08) stated that "We know we have a lot of responsibilities in the wake of any unrest in the industrial sector. But, sometimes we feel helpless as we have no control over the workers."

Various political parties have varied stands on the issue of the garment workers movement. The left oriented trade union leaders (who have political consciousness) stressed on the development of a separate working class movement, while other trade union leaders along with NGO and academicians, stressed upon the need of advocacy and campaign (development terms) to build upon workers consciousness for them to subsequently organize themselves. This development of a human rights language by the trade unions can be seen, as a resultant of the civil society movement developing parallel to the trade union movement and then overcoming the obstruction faced by the classical trade unions. The civil society movement, stressing on the development of a discourse on human rights (essential for the development of a society), has merged with the trade union movement, where many NGO employees are active members of trade unions as well.

Since the left and the trade union movement have always been challenged by the different stakeholders, it becomes very difficult for them to recruit workers in the factories as members of the various trade unions. And whenever they do so, the state and the owners engage in immediate repression, thereby leading to the fall of a developing struggle. It is thus essential for workers to develop leadership amongst themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

Global Post Fordism has been seen as a strategy to weaken subordinate classes in society. The crisis of unions, the generation of bad jobs, the proliferation of part time and flexible occupations and the hyper sensitivity of capital has led to the decay of many states. Its effect has seen to be having totalizing effects which have resulted in leaving very little room for any form of resistance. But this has also led to the growth of some movements, which are trying hard to resist the effects of global capital.

The socio political and economic changes taking place in Bangladesh have the scope to deepen struggle and develop new political forces for a new political agenda. It is also essential to see all the movements occurring in Bangladesh, be it the Phulbari Movement, the Environment Movement or the Industrial workers movement are coming forth due to existent conditions. There needs to be

some kind of coordination between the resistance in the rural areas and resistance in the cities, so as to develop a new movement or to work towards Social Movement Unionism.

The garment workers were combative since the early days of the industry - but the younger generation of today is more assertive. Unlike their parents, who were mostly migrants from rural villages, many of today's young city-bred workers are more literate and more aware of the contradiction between their supposed legal rights within bourgeois democracy and the reality of their situation; this emergent working class has progressively formed a culture of solidarity within itself, as a mode of existence, that counterposes its own class power to its exploiters. "This generation of garment workers is much more literate and politically aware than their predecessors," said Alam [a political scientist]. "They have grown up in the slums not the villages and know that they need to be united and to demonstrate in the streets to realise their aims." (Guardian - 30 June 2010)

With regards to workers militancy, it is not something which can be associated with incidences of violence, as this militancy is built on workers class capacity to take on the power that be. Violence in this capacity is defensive and incidental, but it is imperative to understand that this is giving rise to greater confidence, and a unity in the struggle that is undertaken.

The Bangladeshi working class is both archaic and modern. Archaic in the sense that its conditions of life often resemble those described by such as Engels in his "The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844" - terrible insanitary overcrowded slum housing, malnutrition and adulterated food, brutality and extreme overwork in the factory, strong resistance by bosses to trade unions and factory legislation, the state using military repression against strikes and demonstrations etc. But modern insofar as it functions as the recently proletarianised labour power of an export-orientated outsourcing economy (of finished goods, rather than the colonial-era export economy of raw materials) that has been used as a replacement for much Western manufacturing.<sup>28</sup>

A few recommendations can be that trade unions have to stop their tendency of fragmenting as per their vested interests, if they really want to work towards the interests of the workers. While tracing the history of the garment workers movement, it becomes clear that there is no common platform which has been developed for the workers to put up their demands through. Most of the trade unions have political links, which have either acted for or against the interests of the workers, at varying points of time.

Conscience building and sensitizing of the garment factory owners is an important factor, and for this is the requirement of a negotiating party (a trade union, or a worker represented forum). It is essential to make the owners and the State understand that the workers realize that there is no better economic option that is available to them, than to work in this industry. And hence, the workers would never want to destroy the industry as it is their only source of livelihood.

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<sup>28</sup> Marriot. R (2010): *Tailoring to Needs: Garment Worker Struggles in Bangladesh* <http://insurgentnotes.com/2010/10/garment-workers-bangladesh/> accessed at 11.30 pm on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

Industrial struggles usually acquire a social character involving people who are not exactly stakeholders. As we have witnessed in the entire trade union movement of Bangladesh, where it is not the workers, but the various political party and trade union leaders, who have been involved in organizing and mobilizing the workers by show of solidarity and conscientizing them through education and skill building. It is essential to understand that the role of trade unions have recently started, they cannot dictate a worker's uprising, what they can merely do is to make or create solidarity efforts. What is also required is the role of popular media and middle class intelligentsia, which would help create public opinion. For Bangladesh itself it is a period of transition and hence it becomes important to capture these changes for finding new ways of reaching alternatives.



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Pratyush Chandra, Blogger, India.

Garment Factory Owner (name withheld)

### **Annexure 1:**

#### **Timeline - Minimum Wages in the RMG sector in Bangladesh**

The minimum wages for the garment industry was first declared Tk. 627 for the lowest grade in 1985.

The wage was reviewed after 9 years to Tk.930 in 1994, 48.33% increase.

After 12 years in 2006 it was revised to Tk.1662.5, 78.76% increase.

The third review of the minimum wages has been made after 3 years in 2010 to Tk. 3000, 80.45% increase.

### **Annexure 2:**

#### **The Minimum Wages for the Garment Sector - 2010 Break Down of the Minimum Wages 2010**

Grades	Basic BDT	House Rent (40% of basic)	Medical BDT	Gross BDT
VII	2000	800	200	3000
VI	2230	892	200	3322
V	2395	958	200	3553
IV	2615	1046	200	3861
III	2870	1148	200	4281
II	5000	2000	200	7200
I	6500	2600	200	9300
Trainees				2500

(Source: [http://www.gtz-progress.org/2008/files/MFB MinWage Keynote%20Pape Final.pdf](http://www.gtz-progress.org/2008/files/MFB_MinWage_Keynote%20Pape_Final.pdf))