

# Serving the Workers or Serving the Party? A Historic Struggle of the Labor Movement in Bangladesh's Readymade Garment Industry

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## Abstract

*Trade unions closely interact with the agendas of political parties and state laws, and the labor movement and worker representation are constantly changing. Despite Bangladesh's very late industrialization and the subsequent introduction of contemporary trade union operations in this region, the trade union movement has a long history of struggle in this subcontinent. Since the post-MFA era, the establishment of a neo-liberal economy, the use of new technology at work, and the growth of social movement involvement among employees and their management have significantly impacted stable workplace structures in Bangladesh's garment sector. The primary goal of this study is to examine how the trade union movement has increased its influence on politics under different regimes and established social dialogue platforms to promote workers' interests in Bangladesh's apparel sector. This research is an exploratory attempt to investigate the historical backdrop of the trade union movement and its continued interaction with the political regime. It uses both primary and secondary data sources. This study will help with the historical investigation of the relationship between political orientation and trade unions, especially in the export-oriented RMG sector.*

**Keywords:** Partisan Politics, Trade Union Movement, Worker Representation, Federation Politics, Representation of Interest.

## Introduction

Trade unions are constantly involved in politics worldwide, attempting to influence government policies. To date, structural changes in the global and national economies have led to a steep decline in the membership and political influence of unions worldwide. In the case of Bangladesh, the political and economic changes following the shift to a market economy and various bilateral and multilateral trade agreements led to the rise and multiplication of unions, particularly in the garment industry, albeit with certain limitations and disadvantages. Bangladesh trade unions have a long and intimate tradition of political engagement, beginning with their involvement in anti-colonial movements and continuing through today's struggles to establish a sustainable industrial democracy. Their historical engagement in politics has been recognized as the struggle against British colonialism, as political allies of Bangladesh's national liberation movement, and now as players and partners in political parties (Hossain, 2005). Organizing and strengthening trade unions and creating meaningful unity among fragmented and subdivided ones is a continuing challenge. The multiplicity of trade unions is the dominant feature of the trade union movement in Bangladesh

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(Faruque, 2009; Hossain, 2012). From independence until now, Bangladesh's trade union movement has been weak, fragmented, and politicized (Nuruzzaman, 2006). Though unions' involvement in politics is inevitable (Taylor, 1989), many newly formed unions are rethinking their approach to partisan politics, reducing their reliance on their alliances with ruling parties, and renewing links with the civil society movement (Webster, 2007).

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, trade union-political party relations are an open secret, and many trade union leaders hold top leadership positions in political parties (Kuttig, 2020). Furthermore, there is also a move towards autonomy in Bangladesh despite the plurality of unions with party affiliations. Bangladeshi trade unions have established distinct functions, modes of operation, and relationships with existing political regimes and international communities. In Bangladesh, the trade union's position in the garment sector has remained largely unnoticed in the more significant political calculation of industrial management, posing a challenge to industrial democracy (Khan, 2002). The prevailing conditions of Bangladesh's garment industry sector are marked by severe labor unrest, conflict, ideological polarization, and party labor, which significantly transformative impact on the trade union identity of Representation. The garment sector labor unions have taken various approaches regarding ideological orientation, organizational culture, and political behavior according to their partisan affiliations.

### **Bangladesh's RMG Industry: An Overview**

Bangladesh started its export-oriented, readymade garment industry journey in the 1980s. Though this sector faced many difficulties, it has paved its path, possessed an exemplary world market, and showed colossal performance. The garment industry is now considered a prime sector to contribute to the national economy in terms of industrialization. Now, this industry creates employment opportunities for five million people, especially many underprivileged women in the country. In 1978, only nine export-oriented garment manufacturing units generated hardly one million dollars in export earnings. To control the quantity of imported RMG products from developing to developed countries, the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) was signed in 1974. The MFA agreement imposed an export rate increase of 6 percent every year from a developing country to a developed country. It also permitted the developed countries to impose quotas on the countries that exported at a higher rate than the rule stipulated in the bilateral agreements. Under such restrictions, global producers started searching for countries outside the umbrella of quotas and with cheap labor. Bangladesh started to invest in the RMG sector in pursuit of those privileges.

The RMG industry is the cornerstone of Bangladesh's economic development. The "Made in Bangladesh" logo has substantially raised Bangladesh's prominence in the world apparel market. Though Bangladesh's jute as a golden fiber has lost its golden days, the RMG sector has replaced the jute industry. With 40 years of experience, Bangladesh's RMG has become a significant source of products for the worldwide market. The RMG sector comprises 10% of the country's national economy and 81% of its export revenue (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Bangladesh is currently ranked second to China in terms of export revenue. Bangladesh is the top exporter of cotton t-shirts to the European Union, the second-largest exporter of cotton jeans and pullovers, and the third-largest volume exporter of cotton pants to the United States (Uromato & Nachum, 2018).

The sector has helped increase export and foreign exchange revenue, employment, poverty reduction, and empowerment of women. There are currently 7,000 garment producers in the country, employing about five million people. Women from low-income families make up about 85% of the labor force (Khaled, 2020). Additionally, the sector makes a sizable contribution to 13% of GDP. Vietnam, India, and China now view Bangladesh as its main competitor in global

garment production. The quota restrictions for Bangladesh were lifted in 2005. Then, many believed that introducing quota restrictions before 2005 would significantly shock the apparel sector. However, Bangladesh has risen to this challenge with phenomenal courage. Bangladesh is a model country for the rest of the world regarding its resilience and continuous economic growth in the face of crisis. The industry has now surpassed the US 50 billion dollars in export at the end of 2021. In order to maintain and grow the economy's strength and growth, the government must be sincere and quick to act to resolve disputes, maintain a friendly attitude towards workers, and take active steps to resolve labor disputes in the RMG industry. Only a cordial relationship between labor and owners can prevent most labor disputes from occurring in the RMG sector. Maintaining growth, ensuring quality facilities, boosting production capacity, orchestrating a positive work environment, overcoming economic catastrophe, and strengthening the entire chain is necessary.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This article mainly focuses on the historical texture of the Trade Union movement in post-independence Bangladesh, especially in the readymade garment industry.

### **Methodology**

This study has been conducted using data from two sources: primary data collected through a sample survey data collection dated from September 2022 to December 2022 in Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram districts in Bangladesh; and secondary data collected through national and international newspapers, media reports, and annual reviews of international development organizations. The survey has been conducted to explore the trade union movement and investigate the extent to which trade unions and general workers are involved in partisan politics in Bangladesh. The primary data was collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews with two types of workers: trade union workers and general workers. Ten federation leaders are interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of the trade union movement's trend and character. The respondents are selected using purposive sampling.

### **Problem Statement**

Bangladesh was once known as the bottomless basket due to its severe natural disaster occurrences and over-dependence on foreign assistance. Bangladesh is now known as a developing country and the world's second-largest RMG exporter. Bangladesh's economy ranked 33 by GDP in 2018 and will be 20th by 2050 (Raihan & Bourguignon, 2020), which is the rejoinder of many critics of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has achieved the title of "Economic and Social Miracle" worldwide. Bangladesh has much success in many socio-economic areas while simultaneously confronting many challenges that are also knocking at the door. Bangladesh's readymade garment industry started in the early 1980s as an export-oriented sector, and now it has become the lifeblood export industry of Bangladesh due to global economic restructuring and trade liberalization, neoliberal policies, the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), government liberal policies, etc. (Feldman, 2009). From its journey with fifty factories in 1980 (Bhuiyan, 2013), RMG has jumped to 7,000 factories now.

The sector has made extensive contributions to the country's GDP, export earnings, employment generation, empowerment of women, and overall socio-economic development. Bangladesh's garment industry is a country of first choice, and most global brands are sourcing their clothes from Bangladesh. However, in every spotlight, there are always dark sides too. Labor unrest in RMG is one of the common incidents that cause enormous economic losses; foreign buyers are

reluctant to place future orders, tarnishing the image of Bangladesh abroad. Trade unions in Bangladesh have a long history of political involvement. They are the allies of the political party in the anti-colonial movements, and yet it continues its struggle to establish a sustainable industrial democracy in all areas. Bangladesh's labor movement is known to be quiescent with and loyal to various political parties while maintaining a trade union. Our 40-year-old garment industry is booming, but the dismissive attitude towards workers is risking the harmony of industrial relations now and then. The poor state of organizing through trade unions at the enterprise level is the weakest part of Bangladesh's globally competitive RMG value chain. From the beginning of the industry to date, it is evident that trade unions have hardly been allowed in the RMG sector, and there has been a continuous effort to hold back trade union activities. The first TU federation in the RMG sector was registered in 1983 (Hossain, 2012), and five federations were registered in the following two years. Only three essential trade unions existed in the RMG sector until 1997. The trade union movement in the garment sector is weaker than in the other sectors. The union movement in Bangladesh was historically weakened by its division into multiple federations, each aligned with a different political party as its labor front. At present, Bangladesh has a three-tiered trade union structure. The largest federation, the Jatiyo Sramik League, has 305 affiliated unions, which represent 5,34,463 workers, which is over half of the unionized workers. BNP has 279 trade unions under its allied organization, Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Shramik Dal, representing 247,454 workers (DOL, 2020). These groups represent around 65 percent of the unionized employees in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2014). Regarding trade union membership in the readymade garment industry, only 2.25 percent of workers are estimated to be unionized, reportedly the lowest in Asia (Khan et al., 2020).

The history and development of trade unions, especially in the garment sector, differs from other industrial sectors of Bangladesh. Trade unions in the garment sector have never been allowed to grow at the same pace since the development of the industry (Rahman & Longford, 2012). There has been a continuous effort to hold back trade union activities in many ways. Sometimes, this was achieved for trade liberalization, to create trade union-free EPZ to attract the global market, etc. In these cases, the state's role has been minimal in that it often implemented policies prescribed by the World Bank and other international communities. The management (CPD, 2009) is firmly against trade union formation. There are awareness and training activities of a new generation of NGOs, whose role is similar to that of NGOs and trade unions. Foreign donations run these organizations; they accept any international labor-related campaign and donor prescription uncritically and take up the role of local implementers for these campaigns. Thus, this new NGO, donor, and buyer-driven model of the garment workers' rights movement is becoming powerful. Labor laws and trade unions in Bangladesh have been inherited by the British and Pakistani era legislation, politics, and independence movement (Yunus & Yamagata, 2012). The trade union movement in independent Bangladesh is now over 50 years old. Its career has gone through several stages. Periods of resentment and bitter struggle have alternated with incentives for recognition, restructuring, and achievement.

### **Bangladesh's Pre- and Post-Independence Trade Union Movement History**

The trade union movement in Bangladesh can be distinctively studied through three periods; the first period covered the period of British colonial rule characterized by a humanitarian spirit employed by the friendly societies in dealing with labor. The second period began at the end of the Second World War and went on till the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 under Pakistani rule. This remarkable phase saw the beginning of genuine modern trade unionism in Bangladesh

with an organized and continuous labor movement (Ahmad, 1969). Moreover, the third period started after the liberation of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi trade unions developed as a part of Indian trade unions as early as the late 19th century. They started as self-help organizations and gradually became organizations representing workers' rights. Amendments to labor legislation in 2018 provided the basis for developing collective bargaining as a fundamental instrument in industrial relations. Until 2006, only one trade union organization existed, although changes in the trade union movement had already developed. In 2006, trade union pluralism started to emerge. Today, there are sixty-five registered representative trade union federations in Bangladesh's garment industry. Some chronological histories are described in the table 1, table 2 and table 3 in the following manner.

**Table 1: Major Labor Movement Activities: British Colonial Period**

Year	Major Events
1881	Indian Factories Act Passed
1908	Mohini Cotton Mills with swadeshi spirit established in Kushtia
1911	Indian Factories Act Amended
1919	ILO adopt first limited hours of work and rest periods of workers
1920	Indian Communist Party Established ,a key player in organizing labor movement in India
1920	All India Trade Union Congress(AITUC) is established
1923	Workmen Compensation Act is passed
1926	Trade Unions Act passed
1929	Trade Disputes Act passed
1937	Payment of Wages Act
1938	The Employment of Children Act passed
1939	Maternity Benefit Act passed
1945	Sreehatta Zilla Cha Sramik Union is organized as an affiliated of (AITUC)
1946	9000 workers continue strike in three months in Narayanganj cotton textile mills

**Table 2: Major Labor Movements Activities: Pakistan Period**

1947	East Pakistan Trade Union Federation(EPTUF) is formed
1950	Adamjee Jute Mills Established
1953	Adamjee Jute Mills Union Formed
1955	Pakistan government announces first labor policy
1956	The Industrial Disputes Act 1947 amended
1958	The East Pakistan Trade Union (Recognition) Ordinance promulgated
1961	The Minimum Wages Ordinance
1965	Pakistan Government ratifies ILO Convention which guarantees trade union formation and collective bargaining
1965	The Factories Act
1969	The Industrial Relations Ordinance
1969	Gherao Movement takes place
1970	Nur Khan Labor Policy promulgated
1971	Liberation Movement started and workers of every sector took actively in the liberation movement for the true emancipation and elimination of all forms of discrimination



**Table 3: The Growth of Bangladesh RMG Industry and Major Trade Union Activities**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Event/Trade Union Activities</b>
1977-1980 (Early Period of growth)	Limited trade union activities
1982-1985(Boom days)	First Registration of Bangladesh Garment Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Janashadhin Garments Sramik Federation and Federation of Garments Workers in 1984(Hasssan et el.2022)
Mid 1990s (Knitwear sector developed significantly and male rising employment in the industry)	Formation of Sramik Karmochari Oikko Parishad(SKOP)
1985 (Imposition of quota restrictions)	
1993-1995 (Child labor issue and its solutions)	
2003 (Withdrawal of Canadian quota restriction)	
2005 (Phase-out of export-quota system)	
2006-2013 (BLA2006)	Enactment of BLA 2006 A new window in the TU organizing was opened with the enactment of Bangladesh Labor Law 2006. The Act deals with the rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining Seven agreements with BGMEA covering the several rights of workers such as minimum wage, recognition of trade union activities, providing of appointment letter and ID card to the workers, fixing working hours, and ensuring maternity leave and other holidays
2013-2018(Rana Plaza Disaster and its Aftermath)	Activities of Accord for Fire and Building Safety (Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers' Safety (Alliance),Ban on General System of Preferences (GSP) by USA, Building longer-term, trust-based relationships among trade unions ,buyers and suppliers within global value chains, Amendment of Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) 2006, Approval of Bangladesh Labor Rules, 2015
2018-till now	Establishment of Workers Resource Center (WRC) Close Supervision under National Coordination Committee for Workers Education (NCCWE) and the Industrial Bangladesh Council (IBC),CSR relationship among trade unions and buyers Emphasis given on formation of elected participation committees (PCs) and providing registration to a considerable number of enterprise level trade unions during the post-Rana Plaza phase. The RMG sector has 54 industrial federations and 1093 basic trade unions until August 2022

## **Phases of Trade Union Movement in Post-Independent Bangladesh**

### **The First Phase (1971-1990): Mixture of Nationalization and Neoliberalism**

After independence, Bangladesh possessed a small number of industries, and Bangabandhu adopted a nationalization policy. However, after a bloody coup, the father of the nation, Bangabandhu, and his family members were assassinated, and Bangladesh saw her first and secondary military regime consecutively after independence in 1975-81 and 1981-1990. This military Government adopted a neoliberal economic policy instead of Bangabandhu's nationalization policy (Rahman & Longford, 2012). Garment manufacturing began to shift to

Bangladesh with this policy adoption after the promulgation of Political Party Rules (PPR) 1976, which declared that every political party must declare its sister organization, such as the labor front. As a result, political parties opened their labor front in critical industrial areas to strengthen their power bases. It created a total war of politicization of the country's working class and a labor movement, thereby shredding the whole labor force into 'countless pieces' (Taher,1999). The formation of SKOP was a significant step in 1984 when major labor unions in the country initiated a range of actions against the Ershad regime. Many of Bangladesh's radical political unions were replaced by unions attached to the ruling party during the military regime of Zia and Ershad which were characterized by corruption, nepotism, and the development of a self-interested labor aristocracy (Ahmed, 1995).

### **Second Phase (1990-2005): State-Controlled Unions**

The autocratic Ershad regime was forced from power in 1990 by powerful student movements, and Bangladesh's second democratic journey started. From 1991 to 2006, the Awami League and the BNP ruled the country. Interestingly, although both the Awami League and BNP claim themselves to democratic norms and practices, neither of the parties has made any remarkable contributions towards the welfare of the workers (Rahman & Langford, 2010). When either party was in power, many agreements were signed with labor union federations, but most remained unrealized. Since both parties support an open market economy, their policies towards workers and unions are similar. In fact, during each party's period in office, the respective ruling party's labor front became very powerful. As a result, during the period of democratic governance over the past 20 years, the major labor unions in Bangladesh have continued to represent the interests of political parties rather than those of workers. It is no doubt to note here that the major labor unions in Bangladesh had become so myopic and obsolete by 2002 that when the Government closed a 50-year-old nationalized jute mill and snatched away the employment of 30,000 workers, no fruitful resistance was mounted (Rahman & Langford,2010).

### **Third Phase (2006-2013): Union Growth, Alignment and Realignment**

Trade unions in Bangladesh greatly need higher social acceptance levels and political-ideational rifts among themselves, which makes it challenging to find shared goals. It is also a legacy of the past: the involvement of the Bangladeshi labor movement in the anti-colonial resistance movement in 1969 and the fight for independence in 1971 (Fink, 2014) led to the division of the labor movement and trade unions along political lines. The number of registered trade unions rose dramatically after BLA 2006. By December 2013, 96 new unions sought registration from the Directorate of Labor (DoL), compared to only two in the previous two years. Within just over a year, the garment sector had 464 trade unions, up from 132 in 2012. It is because of the impact of the devastating Rana Plaza Disaster (Siddiqi, 2016).

### **Fourth Phase (2013-2022): Period of Greater Freedom and International Alliance**

A new window in the TU organizing was opened with the enactment of Bangladesh Labor Law 2006 and Amendment 2013. The aftermath of the collapse of the eight-story building that killed over 1,100 people raised the profile of health and safety in the Bangladeshi G&T industry. Arguably, the Rana Plaza building collapse was a catalyst, ushering in a new era of industrial relations within the Bangladeshi garment industry. Several international organizations such as Accord, Alliance, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) have taken some remarkable activities within Bangladesh. They now provide support and continuously pressure the

Bangladeshi Government to improve the working environment, focusing on health and safety issues. In response to the collapse of the Rana Plaza building, the Bangladesh government revised the Labor Act (2006) twice, first in July 2013 and again in 2018. These revisions added provisions for workplace safety and made it simpler to form unions, all under strict ILO oversight and pressure from foreign buyers. Though CSOs and ICSOs raised some issues, such as minimum requirements to form a trade union and the extension of the BLA to EPZs. On March 11, 2018, a Workers Resource Center (WRC) was established to assist unions and workers in growing their capacities and offering support for organizing, collective bargaining, negotiating with employers, and dispute resolution. It brings together federations from the National Coordination Committee for Workers Education (NCCWE) and the Industrial Bangladesh Council (IBC) to lessen fragmentation and address capacity issues amongst unions. The Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) has allowed inspections of factories within the EPZs, albeit in collaboration with the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority. The Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments has introduced a Labor Inspection Management Application (LIMA) to improve labor inspection data collection, storage, and analysis, benefiting workers and employers in all industrial sectors.

### **Garment Worker's Interest Representation**

A more extensive idea of industrial democracy might include worker representation. Rogers and Streeck (1994) assess shop floor engagement as a workplace committee for worker representation. These workers' committees are set up to give employees a voice in how the factory floor and company are run and to make it easier for management and employees to communicate and work together on production-related issues. The true nature of representation in trade unions likely falls somewhere between the representational ideal and elite hegemony. It is the common feature of partisan trade unions in the RMG sector, which is the most suffering sector of unionization. Labor has supported various formations to defend and advance its rights and interests; however, the trade union has yet to be longer-lasting or effective (King, 1897). A trade union is "a continuous association of wage earners to maintain or improve the conditions of their employment (Webb & Webb, 1920)."

Trade unions are core institutions fighting for bargaining power to deliver benefits to workers. The universal justification is that labor unions involve themselves in party politics to influence policy formulation in Government and to determine the allocation of resources to their advantage (Hyman and Mc. Cormick, 2010). Globalization has strengthened the political power of organized labor. In some cases, groups such as labor unions, farmers, or business associations may be closely associated with particular strong parties (Garrett, 1998). Partisan politics can be viewed as a means through which unions attain their ends. Trade union's engagement in partisan politics is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh, and trade unions are viewed as political extensions of political parties and are supported by party funds. In addition, the political parties interfere with the institutional functions of trade unions, such as employee recruitment and strike decision-making, which, in effect, makes these institutions extensions of political offices. It is now argued that when unions have solid institutional ties with incumbent political parties, the probability of regulatory reforms to individual labor law is three times as high as deregulatory reforms (Mosley, 2008). The advantages of alliances between unions and political parties have relied on the political and economic environments in which they operate (Bensusan, 2019). In Bangladesh, there has been a strong partisan divide among the party's narratives about all issues, which resulted in the polarization of individual behaviors and group interests. So, as a result, most of the time, the labor



movement is underway; it ends with a whimper rather than a bang, and the leaders reap benefits from it (Taher, 2021).

The trade union scene mirrors the inter-party scene, in which many political parties compete for status without a coherent vision or discernible agenda differences. In such a situation, it is evident that confidence in the political parties and trade unions has been rapidly lost. Workers' organizations have developed with very little leadership from their ranks. Union leaders are frequently individuals who are not and have never been associated with the work performed by the union members. Often, they are middle-class, university-educated professionals and intellectuals (Kearney, 1968). Being historically part of the struggle, many unions continue to be closely allied with mainstream political parties. The widespread politicization of trade unions in Bangladesh is a product of the structure of political parties in the country rather than of the nature of trade unionism itself. Not only have the political parties failed to curb the rent-seeking activities of trade union leaders, but they have actively benefited from their partisan activities (Mahmud & Kabeer, 2003). Almost every political party has its affiliated labor wing, i.e., trade unions, and fewer than 10% of the garment workshops in Bangladesh currently have trade union representation.

Both formal and informal groups represent garment workers' interests. Now, there are 65 registered trade union federations representing workers in garments. In the garment sector itself, there are sixteen national garment labor federations. The plant-level unions are affiliated with the national or division-based garment federations. Given the need for more plant levels through unions and associations, multiple national and industrial federations carry out the formal representation of garment workers (Ahmed et al., 2011). The trade union registrar can only allow workers permission to unionize if the official is satisfied with the petition. It is also evident that many radical left-wing unions find it almost impossible to get registration. After the Rana Plaza accident, many unions have formed with the help of external funding from NGOs. Many labor leaders suspect that many newly formed unions are company shops working in the interests of capital.

## Findings & Discussions

One of the trade union members said that the main reason for the weakness of the trade union movement in the garment sector in Bangladesh is the disunity and division of organizations. He also mentions that unlimited and long working hours are a reason to avoid getting involved in the affairs of a trade union. Many respondents claim that the absence of Job security in the garment industry is hampering their movement. Another reason prevailing in the garment industry for the low rate of trade union membership is the migration of workers from the factory to the factory for better facilities. Whenever they face problems, they change factories. Many women garment workers must refrain from participating in trade union activities due to the absence of weekly holidays and other holidays. Because they do not have time for trade union activities, they maintain their family members after long, hard work. Many trade unionists argue that the majority of women are one of the reasons for the weak trade union movement in the garment industry. Many labor activists allege that trade unionism is ineffective due to state policy. One of the respondents said that garment owners belong to the elite class and have good relations with national political figures. For this reason, broad social movement unionism is not happening against their will. Unskilled labor is the last choice of the garment industry because of unemployment. So, they do not want to engage in agitation or protest for fear of job loss. So, it is one of the main reasons for the weak trade union movement in the garment industry. A renowned labor leader and trade union expert said that though we have many trade unions in our readymade garment industry, some federations

try to increase their membership to attract foreign donors. It is called federation politics. However, what changes do they make for their workers? One of the critical obstacles to protecting the interests of the workers is the sold-out and ineffective trade unions in our industry. Another renowned trade union leader said that Bangladesh is fertile soil for the obedience of political parties and national or international NGOs. On paper, the number of trade unions has increased surprisingly in every sector, particularly the RMG sector, in Bangladesh over the years. However, effective trade unionism still needs to be present in the country due to the involvement of political parties or national and international NGOs. Many trade union leaders claim that our country's relationship between trade unions and political parties is an open secret. So, after Bangladesh's independence, this relationship adversely impacted genuine trade unionism due to the ruling party's control over trade unions and their obedient student-like relationship with political parties. Trade unions are the school of democratic leadership. Every union is the best place for education in leadership and political socialization. However, our trade unions always face political pressure and an undemocratic way of choosing union leaders. So, a healthy growth of the trade union movement is hampering the country for this reason. Many independent trade union leaders said that even though our readymade garment industry has many trade unions, some federations are always looking to expand their membership to attract foreign donors. It is called federation politics. But what changes do they make for their workers? Our industry's sold-out and ineffective trade unions significantly impede protecting workers' interests. The Bangladesh Labor Act also gives unparalleled discretionary powers to the Directors in the Department of Labor. The director has the arbitrary power to refuse trade union registration, even if all requirements have been met. 10 So, the rejection rate of trade union registration applications in 2013 was 18 percent, rising to 26 percent in 2014 and 75 percent by the middle of 2015 (DOL, 2017). According to the Act, the registration of a trade union may be canceled. If the trade union has participated in an unfair labor practice, if membership has fallen short, or if the union has violated any provisions. The ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations observes that this involves severe risks of interference by the authorities regarding the existence of trade unions (ILO, 2016). Unregistered unions are not allowed to function as trade unions. So many labor activists need to be more capable of serving the interests of workers or the trade union movement. Garment workers cannot think of the labor movement as the solution to their problem. For the factory-based trade union leader, as the respondent workers overwhelmingly opined, the trade union movement has been a form of political ladder to grab a party position for the central leader. For example, in his interview with, a male factory-based trade union worker in a garment factory says:

“Sramik union and federation (trade union federation) leaders work mainly for their self-interests and also for the interests of the owner. They pretend as they work for the workers. After they are elected as President and/or Secretary of the trade union, they become agents of the factory. The workers elect them for the interest of the workers but they local trade union leader do not keep their promises once when they are elected.”

Another labor activist's worker, interviewed by the author, further stated:

There is hardly any effective ‘Sramik Andolon’( labor movement) in garment because of disunity among the workers and our leaders. Had there been unity, there would be a real labor movement. Our labor leaders just say, we are

looking after solving your problems, you just go to work. Now federation office becomes the training and workshop center for workers improvement in which buyers and international donors donate funds. We go back to work and they continue to look at our problems not to look after solving them. Only they know what they look at and what they look after!

Federation trade union leader thus stated that:

"Trade unions that are overly politically oriented and skew excessively towards a particular political party will run into issues at a certain time because you cannot serve two gods: your members and the political party."

Many so-called federation leaders are intended to serve the powerful factory owners' interests while those of the leaders only serve their self-interests at the expense of the workers interests. The leader either due to compulsion or for their ill motives, make the factory-based union representatives weak and loyal to owner due to their inability to meet the workers' expectations. And factory owners make a strategic and supportive financial alliance with labor leaders to control workers. Factory owners require support from the leader and leader render this for their personal benefit. This view is perhaps most explicitly stated by a labor leader:

"Ideologically, the primary goal of labor unions is to grow membership, serve their members' interests, and advocate for policies that benefit the working class, no matter the political landscape. But what scenario is present in our country? They are agents of political parties for showing their strength in the streets, and when antigovernment political parties try to call any protest or hartal (strike), pro-government party cadres are used with all state force violently. In the garment industry, we cannot organize against this local pro-government party labor cadres. There are many economic as well as political interests in every garment area. Garment owners manage those ruling local labor political leaders who constantly suppress us, though we never voice our opposition to any injustice. When any big problem arises, then workers spontaneously leave the factory, protest on busy roads, block public transport, and the police and labor department always threaten us to stop our workers by blaming us for being behind in this labor unrest; otherwise, we might be in prison. So, we are now treated as 'special interest groups' that don't work for the workers' good and I'm sorry to say that many of us have owned cars and flats with illegal wealth."

Power of trade union depends on its non-partisan character through which it can pressure on employers and demand their rights. But power comes from mediating interest, delivering right channel. So, a labor leader rightly said that:

"Being right is not enough to demand; you also need power to make a demand fulfilled."

Modern factory-based trade unionism requires true representation of workers and integrity in the leadership for the benefit of the collective. The different tiers of leaders exhibit fragile unity and

strength due to state-repressive laws towards workers. This fragmentation is reflected at both the individual worker level and at the sectoral collective bargaining level. There are partisan politics that engender disunity and disintegration among the workers. Our respondents overwhelmingly pointed to their integrational problems as impeding progress towards their collective goals. So, there is a ‘divide and control’ policy to weaken the workers’ unity and strength and a political opportunity theory to suppress any democratic and representative labor movement, and as per agent theory, labor leaders play an agency role in maintaining the owner’s unquestionable dominance.

## **Conclusion**

The current institutional design sets the conditions for a competitive labor market. However, it also struggles with increasing discontent and inequality, and trade unions always face considerable constraints in representing workers' interests. After the Rana Plaza incident in 2013, there has been a landmark change in the approach to trade union registrations. The country's trade union movement (FES, 2017) is centered on demands for promoting core labor standards of the ILO (CLS+). However, the bargaining power of plant-level trade unions has less access to engaging with powerful management, and therefore, the workers fear involving themselves with the broader trade union movements. Less than 1% of garment factories in Bangladesh (AFL-CIO, 2017) have a collective bargaining agreement. There is a tendency for the Bangladesh government to establish a worker participation Committee instead of a trade union in the garment industry. DoL statistics show that up to August 2020 (Social Dialogue, 2021), the total participation committees in RMG factories were 1,614. The data reveals that only 32 percent of RMG factories have formed PCs, as according to DIFE, there are 5,115 RMG factories in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh's trade unionism in the garment industry has been regarded as the movement of the entire working class over time. However, in partisan organizational reality, each trade union has lost the right to regulate its internal affairs. This partisan entry into labor-right politics cut off independent working-class politics. Lack of working-class ideology, disunity among workers, negative attitudes among employers, and unnecessary politicization hampered genuine trade unionism in Bangladesh.

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