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Voice of Workers in Bangladesh Trade Unions' Joint Position Paper

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS
বাংলাদেশ ইনস্টিটিউট অব লেবার স্টাডিজ-বিল্‌স

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The Bangladesh Trade Unions, under the umbrella of SKOP (Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad) and the NCCWE (National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education), have come together to present this joint proposal.

Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) the mainstream trade union movement in the country established in a joint meeting of the top leaders of 12 national trade unions in Dhaka on 13 April 1983. It was, in fact, the turning point in Bangladesh trade union movement at a time when normal trade union activities had been banned by the then military government. At present, SKOP represents as many as fourteen national centres of trade unions in the country, which constitute the majority of the workforce organised by the national trade union movement. The National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education (NCCWE), as a wing of SKOP, has been playing an important role in advancing education and training among the workers, hence fostering a knowledge-based labour movement in the country.

Changes and Transitions in the World of Work in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's labour market, with a workforce of 73.75 million in 2024, is rapidly evolving under internal and external pressures. However, informal employment remains dominant at 84.9%, contributing to wage stagnation, poor working conditions, and fluctuating productivity.

Changes in economic structure and employment: The broad economic sectors have been undergoing transformations. The contribution of agriculture to the GDP has decreased, and employment in this sector has also declined over the past decades. In contrast, the manufacturing sector's contribution, both in terms of GDP and employment creation, has increased.

Wage Stagnation and Productivity: Wages in Bangladesh have struggled to keep up with inflation, resulting in stagnating real wages. Labour productivity is also low, and the limited investment in skills training has further hampered productivity, as workers' skills often fail to meet market demands. This low-wage, labour-intensive growth model faces sustainability issues as automation increases.

Technological Transformation and the Future of Work: Industry 4.0 is reshaping the global job market, and Bangladesh is vulnerable. Automation and AI threaten sectors like textiles, which could see millions of jobs displaced. A 2021 World Bank report warns that up to 5.4 million jobs could be lost by 2030 unless workers are retrained. A study conducted by Aspire to Innovate (a2i) programme shows that 4RI will create about 10 million jobs in several sectors like Industrial Robotics control, automated packaging, Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM), 3D printing, internet of things, cyber security, and big data analytics. On the other hand, 4IR will eliminate many of existing occupations. However, the same study claims that 5.5 million people will lose their jobs in the next 10 years in Bangladesh due to the 4IR. Industries which are at risks of higher job loss include Readymade Garments (RMG), furniture, agro-processing, tourism, and leather.¹

Migration, Gender Inequality, and Youth Employment: Each year, over around 5-7 lakh Bangladeshi workers migrate abroad, sending home over USD 24.7 billion in remittances in 2022. However, these workers often face exploitation and poor working conditions. At home, youth unemployment remains high at 10.6%, more than double the national rate, and gender inequality further exacerbates the issue. Female labor participation is only 43% compared to 80% for men, with women concentrated in low-paying, informal jobs.

¹ Ahmed, N. (2023). 'Bangladesh needs to do better for its elderly'.

Digitalization and Gig economy: Over the past decade, Bangladesh's gig economy has experienced significant growth, with nearly a million individuals now engaged in online freelancing, outsourcing, ridesharing, and delivery services.² However, this sector heavily relies on temporary and part-time roles filled by independent contractors and freelancers instead of full-time employees. Despite the expansion, gig workers face several major concerns, including inadequate job quality, job insecurity, and the lack of insurance coverage for injuries sustained during work. The protection of their interests remains insufficient due to the absence of supportive policies.

Demographic transition: As per the Population and Housing Census, 2022, over 15.3 million Bangladeshis are aged 60 years or above, which constitutes 9.28 percent of the total population—an increase from 7.48 percent in 2011.³ It is also claimed that Bangladesh will become an ageing society by 2029 and an aged society by 2047 and the speed at which Bangladesh is likely to transition from an "ageing" society to the "aged" stage is faster than advanced Asian countries and rich European countries.⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projects that by 2050, people aged 60 and above in Bangladesh will number 3.6 crore and constitute 22 percent of the total population.⁵ Consequently the needs of the elderly in terms of housing, food, healthcare, and financial services, are expected to be enormous.

Climate Change: Bangladesh ranked the seventh extreme disaster risk-prone country in the world as per the report from the Global Climate Risk Index 2021.⁶ The country is experiencing the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme heat waves, floods, droughts, and rising sea levels. These changes are having a significant impact on various sectors of the country's economy, especially on the working people. ILO estimates that the impact of rising heat on exposed indoor and outdoor workers already reduces Bangladesh's annual economic output potential by approximately 4% of GDP and will continue to grow if not addressed.⁷ Other estimates also show that due to heat stress, 4.84% of working hours and 3.83 million full-time jobs will be lost by 2030.

To tackle these challenges of the changes and transitions, Bangladesh needs a comprehensive strategy promoting fair wages, improved working conditions, and sustainable industrial relations. Strengthening trade unions and enforcing labor laws that protect workers' rights, ensure safe workplaces, and offer equal opportunities are essential steps toward social justice and inclusivity.

Purpose

Our joint position is grounded in a shared commitment to advancing the rights and well-being of all workers in Bangladesh, particularly in light of the rapid transformation of the labour market. The purpose of our united stance is shaped by three key objectives:

Social Justice, Equality, and Inclusiveness

Our primary goal is to foster a labour system in Bangladesh that ensures fairness, equality, and inclusiveness for all workers, regardless of their socioeconomic status, gender, or background.

² <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/interests-gig-economy-workers-remain-unprotected-experts-3272496>

³ Ahmed, N. (2023). 'Bangladesh needs to do better for its elderly'.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/bangladesh-needs-do-better-its-elderly-3470111>

⁴ <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/demographic-dividend-how-long-can-bangladesh-enjoy-it-3578701>

⁵ Zaman, A. M. and Parvez, S. (2024). "Ageing in Bangladesh: Are we ready for more social spending?"

<https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/ageing-bangladesh-are-we-ready-more-social-spending-3574911>

⁶ <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/publications/climate-vulnerability-index>

draft#:~:text=Bangladesh%20is%20vulnerable%20to%20both,Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202021

⁷ Ibid

Sustainable Industrial Relations

The development of sustainable industrial relations is at the heart of our efforts to promote a harmonious balance between workers, employers, and the economy. We believe that a strong industrial relations framework is essential for maintaining labour peace, boosting productivity, and ensuring long-term economic stability.

Human Rights, Safe Workplaces, and Fundamental Freedoms

Our third key objective focuses on the protection of human rights, the promotion of safe and secure workplaces, and the upholding of fundamental freedoms for all workers.

Our Concerns

We express deep concern about the following:

- 1. Status of Workers' Rights:** The enforcement of labour laws remains weak, with violations of workers' rights being commonplace. This includes the suppression of trade union activities, limited access to safe workplaces, and the erosion of wages and benefits.
- 2. Wages of the workers:** Low wages, irregular wage revisions, wage due and wage theft, and decreased real wages are vital wage-related concerns.
- 3. Commitments to National and International Obligations:** Bangladesh has committed to various international frameworks, including the Decent Work Country Program (DWCP), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Government of Bangladesh's roadmap, the National Action Plan (NAP). However, the progress on these commitments remains inadequate. National policies and plans lack strong implementation mechanisms.
- 4. Fourth Industrial Revolution and Technological Transformation:** The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) brings with it the potential for reduced employment opportunities. Automation, digitalization, and the integration of new technologies are replacing traditional jobs, with low-skilled workers being the most vulnerable. Without proactive measures, this transformation will exacerbate inequality.
- 5. Increased Informality in the Labor Market:** The "new normal" has led to increased informal employment. Many workers are without formal contracts, social protection, or adequate safety nets. This trend has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 6. Gender Inequality in the Workplace:** Women workers in Bangladesh continue to face significant wage gaps, discrimination, and limited access to leadership positions. The gender-based disparity in employment opportunities also reflects structural barriers in education, skills, and policy frameworks.
- 7. Youth Workers:** Despite the growing youth population in Bangladesh, young people face significant challenges in accessing decent work. Many are underemployed or trapped in low-quality jobs, contributing to a growing sense of frustration and alienation among the youth.
- 8. Migrant Workers:** Bangladeshi migrant workers contribute significantly to the national economy, yet they remain one of the most vulnerable groups, facing exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and a lack of social protection both at home and abroad.

National Minimum Wage

The National Minimum Wage is a critical issue, and setting appropriate wage-fixing parameters is essential. These parameters should consider factors such as family size and basic living requirements to ensure fair and livable wages. The formation of a permanent Wage Commission, which should be inclusive and democratic, would help ensure that wage setting is based on comprehensive input from all stakeholders. Moreover, wage revision should be conducted annually to account for inflation, protecting workers' purchasing power over time. To solidify these practices, provisions related to minimum wages must be included in labour laws and rules, ensuring legal backing for this essential protection.

Ensuring trade union rights

It is necessary to lower the threshold for Trade Union (TU) registration to 10 persons (on the basis of the spirit of C-87), making it easier for workers to organize and protect their rights. Additionally, there should be a review of the High Court observation regarding the role of the Department of Labour's (DOL) representatives in TU general councils and elections.

Labour law reform

It is essential for creating a uniform legal framework that applies across all sectors and regions. This includes extending labor law protections to areas like Export Processing Zones (EPZ), Special Economic Zones (SEZ), and other regions currently excluded from such protections. Furthermore, contradictory laws, such as the Essential Service Act 2023, should be eliminated to ensure consistency in workers' rights. Revising the definition of "worker" to reflect modern work contexts will help make labour laws more inclusive. It is also vital to include provisions to gender equality in the workforce, guaranteeing equal wages for male and female workers and eliminating all forms of gender discriminations and harassment at workplaces.

Formalization of Informal Sector

To address the formalization of the informal sector, the definition of "worker" must be expanded to include informal sector workers. Creating a sector-based database is crucial that would issue identity cards and ensure that all workers, regardless of their sector, receive appointment letters upon recruitment. This step is key to improving job security and access to benefits for informal sector workers.

Reopening of closed national industries and revitalizing the sick ones

The reopening of national industries is crucial for economic revitalization and job creation. Government-owned jute, sugar, textile mills, paper mills, hardboard and packaging mills, match factories, cement, chemical, rerolling, and steel mills, chemical industries should be prioritized, with the government taking necessary steps to ensure their smooth operation. Reviving these industries under government authority will help preserve national assets and create employment opportunities.

Social Protection/Security

Social protection and security for workers is a pressing need. Introducing a Universal Pension Scheme (considering workers' needs and issues) would provide a safety net for workers in their old age. Additionally, rationing systems should be implemented to ensure workers have access to basic necessities. Workers' compensation should be aligned with ILO Convention 121, and free healthcare must be provided to all workers. Moreover, low-cost, modest accommodation should be made available to workers, and employment injury schemes (EIS) and daycare centers must be ensured across all workplaces. The education of workers' children should also be prioritized, with free access to quality education guaranteed. Unemployment benefits need to be introduced and it is essential to establish hospitals in industrial belts to ensure health care facilities to workers and their families.

Ensuring TU representation in all policy-making bodies focusing on inclusiveness

Trade union representation in policy-making bodies is essential to ensure workers' voices are heard. This representation should be included in processes such as budget preparation, SDG implementation, and alignment with various ministries, including the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, and Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment.

Ensuring job security

Job security must be improved by eliminating outsourcing practices that often undermine workers' rights. Contractual recruitment should be abolished for jobs that are permanent in nature, and workers in such roles should receive the same benefits as permanent employees, in accordance with labor laws.

Ensuring Just Transition for climate and Automation issues

In response to climate change and automation, a just transition is necessary. Trade union representation in policy-making bodies dealing with these transition issues is critical to protect workers' interests. Workers affected by climate change must be rehabilitated, and opportunities for skilling and reskilling should be provided to help them adapt to new labour market demands.

Ensuring Safe Migration & re-integration

For safe migration and reintegration, costs associated with migration should be minimized, and brokers must be regulated to prevent exploitation. Trade union rights for migrant workers must be safeguarded, and returning workers should have access to soft loans to support their reintegration into the workforce. A structured system for migration should be established, covering the entire process from recruitment to social and economic reintegration.

Ratification of International Labour Standards (ILS)

The ratification of International Labour Standards (ILS) is a critical step toward improving workers' rights globally. The key ILO conventions that should be ratified include ILO Convention 155 (Occupational Safety and Health), ILO Convention 156 (Workers with Family Responsibilities), ILO Convention 187 (Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health), ILO Convention 121 (Employment Injury Benefits), ILO Convention 189 (Domestic Workers), and ILO Convention 190 (Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work), ILO Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention). These conventions are vital for ensuring comprehensive protection for workers in diverse sectors.

Reinforcement of Key Demands

We emphasize the need for:

- 1. Inclusive and Functional Tripartite Forums:** We call for the strengthening of tripartite bodies (comprising government, employers, and trade unions) to ensure functional and inclusive social dialogue on labour issues. These forums must be transparent, accessible, and effective in addressing key labor concerns.
- 2. Accountability of the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE):** Both agencies play a critical role in enforcing labor laws and ensuring worker safety. We demand stronger accountability, better resourcing, and capacity-building to ensure they fulfill their mandates effectively.
- 3. Full Participation of Trade Unions and Enhancing Collective Bargaining:** Trade unions must be fully engaged in decision-making processes, particularly those related to labor law reforms, workplace safety, and social protection. The exclusion of unions undermines democratic decision-making and workers' rights.

To achieve the objectives outlined in this joint position, trade unions in Bangladesh call upon several key stakeholders to take coordinated and effective action. Achieving lasting change in the labour market requires a collective effort to promote decent work, protect workers' rights, and ensure sustainable economic growth. Below is an expanded call for action targeted at specific stakeholders, reflecting the unique context of Bangladesh's labour landscape.

1. Broader and Effective Partnership and Collaboration

A holistic, inclusive, and coordinated effort is vital to address the multi-faceted challenges facing the labor market in Bangladesh. Trade unions call for the establishment of broad coalitions and effective partnerships that include the government, employers, trade unions, civil society, and international organizations.

- Government, employers, and trade unions must work together to create an enabling environment that fosters decent work, improve existing labour standards, ensure labour rights, and promotes sustainable economic growth. Collaboration is essential to tackle challenges like informal employment, wage stagnation, workplace safety, and labour migration.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in holding stakeholders accountable and advocating for vulnerable workers, particularly in sectors such as the garment industry and informal economy. They should be involved in dialogues and decision-making processes to ensure that marginalized voices are heard.
- The creation of broad coalitions is crucial for addressing complex challenges such as gender inequality, informal employment, and the future of work amid technological transformation. These partnerships will drive long-term change by leveraging diverse expertise, mobilizing resources, and ensuring accountability.

2. Government

Trade unions urge the Government of Bangladesh to take decisive actions to protect workers' rights, improve workplace conditions, and align national labour laws with international standards. This is critical to promoting social justice, fostering a fair labour system, and ensuring Bangladesh's economic competitiveness on the global stage.

- Ratify and Adhere to International Labour Standards (ILS): The government must ratify all relevant conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), particularly those related to workers' rights, gender equality, and workplace safety. Compliance with international labour treaties is crucial for improving Bangladesh's labour standards, especially in export sectors like ready-made garments (RMG), which is vital for the economy.
- Amend the Labour Law: The current Labour Act requires amendments to bring it in line with international standards. Particular attention must be given to protecting the rights of informal workers, ensuring gender equality, and improving workplace safety. Legal frameworks must also address the challenges posed by new forms of employment such as gig work and digital labour platforms. Special provisions should be made to ensure the fair treatment and formalization of informal sector workers, who make up a significant portion of the labour force.
- Strengthen Labor Inspections and Enforcement: The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) must be empowered with greater capacity, both in terms of human resources and technical expertise, to ensure that labour laws are effectively enforced. More frequent and comprehensive labour inspections are necessary, and penalties for non-compliance with labour laws must be

strengthened to serve as effective deterrents for violations such as wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and union-busting practices. (mechanism for reviewing the role of DoL and DIFE from time to time engaging the stakeholder)

- **Improve Social Protection Schemes:** The government should expand social protection programs, including unemployment benefits, healthcare, and pensions, to cover all workers, especially those in the informal sector, migrant workers, and women. This is essential to ensuring that workers are not left vulnerable to economic shocks or workplace accidents.

3. ILO, UN Agencies, and Development Partners

Trade unions call on these global actors to increase their technical and financial assistance to help Bangladesh improve labour standards, strengthen social protections, and promote gender equality.

- **ILO and UN Agencies** such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, and UNICEF should continue to collaborate with the government and trade unions to ensure that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to decent work, gender equality, and poverty eradication are achieved. Special focus should be placed on SDG 8, which calls for sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- **Development partners and donor countries** must increase their support for initiatives that promote workers' rights, social dialogue, and gender equality in Bangladesh. Technical assistance is needed to modernize labor inspection systems, enhance occupational health and safety standards, and support capacity-building for trade unions. Financial aid should also be directed towards programs aimed at empowering women in the workplace and improving working conditions in hazardous sectors.
- **Specialized Programmes:** Development partners should support programmes focused on training workers for the future of work, including adapting to digitalization, automation, and technological advancements. This is essential to building a resilient workforce capable of thriving in the evolving labor market.

4. International and Global Trade Unions

Trade unions in Bangladesh call on global trade union federations and international labor movements to stand in solidarity with Bangladeshi workers. Support from global unions is essential to applying international pressure on employers and the government to ensure that workers' rights in Bangladesh are fully respected.

- **International Solidarity:** Global unions must use their influence to apply pressure on multinational corporations operating in Bangladesh to ensure that labour rights are upheld throughout the supply chain and that ethical trading and social justice are ensured.
- **Support for Advocacy:** International trade unions should provide support for Bangladeshi unions in their efforts to access global platforms, such as the ILO and the UN, for advocacy on issues like freedom of association, collective bargaining, and workplace safety. Solidarity campaigns, petitions, and joint actions can amplify the voices of Bangladeshi workers on the international stage.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Global unions should offer technical assistance to build the capacity of Bangladeshi unions to organise, negotiate, and advocate for workers' rights. This includes training on global labour standards, negotiation techniques, and strategies for engaging in social dialogue with employers and policymakers.

Urgent Appeal to Stakeholders

To Trade Unions:

- Unite across sectors and regions to advocate for collective interests
- Strengthen solidarity, increase membership, and engage in capacity-building to face new challenges like automation and digitalisation.

To Workers:

- Be informed and aware of rights. Organise to demand better working conditions, fair wages, and social protection, safe and harassment-free workplaces.
- Participate actively in union activities to build a stronger, united voice.

To Employers' Organisations and Business Associations:

- Respect labour rights and engage in social dialogue with unions to create fair, safe, and productive work environments.
- Ensure that workers' well-being is integrated into business sustainability strategies.

To Local Government and Administrative Bodies:

- Collaborate with trade unions, employers, and civil society to address labour market challenges.
- Implement effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to safeguard workers' rights.

Expected Outcomes

Through this joint proposal, we expect the following results:

- Improved worker rights conditions and improved living standards, social protection and welfare of the workers.
- Strengthened Collective bargaining and Social Dialogue: Stronger, more inclusive tripartite forums that ensure workers' voices are heard in policy-making.
- Reformed Labor Legislation: Amendments to labour laws that safeguard workers' rights, promote collective bargaining, and ensure compliance with international standards.
- Just Transition in the Workplace: Policies and frameworks that support workers through the technological transformation, providing skills development and social protection.
- Reduction in Informal Employment: Strategies that promote formal employment and protect informal workers, ensuring social protection coverage for all.
- Gender Equality, Women and Youth Empowerment: Concrete measures to close the gender gap in employment and create quality jobs for women and young people.

By working together—government, employers, unions, and development partners—Bangladesh can achieve a just and fair labour market that respects the dignity of all workers and contributes to a sustainable and inclusive economy.



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