

## **Labor Unrest in Newly Independent Bangladesh, 1972-1975: Nationalization, Neglect, and the Rise of Labor Movements**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how the dissatisfaction of Bangladeshi laborers evolved into organized labor movements, focusing on the discrimination they faced in the newly independent country during 1972-1975. Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, approximately 85% of industries were nationalized. However, instead of empowering workers, the government recruited politically affiliated individuals who lacked the necessary knowledge and experience for key managerial positions. The Jatiya Sramik League (National Workers' League), backed by the ruling party and supported by the paramilitary Lal Bahini, emerged as a major labor organization closely aligned with state interests. Despite initial hopes, factory workers faced greater hardships under this new structure, leading them to fight for their rights. This paper also sheds light on the nature and intensity of these discriminations. Ultimately, the central argument is that in newly independent Bangladesh, various crises, along with systemic oppression and discrimination, compelled laborers to participate in organized labor movements.

**Key words:** War-torn Country, Nationalization, Lal Bahini, Opportunistic leadership, Exploitation, Unrest.

### **Introduction**

During the entire Pakistan period, the working class in East Pakistan was exploited by West Pakistani non-Bengali owners and state policies, facing low wages, poor working conditions, long working hours, and weak management practices. Labor laws were poorly implemented and restrictive of trade unions and strikes.<sup>1</sup> As a result, discontent grew among workers in East Pakistan, leading them to participate in the Liberation War of 1971 to transform the exploitative ownership system. During the War of Independence, approximately 4 million working-class people in East Pakistan participated spontaneously, shutting down factories and industries and contributing significantly to the liberation effort.<sup>2</sup> The role and sacrifices of the working class during the nine-month-long War of Independence were pivotal.

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1 Report of the ILO, *Labour Survey Mission (Summary of Recommendations) Pakistan Trade*, Vol. V, April 1954, p. 51.

2 *Banglar Bani*, 13 March 1973.

However, following independence, workers held high expectations of gaining adequate facilities and fundamental rights to improve their living conditions. They believed that, in the absence of colonial and class-based adversaries, they would receive fair wages and social recognition. These expectations, however, were soon unmet. Rather than achieving economic liberation, the working class began to experience renewed exploitation and marginalization. For instance, the first national labor policy of independent Bangladesh (1972) denied workers fundamental rights such as collective bargaining<sup>3</sup> and the right to strike,<sup>4</sup> further intensifying their frustration. Moreover, the difficulties of regionalism, corruption among the administrative officials, market manipulation by dishonest businessmen through artificial shortages and resulting inflation in essential consumer goods, and the self-serving bargaining tactics of opportunistic labor leaders collectively contributed to a further degradation in workers' living standards. Consequently, worker dissatisfaction increased significantly compared to the past.

In response, workers organized movements and strikes demanding wage increases, bonuses, relief from rising prices of essential commodities, redress for regional disparities, and improved working conditions. This complex environment ultimately led to a series of labor disputes and movements. The present article is structured around two interlinked research questions: What were the causes and consequences of worker discontent in Bangladesh after independence? Under what conditions did this dissatisfaction turn into organized labor movements?

This study employed a historical methodology, utilizing archival materials from the Bangladesh National Archives, including newspapers and official records, to examine the depth of labor unrest. It also incorporated personal narratives, such as memoirs and autobiographies, to add context to the findings. The research relied on a range of primary sources, including reports from the International Labor Organization (ILO), Bangladesh Planning Commission, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (Statistical Yearbooks of Bangladesh), and Staff Appraisal Reports. In addition, relevant secondary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, and

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3 ILO Convention No. 98, particularly Articles 3 and 4, provides for the establishment of appropriate machinery to ensure respect for the right to organize and for measures to promote voluntary negotiation between employers' and workers' organizations, with a view to regulating employment conditions through collective agreements. [International Labour Organization, Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (No. 98), July 1, 1949, 96 U.N.T.S. 257, arts. 3-4]

4 *Ibid.*

prior research, were consulted to contextualize the analysis. The collected data were systematically analyzed through a process of critical, logical interpretation and integrated into the analytical framework of this study.

This article is grounded in the theoretical framework of Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. According to Marx, society is fundamentally divided into two opposing classes: the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeoisie (capitalists). Essentially, labor includes those who earn their livelihood by selling their labor power and receiving wages for their work. They have little choice but to work for capital, as they generally lack independent means of survival. Capital, on the other hand, includes those who derive their income not from their own labor but from the surplus value<sup>5</sup> appropriated from workers who produce wealth. Thus, the income of the capitalists is fundamentally based on the exploitation of the proletariat.

Within this framework, class relations are inherently conflictual, as the interests of labor and capital remain fundamentally opposed. This study applies Marx's analytical lens to examine the dynamics of labor unrest in Bangladesh between 1972 and 1975. It is evident that both an exploiting class and an exploited class existed in Bangladesh during this time. After Bangladesh's independence, factories were nationalized. In the post-independence trajectory of Bangladesh, workers were subjected to new forms of exploitation. On the other hand, the ruling class and factory owners benefited in various ways.

As a result, sections of the administrative apparatus became increasingly prone to corruption. The workers' demands remained largely unfulfilled. Consequently, there was a continuous struggle between the working class and the owners, officials, and the government throughout the period.

### **Understanding the War-torn Country**

After a fierce and bloody nine-month war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation on December 16, 1971. The destruction caused by the Liberation War of 1971 was immense and far-reaching. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, while vital infrastructures such as railways, bridges, and homes were destroyed. The six airports were not functioning; Chittagong, the main port, was littered with mines

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5 Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle* (Erfurt Program) Charles H. Kerr & Co, Chicago, 1910, pp. 84-85.

and wrecks; and the telecommunications network was out of service.<sup>6</sup> According to *Bangladesh: The Test Case of Development* by Just Faaland and J. R. Parkinson, the damage to roads alone was estimated at 130 million US dollars. Furthermore, *A Survey of Damages and Repair*, published in 1972 by the United Nations Relief Operation in Dhaka (UNROD), estimated the total damage at approximately \$ 1.2 billion.<sup>7</sup> A more recent UNROD estimate placed the overall loss at around Taka 9,300 million,<sup>8</sup> underscoring the severe destruction caused by the Pakistani occupation forces during the nine-month period.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the people of the newly liberated country hoped that they could lead a peaceful and normal life. Unfortunately, their hopes were quickly overshadowed by growing social unrest and chaos. The streets were marked by violence, with abandoned bodies reflecting the tragic consequences of mob lynchings, political struggles, and conflicts between different groups.<sup>9</sup> People were killed not only by opposing political groups but also by factions within their own, targeting dissenters and rebels. Between 1972 and 1975, incidents of rape, assault, and murder escalated at an alarming rate across the country.

The situation worsened due to severe security breakdown. After independence, about 4,500 prisoners managed to escape from Dhaka Central Jail. Lacking money or support, many of them started looting abandoned houses. Compounding the crisis, members of the Razakar forces, in their attempt to flee, left behind large caches of rifles and firearms. These weapons were subsequently picked up by thieves, robbers, and violent convicts, creating a highly volatile and dangerous environment.<sup>10</sup> Over time, these individuals regrouped and began committing crimes in an increasingly organized manner. More alarming was the near-total collapse of law and order. Armed gangs roamed freely across the countryside, exploiting the chaos.<sup>11</sup> The easy availability of weapons, a byproduct of the recent war, fueled an escalating wave of violence. In this volatile environment, the general populace, driven to desperation by hunger and deprivation, began resorting to unlawful measures to survive.

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6 Willem Van Schendal, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge University Press), UK, 2009, p.173.

7 Haider Akbar Khan Rono, *Rajnir Kotha Prasonge (In the Context of Politics)*, (Tarafdar Prakashoni), Dhaka, 2003, p.263.

8 *Morning News*, 11 November, 1972.

9 Mohiuddin Ahmad, *Bela-Obela, Bangladesh: 1972-1975, (Timely and Untimely, Bangladesh: 1972-1975)*, (Batighar), 2024, pp. 94-95.

10 Kamrudin Ahmad, *Shadhin Banglar Obhuddoy Ebong Otopor (The Emergence of Independent Bengal and Aftermath)*, (Prothoma Prakason), Dhaka, 2025, p.169.

11 William B. Milam, *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia*, (The University Press Limited), Dhaka, 2010, p.34.

The disarray extended to border management. Following the surrender of the Pakistani army, the Bangladesh-India border became virtually unregulated, with rampant cross-border smuggling becoming a daily phenomenon. The Bangladesh Rifles, the border security force, remained poorly equipped and disorganized. The police were in no position to reassert control, and the army was not yet prepared to assume civil duties. In response, the government initiated the formation of a new paramilitary unit, the Rakkhi Bahini, under the National Guard Order of March 7, 1972 (backdated to February 1, 1971). The leaders of the ruling party used the Rakkhi Bahini to spread fear through intimidation and torture.<sup>12</sup>

The industrial sector was also heavily affected. A significant number of mills and factories were blown up with explosives, while machinery and raw materials were looted, burned, or otherwise destroyed.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, during the initial years after independence efforts were made mainly for repair, rehabilitation and restoration of production to the pre-Independence level.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, substantial financial resources were required to restore and rehabilitate war-ravaged industries and factories.

Moreover, there was no significant industrial development. Despite a significant recovery in agricultural and industrial output from the low levels in the aftermath of the war of liberation, production in 1973-74 remained below the level attained in 1969-70.<sup>15</sup> In the external sector, export earnings fell short of the targets, and actual volumes of imports of non-food consumer goods, industrial raw materials, and spares had to be curtailed drastically to accommodate the steep rise in prices, particularly of food grains and POL (Petroleum, Oil and Lubricant) products. In the fiscal year 1972-73, the government allocated only Rs. 1 crore in its budget for industrial investment. Most of these funds were intended for replacement costs, repairs, and the purchase of raw materials. The value of industrial assets and properties damaged during the turmoil of 1971 was estimated at over Rs. 20 crores. Not all the damage could be repaired within the fiscal year; only partial restoration was possible.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Willem Van Schendal, *Op. cit.*, p.173.

<sup>13</sup> *The People*, 30 January, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> *Bangladesh Economic Survey (1985-86)*, Ministry of Finance, Finance Division, Economic Advisor's Wing, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

<sup>15</sup> *Economic Development in 1973-74 and Annual Plan for 1974-75*, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 21 January, 1973.

After independence, non-Bengali mill owners, managers, and supervisory personnel left the country, and inexperienced management took their place. Moreover, civil disturbances and maintenance neglect, partly due to a lack of spares, resulted in substantial deterioration of the machinery, particularly the more sophisticated spinning frames and back-processing machines.<sup>17</sup> Besides, due to a lack of financial assistance and government support, production in 34 tea gardens had stopped, leaving over 25,000 workers unemployed and depriving the country of significant foreign exchange earnings.<sup>18</sup> The textile industry was also in crisis: of 450,000 hand-operated looms, only 75,000 were operational, many of which had ceased due to a shortage of yarn. Similarly, power-operated looms faced the same problem. Many jute mills were also destroyed.<sup>19</sup> Shortages of raw materials and electricity forced numerous factories to close, resulting in thousands of workers losing their jobs. In 1972-73, state-owned industrial companies suffered a total loss of 38.11 crore taka, with the Jute Mill Corporation losing 25 crore, the Sugar Mill Corporation 7.09 crore, the Paper Mills Corporation 3.5 crore, the Steel Mill Corporation 1.5 crore, and the Mineral Gas Corporation 1.1 crore.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, due to widespread terrorism, the occupation of labor areas, and the control of labor unions in various industrial regions of the country, the Rakshi Bahini was also deployed in Tongi. Even after their deployment, it was impossible to suppress the leadership of the Bangla Workers Federation in Tongi, the leadership of Abul Bashar in Chittagong and other organizations under any circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Following this, a situation arose in which the workers spontaneously engaged in a fierce struggle against the Rakshi Bahini. This was the ultimate depiction of the industries and industrial areas.

### **Nationalization of Industries and Its Impact on the Labor Class**

In the immediate aftermath of the Liberation War in 1971, Bangladesh inherited a devastated economy and a vacuum of industrial leadership following the departure of West Pakistani capitalists. Within the growing aspirations for socio-economic justice and under the ideological influence of socialism, the newly formed government

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17 Bangladesh Staff Appraisal Report, *Jute Industry Rehabilitation Project*, Report No. 2889-bd, *Document of The World Bank*, Industrial Development & Finance Division, 7 May, 1980, [multi-page.pdf](#) (Accessed on-31.10.25)

18 *Dainik Ittefaq*, 4 March, 1974.

19 *Dainik Ittefaq*, 18 July, 1972.

20 *Sonar Bangla*, 7 October, 1973.

21 Kazi Zafar Ahmed, *Amar 60 Bacharer Rajniti: Jayar Bhatar Kathan (My Sixty Years in Politics: Tales of Ebbs and Flows)*, (Tarafdar Publications), Dhaka, 2024, p. 256.

pursued a policy of large-scale nationalization.<sup>22</sup> On March 26, 1972, the government took over 620 major industrial units with fixed assets valued at Tk. 3.77 billion.<sup>23</sup> These included iron and steel, mining, machine tools, petrochemicals, cement, fertilizers, banks, and insurance sectors. By the end of 1972, around 92% of industrial assets, including key sectors like jute and cotton, were under state ownership.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the noble intentions behind nationalization, its execution and consequences were far from ideal. The nationalization process created a deeply flawed economic system. The implementation of laws such as the Acquisition of Abandoned Property Order (APO-1), and later, P.O. 16, gave the government excessive powers, enabling it to seize not only the property of absentee Pakistani owners but also the assets of its own citizens. It stated that the government would appoint a board of management or administrator to manage the institutions.<sup>25</sup> This order further stated that the management of all these institutions and the responsibility of maintaining their accounts would be entrusted to the board of managers or administrators nominated by the government or to other authorities. Later, the excessive power granted to the government administration through laws like P.O. 16 had a profoundly adverse effect on the socio-economic conditions and lifestyle of the people, and its impact was particularly devastating on the lives of the common masses.<sup>26</sup> As a result, widespread corruption, with ruling party members exploiting these laws for personal gain by looting of valuable industrial machinery, smuggling, and the mismanagement of state-owned enterprises.

Although the nationalization was intended to democratize ownership and reduce inequality, it soon devolved into mismanagement. The appointment of politically affiliated Awami League members to managerial positions, often without relevant expertise, resulted in administrative inefficiencies and corruption.<sup>27</sup> Factories became overstaffed due to political interference, and productivity plummeted as many new

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22 M. M. Akash, *Bishwa Pujibad O Bangladesher Rajnoitik Orthoniti (Global Capitalism and the Political Economy of Bangladesh)*, (Prothoma Prakason), Dhaka, 2018, p.134.

23 Dilruba Begum, “*The Fiscal and Monetary History of Bangladesh: 1971-2020*”, Article, *The Ritsumeikan Economic Review*, Vol. 70, No.1, (May 2020), p. 32.

24 Mushtaq H. Khan, *Bangladesh-Economic Growth in a Vulnerable Limited Access Order*, (Cambridge University Press), 2003, p. 18. [BD LAO.pdf](#) (Accessed on- 02.11.25)

25 *Bangladesh Industrial Enterprises* (Nationalization) order, 1972, Legislative and parliamentary Affairs Division, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972.

26 *Ibid*, p.18.

27 *Ganakantha*, 28 June, 1973.

hires were unqualified or redundant. The Lal Bahini, a paramilitary group linked to the National Workers' League, often overstepped its boundaries in workplaces, creating a climate of fear and disorder. Rather than helping workers, their involvement worsened economic uncertainty and pushed away skilled professionals workers. They had no sense of discipline and ideological commitment. The chief of this group, Abdul Mannan, tried to establish absolute dominance in the industrial areas. They (80,000 members) were salaried workers of government-owned factories. They would parade around all day with the banner of the Lal Bahini, wearing red bands or caps and red shirts, but wouldn't want to work. In June 1972, at a public meeting, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said, "The Lal Bahini should set an example by going to their respective factories and working 10 hours a day." But he failed to exercise effective control over them.<sup>28</sup>

Soon, the accounting system governing abandoned and nationalized properties began to operate without transparency and accountability. The properties of industrial institutions were looted, and their valuable machinery and raw materials were smuggled out. Corruption reached alarming levels, resulting in a substantial loss of capital. Despite having the experience and technical knowledge to run the institutions, they were busy getting personal benefits. Thus, the national economy became a field for plunder by the leaders and workers of the ruling political party. As a result, production declined rapidly, black money increased manifold, and inflation disrupted the economic lives of people at all levels.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that due to the wartime situation and the migration of a large number of skilled workers to Pakistan, the industrial institutions had to endure considerable stress. Therefore, nationalization brought even more miserable results to the nation due to the failure of the ruling government. From 1972 to 1973, Bangladesh's export earnings fell to 36.38% of their 1969-70 levels. Sugar production declined by 79%, newsprint by 25%, matches by 4%, cigarettes by 65%, paper by 71 % and jute products by 24 %, while raw jute export earnings were less than two-thirds of the target. In 1972-73 alone, jute mills suffered losses of Tk 25 crore. The money supply increased from Tk 387 crore on 16 December 1971 to Tk 696 crore in 1972-73, and its correlation with production was weak.<sup>30</sup> Valuable machinery and raw materials were smuggled across the Indian border, and corrupt dealers, often with political backing, profited by selling imported goods and permits on the black market. As a

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28 Mohiuddin Ahmad, *Op. cit.*, p.70.

29 Moudud Ahmad, *Ibid.*, p.30

30 *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

result, domestic industries were gutted of value, and workers suffered mass layoffs, unpaid wages, and deteriorating working conditions. Though it is stated in *Economic Development in 1973-74 and Annual Plan for 1974-75*, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh that the turbulent labour situation had progressively stabilized during this period.<sup>31</sup>

Despite official claims that nationalization empowered workers, the actual impact on the labor class was dire. Labor Minister Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury declared that factory ownership had passed to the workers and urged them to increase productivity. He also said, "The only way to improve workers' fortune is to increase production. If production increases, the standard of living and various facilities of the workers will increase".<sup>32</sup> However, in reality, workers had no significant control or voice in management decisions. The bureaucratic model excluded them from any meaningful participation.<sup>33</sup> Wages stagnated, living conditions worsened, and inflation eroded purchasing power. Many factory workers were coerced into party politics, especially through organizations like Lal Bahini, which often acted as enforcers rather than protectors of workers' rights.

One of the most paradoxical outcomes of the nationalization policy was the emergence of a new elite dubbed the 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie.' In the 1973 election manifesto, the NAP (Bhashani) stated that in place of Pakistan's wealthy 22 families, two thousand families had emerged in Bangladesh who were incapable of leading the country towards socialism.<sup>34</sup> Many members of the Bengali middle class transitioned into this new affluent class, enjoying foreign luxury goods and capital accumulation while the majority of the laboring masses sank deeper into poverty. According to Haidar Akbar Khan Rono (a prominent leftist leader), during Mujib's tenure, a significant portion of the middle class was elevated to the upper class. For example, 555 cigarettes were first widely introduced during Mujib's tenure, something that had not been the case during the Pakistan period. During this period, a large section of the Bengali middle class first came into widespread contact with foreign luxury goods.<sup>35</sup> This class acquired vast personal wealth through administrative corruption at the expense of state-owned factories. The officials of the corporations seemed as if they

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<sup>31</sup> *Economic Development in 1973-74 and Annual Plan for 1974-75*, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> *Purbadesh*, 15 November, 1973.

<sup>33</sup> Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, 2003, *Op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

<sup>34</sup> Mohiuddin Ahmad, *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>35</sup> Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, 2003, *Op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

were the rulers of their own empires.<sup>36</sup> Factory Managers were also engaged in increasing personal wealth by embezzling money. As a result, the state suffered much. For example, in July 1975, at least seven responsible officials, including four general managers of Zeenat Textile Mill, Comilla Chishti Textile Mill, Ashraf Textile Mill, and Halima Textile Mill, were temporarily suspended on charges of embezzling more than sixty lakhs taka. The accusations against them included discrepancies in mill records and the purchase of fake goods locally.<sup>37</sup>

The nationalization of Industries had the most devastating impact on the workers. During this period, wages did not increase significantly. A report by the Planning Commission in 1974 noted that worker wages had stagnated while inflation rose sharply due to food shortages and mismanaged distribution systems.<sup>38</sup> Because of factory losses, wages went unpaid for months, and workers were laid off arbitrarily with no prior notice. As a result, many lost their jobs and became unemployed. Thus, it can be said that the failure to establish democratic management within state-owned enterprises increased the plight of the working class, making them economically marginalized and politically powerless in the face of a corrupt system. This was why worker discontent was high, leading to protests against poor working conditions, low wages, and job insecurity.

### **Labor Politics and Their Activities**

During the Pakistan period, the political significance of the labor class increased markedly due to their widespread participation and active involvement in the Six-Point Movement of 1966. Subsequently, the working class participated spontaneously in all nationalist movements.<sup>39</sup> Initially, only the leaders of the Communist Party worked among the working class during the British period, aiming to raise their political awareness. Later, recognizing the growing importance of the labor class, the Awami League established its own labor front, the Jatiya Sramik League (National Labor League), in 1969, which played a significant role in various labor struggles for freedom. Following independence in 1971, all major political parties formed their respective labor wings.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, this led to fragmentation within the labor movement's leadership and organization during that period.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 291.

<sup>37</sup> *Dainik Ittefaq*, 28 July, 1975.

<sup>38</sup> Bangladesh Planning Commission, *Second Five-Year Plan (1973-1978)*, Government of Bangladesh.

<sup>39</sup> Kamruddin Ahmad, *Labour Movement in East Pakistan*, (Progoti Publishers), Dhaka, 1969, pp. 91-92.

<sup>40</sup> Haider Akbar Khan Rono, 2003, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

In the early days of independence, the nationalization of most large factories led to reckless looting in the state-owned sector. Trade union leaders often became complicit in this process, acting as partners in the misappropriation of state resources. Concurrently, workers were subjected to repression, including violent attacks. For instance, in areas such as Tongi, Barabkundu, and worker colonies in Chittagong, there were instances of open firing on workers.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, if a trade union was affiliated with the ruling party and could mobilize large crowds for its political rallies, it was often possible to secure minor concessions for workers through negotiation.

Between 1972 and 1975, three major opposition parties of the Jatiya Sramik League (National Workers' League) were the Jatiya Sramik Federation (National Workers' Federation), the Bangla Sramik Federation, and the Bangla Mazdur Federation. Among them, rivalry persisted particularly between the National Workers' League and the National Workers' Federation. Instead of fostering constructive engagement, they became involved in counterproductive conflict, attempting to suppress each other's organizations through violent means, including the use of firearms.<sup>42</sup>

During this period, the labor movement increasingly came to be viewed as an extension of partisan politics, with each major political party forming its own labor organization. Consequently, politically endorsed labor leaders began to replace those with professional backgrounds in labor activism. This politicization led to a departure from the fundamental principles of the labor movement, including class solidarity and independent representation.<sup>43</sup> The resulting inter-party conflicts and partisan agendas contributed to rising tensions, violence, and discontent in industrial zones, ultimately disrupting production processes and undermining the credibility of trade unions.

At that time, the conditions of numerous labor organizations can be identified through their programs and statements. They even met with the government on several occasions to raise complaints. For example, on 6 January 1973, about 50 Sramik League leaders, led by Mr. M. A. Hannan and Mr. Abdul Mannan, Acting President and General Secretary respectively of the Jatiya Sramik League, called on Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Friday evening at the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.61.

<sup>42</sup> Harunar Rashid Bhuiyan, *Gat Theke Bishayan O Shromic Andolon (From GATT to Globalization and Labor Movements)*, (Bortoman shomoy), Dhaka, 2014, p.147.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

Bangabhaban. They conveyed to the Prime Minister their deep resentment against the secret political killings in the country and urged him to immediately identify those responsible and ensure condign punishment. Additionally, they strongly condemned black marketers and hoarders and demanded strong and effective government measures against them. During their discussion, the Sramik League leaders also expressed their concern to Bangabandhu over the recent activities of some paid agents of Pakistan and a few foreign powers who were trying to foil the hard-earned independence of Bangladesh and requested Bangabandhu to take immediate and strong action to eliminate these elements from the sacred soil of Bangladesh.<sup>44</sup> Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assured the Sramik League leaders that necessary steps would be taken by his government in due course on all the issues raised by them.

On the other hand, several other labor organizations issued statements criticizing the ruling government's actions, particularly its treatment of the working class. The leaders of the Bangla Sramik Federation, including President Kazi Ahmed Zafar, Executive President Nasim Ali, and General Secretary Jamal Haider, expressed their concerns in a joint statement. They warned that the country's democracy is in severe threat due to the increasingly authoritarian behavior of the current administration. The Federation expressed grave concern over reports of torture and extrajudicial killings of workers from various regions, leading to widespread panic among the populace. The Federation reported that approximately 150 workers were killed during curfew enforcement in Chittagong and accused the government of conducting systematic repression in Daulatpur, where workers' colonies, particularly those affiliated with various political, student, and labor organizations, were allegedly raided and searched.<sup>45</sup>

The pro-Muzaffar faction of the National Awami Party (NAP), led by President Professor Muzaffar Ahmed and the party's General Secretary, also released a joint statement denouncing the actions of the ruling Awami League. They claimed that despite rhetorical commitments to democratic governance, free elections, and civil liberties, the Awami League had continued to perpetrate a series of anti-democratic and violent acts. Their statement characterized the ruling party's conduct as a direct contradiction of the principles it publicly espoused.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Morning News*, 6 January, 1973.

<sup>45</sup> *Morning News*, 6 January, 1973.

<sup>46</sup> *Ganakantha*, 12 January, 1973.

A report in *Dainik Samaj* on April 7, 1973, noted that around 25,000 workers from various factories in the Tongi industrial zone gathered for a protest meeting. This event was organized by the Tongi regional branch of the National Workers' League. The meeting was presided over by Kazi Mozammel Haque, Member of the National Parliament and President of the Tongi regional branch of the National Workers' League. The gathering strongly condemned the unprovoked attack on ordinary workers in Tongi by so-called labor representatives and hired assailants that occurred on the morning of the preceding Thursday. The assembly demanded the establishment of an official investigation committee to examine the incident. Several prominent labor leaders addressed the meeting, including Mr. Abdul Mannan (General Secretary of the National Workers' League and Member of Parliament), Mr. Abdur Rahman (Vice President of the National Workers' League), Mr. Hasanuddin Sarkar (General Secretary of the Tongi Regional Workers' League), Mr. Abdul Mannan (Joint Secretary of the National Workers' League), and Mr. Mahbulul Alam (General Secretary of the Textile Workers' League). In his address, Mr. Abdul Mannan criticized the so-called labor leaders, accusing them of misleading the working class for over a decade.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, due to corruption, inflation, and famine, the levels of exploitation and discrimination against workers increased around 1974. A significant labor struggle committee named the All-Party Labor Struggle Committee (*Sarbadaliya Sramik Sangram Committee*) was formed in December 1974 by the Sramik Federation, Jatiya Sramik Federation, Jatiya Sramik League (*Shahjahan*), Bangla Sramik Federation, and Bangla Majdoor Federation. A labor conference held on December 18, 1974, adopted a five-point charter of demands and announced a comprehensive program. The five-point charter formulated at the conference was as follows:

1. Fixation of minimum wages for the workers of the country on the basis of the ILO-sponsored survey report on minimum wages in this region. Pending the declaration of this award, an interim pay equivalent to the value of five maunds of rice at the current market price should be announced, and full rationing for workers should be introduced.
2. All forms of trade union activities, including internationally recognized collective bargaining and strikes, should be permitted in this country.
3. All workers and leaders of labor and political parties should be released immediately, and retrenched workers reinstated.

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<sup>47</sup> *Dainik Samaj*, 7 April, 1973.

4. Peasants, the allies of the labor class, should be given all facilities for the introduction of scientific agriculture.
5. Workers' children should be provided with free education, medical care, and housing facilities.<sup>48</sup>

They also criticized the then government for its failure to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the working people. The labor leaders stated that working people were now living in great hardship and observed that workers' purchasing power had decreased manifold compared to the 1970 level.<sup>49</sup> Thus, during this period, labor leaders and members expressed their demands through various programs and statements, interacting with the government, sometimes in cooperation, but most often in opposition.

#### **Labor Unrest: Govt. policy and its implications**

It had previously been stated that after Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, workers had high expectations of gaining adequate facilities and basic rights to lead better lives than before.<sup>50</sup> But during the period 1972-1975, the workers of Bangladesh were subjected to various forms of exploitation. As a result, the workers became agitated and staged various organized movements. They went on strike to demand wage increases, bonuses, relief from the high prices of daily necessities, changes to labor policies that were against their interests, and improved working conditions.

The government announced the first national labor policy on September 27, 1972. This new labor policy announced by the Minister of Labor, Mr. Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, failed to show due respect for workers' fair democratic rights and aspirations. Under this policy, trade unions in state-owned industries or factories lost their right to collective bargaining, and 85% of the country's industrial workers were deprived of the right to strike.<sup>51</sup> The government argued that since workers would have the right to participate in the management of state-owned industries, there was no scope for collective bargaining or strikes. They claimed any strike in the state-owned sector would disrupt production. However, the right to strike is an

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48 *The Bangladesh Times*, 19 December, 1974.

49 *The Bangladesh Observer*, 19 December, 1974.

50 Md. Sohel Rana, "Comprehensive Analysis of Labour Rights under National Law of Bangladesh and Relevant Laws of ILO Convention", *CIFILE Journal of International Law* 5.10 (2024), pp. 48-64. [Accessed on-10 April 2025].

51 *Sangbad*, 1 October, 1972.

internationally recognized basic right of the working class, and this right cannot be taken away under any circumstances.

In the past (1969), the Awami League had consistently supported workers' demands for trade union and strike rights; thus, the people and workers of the country did not expect such a labor policy from the party's government<sup>52</sup>, and it was rejected by various labor organizations. Five labor leaders, in a joint press statement, demanded the withdrawal of the labor policy. They claimed that the Government had earlier assured the working class that it would announce a labor policy based on the recommendations of labor representatives.<sup>53</sup> They said that the labor policy was 'Detrimental to the interests of the workers'. The five Worker's Federations, namely, Bangla Mazdur Federation, Bangla Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Shangjukta Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Sramik Federation, and Jatiyo Sramik Parishad, also gave a call for a token strike for the day. Addressing the Rally, Kazi Zafar Ahmed, the Chief of the Bangla Sramik Federation, declared that the workers and peasants of the country would never accept the constitution if it failed to project the hopes and aspirations of the working people. He opined that the present House did not have the right to frame the country's constitution, because its members had been elected under the Pakistani Legal Framework Order. Mr. Dewan Sirajul Huq, the Chief of the Bangladesh Mazdoor Federation, said that the new labor policy was even worse than the one given by Air Marshal Nur Khan of the colonial regime.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the Bangladesh Constitution does not contain any specific provision obligating the State to enforce or implement international treaties and Conventions<sup>55</sup>, including the ILO<sup>56</sup> Conventions on Freedom of Association.<sup>57</sup>

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52 *Sangbad*, 1 October, 1972.

53 *The Bangladesh Observer*, 1 October, 1972.

54 *The People*, 12 October, 1972.

55 Borhan Uddin Khan, "The ILO Convention on Freedom of Association: Implications in Bangladesh", *Bangladesh Journal of Law*, II, Vol. 6 (1&2), 2002

56 The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a UN specialized agency with a tripartite structure consisting of governments, employers, and workers. The main objective of the ILO is to formulate international labor policies to improve global working conditions, raise living standards, and ensure fundamental human rights. According to official records, Bangladesh has ratified a total of 39 conventions and 1 protocol. [International Labour Organization, "Country Profile: Bangladesh," NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards, accessed August 20, 2026, ilo.org.]

57 ILO Convention No. 87 guarantees workers' and employers' freedom of association and right to organize without prior authorization. It protects their freedom to form and join organizations, manage their activities independently, and establish federations and confederations, while requiring states to safeguard these rights from undue interference. [International Labour

The demand for a new labor policy began to rise again, and following this, in the opening speech of the three-day National Industrial Management Seminar in Dhaka on Thursday, November 15, 1973, Labor and Social Welfare Minister Alhaj Zahur Ahmad Chowdhury said that the report of the Labor Policy and Industrial Employees' Wage Commission would be published next month, i.e., mid-December.<sup>58</sup> In 1973, the government established the Workers' and Employees' Commission and adopted recommendations regarding the determination of wages, bonuses, medical allowances, house rent allowances, travel allowances, and holidays for workers in state-owned industries. At the same time, the commission also published a report. To implement the Wages and Salaries Commission's report, the Government issued the Ordinance in 1974. However, the situation in the industrial sector did not significantly improve.<sup>59</sup>

Regionalism was another reason behind the unrest in the labor areas. Actually, laborers from different marginal regions of the country came to work in the industries, keeping the factories running through their organized efforts. However, after independence, conflicts among laborers became evident due to regionalism. Even bloody clashes occurred among them. The blatant manifestation of regionalism in various industrial areas created deadlock situations. Several fraternal riots broke out in the Adamji Jute Mill centered on the issue of regionalism. As a result, the Adamji Jute Mill was closed day after day. In those incidents, numerous innocent workers were killed, millions of taka were lost each day, and the foundation of the economy grew weaker.<sup>60</sup> In April 1973, the Home Minister, Mr. Abdul Malek Ukil, said-

The Liberation War in Bangladesh was fought on the basis of Bengali nationalism. During the liberation war, we all had a thought in our minds that, regardless of which district or region we lived in, we were all Bengalis. Inspired by the concept of nationalism, we achieved our country's independence. In many cases, regionalism has emerged as radical and fratricidal, like communalism. Unless the poison of regionalism is removed from the industrial areas, it will never be possible to establish peace in the labor sector, and production in factories will not increase.<sup>61</sup>

After independence, workers did not get a healthy working environment in the factories. Moreover, even if someone fell ill while working, there was no medical

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Organization, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention (ILO No. 87), adopted July 9, 1948, ilo.org.]

58 *Dainik Ittefaq*, 15 October, 1972.

59 Harunar Rashid Bhuiyan, *Ibid.*, p.146.

60 *Sangbad*, 11 April, 1973.

61 *Banglar Bani*, 18 April, 1973.

treatment available. As a result, many people were injured or died in workplace accidents. But most of the time, the authorities were apathetic about this issue. For example, on June 19, 1973, a worker's hand was caught in a roller in a sheet factory of the Chittagong Steel Mill, resulting in amputation. Due to the absence of an ambulance in Chittagong Steel Mill, the injured worker had to be taken to the hospital by baby taxi. The mill workers became enraged at this incident and surrounded the manager. The workers snatched the cars of Deputy General Manager Dr. Kamal Uddin and Chief Accountant Mr. Nurul Haque from their homes. The aggrieved workers said that the factory cars would not be allowed to be kept at home or used for personal purposes by the officers. Actually, the workers had been demanding an ambulance for a long time. Due to the lack of an ambulance, a jeep was used instead. However, on the day of the incident, the jeep was dispatched to the hospital with a worker who had been injured in an earlier accident, and the worker was not present at the factory at the time of the accident.<sup>62</sup> As a result, there is an issue with transporting the injured person to the hospital. The mill workers became angry and surrounded the personnel officer, Abrar Hossain. They demanded that all the mill vehicles, including those of the officers, be stored at the mill. The mill's personnel manager, upset by this incident, resigned. But by night, the workers called off the siege, and the personnel manager also withdrew his resignation.

Between 1972 and 1975, the government attempted to remove the communist leadership from the industrial area and establish control by the Awami League. For this, they adopted two strategies simultaneously: creating opportunistic leadership and suppressing leftist leadership through violence. Trade union leaders became partners in the reckless looting of the nationalized sector. Terrorist attacks on workers were also carried out. The situation destroyed the labor movements.<sup>63</sup> Thus, extreme opportunism and corruption flourished. After nationalization, the products were illegally sold; 3 lakh taka was spent weekly on 8000 fake labors' cards; flour mills and ration shops engaged in smuggling; corruption spread in the supply of other essentials goods, parts and machinery; lakhs of taka were stolen from the electrical department's go-down; water pipes worth about 1.5 lakh taka and goods worth 1.5 crore taka were smuggled from the lamination factory. Additionally, 24 lakh mounds of useless jute were purchased. The average daily production during the Pakistan period has gradually decreased from 250 tons to 300 tons and has reached 26 tons.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Dainik Ittefaq*, 20 June, 1973.

<sup>63</sup> Haider Akbar Khan Rono, 2003, *Op.cit.*, p.61.

<sup>64</sup> *Ganakantha*, 28 June, 1973.

In all these corruptions, many officials of the industrial administration, leaders of government labor organizations, and members of the ruling party were involved. For example, on 2 January 1975, the General Secretary of Jatiya Sramik League and Chief of Lal Bahini (Member of Parliament), Mr. Abdul Mannan, was arrested by the Anti-Corruption Department from his residence on Faridabad Lane on charges of embezzling goods worth seven lakhs from the Dhaka Cotton Mill. A case was registered against him under Section 409 of the Bangladesh Penal Code at Sutrapur police station, and he was sent to Dhaka Central Jail.<sup>65</sup>

Apart from that, he was accused of leading an attack on the Chairman of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC). The incident took place at the Adamjee Court Office in Motijheel. Members of the Lal Bahini stormed into the office, dragged the chairman out, and humiliated him. Some say they tied a *gamcha* (cotton towel) around his neck, while others claim he was forcibly taken out of the office. The bureaucracy took this incident very seriously. All the secretaries stopped working and went together to meet the Prime Minister. They had already approached the ministers, but the ministers said, “There’s nothing we can do.” Consequently, the bureaucrats went directly to the Prime Minister, saying, “If we are humiliated in this way, we cannot continue our work.”<sup>66</sup> Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took the matter very seriously. As a result, Mr. Mannan was arrested.

Furthermore, the trade union movement, which was necessary to realize the demands of workers, maintain peace and order in industrial areas, and improve efficiency and morale, was corrupted. It was a sad truth that, in the name of the labor movement, a group of so-called labor leaders in an independent country pursued narrow, personal, or group interests. There were numerous examples in various factories. For example, a special investigation committee was appointed by the Prime Minister to investigate the incidents at the Adamjee Jute Mill. The committee stated that:

A class of labor leaders obtained special privileges from the authorities for themselves, their relatives, and their supporters. Some of them occupied many of the mill’s properties. A certain labor leader occupied the wheat crushing machine. Neither labor leaders nor their close associates worked but still received wages. Due to their manipulation, mines

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<sup>65</sup> *Dainik Ittefaq*, 3 January, 1975.

<sup>66</sup> Tauhid Hossain Khan, Ishrat Zakia Sultana, and Sabina Sharmin, “*Fight for Labor Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh: An Interview With Legendary Union Leader Nazrul Islam Khan*,” *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* (August 2025): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10482911251364010>.

were withdrawn in the names of many fake workers. They also occupied the mill vehicles and the workers' living quarters. And the ordinary workers lived in inhuman conditions.<sup>67</sup>

As a result, the mills' production was disrupted, and discontent among the common workers increased. However, a different scenario was also evident. Numerous labor leaders dedicated themselves tirelessly to improve the conditions of the working class. In return, the workers demonstrated profound loyalty and affection by fulfilling their obligation to safeguard their leaders in times of crisis. In his autobiography, Kazi Zafar Ahmed writes:

When the beloved leader of the workers, Abul Bashar, was arrested in the Barabkunda area of Chittagong and taken to court, thousands of workers from Kalurghat, Barabkunda, and other industrial areas surrounded the court building in a procession, carrying whatever they could find. The number of workers was approximately 40,000 to 50,000. They created great unrest, and eventually Abul Bashar was released.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, another strategy of the government was to eliminate leftist leadership through extreme repression. During this time, brutal attacks were carried out on the labor areas, creating a reign of terror. Anti-government labor organizations or labor activists were not allowed to remain in the labor zones. For example, in 1972, the Jatiya Sramik League placed machine guns in front of the police station and fired indiscriminately on a labor colony in Tongi. The number of casualties exceeded one hundred. In protest, the unarmed workers left the industrial area and began walking to Dhaka. Fifteen thousand workers walked twenty miles and took up positions in Dhaka. After spending three days and three nights on the streets of Dhaka, they returned to the area on the assurance of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.<sup>69</sup> However, later, this assurance did not take effect, and as a result, attacks were carried out again. Mr. Ali Azam, the General Secretary of Zinnath Textile Mills Worker Union, was brutally murdered. But the authorities did not take any initiative to punish the culprits. Kazi Zafar Ahmed accused a particular labor organization of carrying on fascist activities in different industrial areas of the country. He claimed that about one hundred Sramik Federation workers were killed in the Tongi industrial area, while the law-enforcement agencies often appeared helpless.<sup>70</sup> Similar violent attacks were carried out in all the labor areas. Nevertheless, laborers resisted in various ways. Although strikes were prohibited at that time, many laborers went on spontaneous strikes and clashed with the police and the security forces.

A report published in the *Purbadesh* newspaper on February 7, 1973, stated that:

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<sup>67</sup> *Sangbad*, 16 February, 1974.

<sup>68</sup> Kazi Zafar Ahmed, *Op. cit.*, p.255.

<sup>69</sup> Haider Akbar Khan Rono, *Ibid*, 2003, p.62.

<sup>70</sup> *The People*, 16 October, 1972.

A brutal murder took place in the Barabkunda industrial area, located twenty miles away from Chittagong city. When the workers of R, R, Jute Mills and R, R, Textile Mills were deep in sleep after the day's work, a group of armed former workers attacked the slum and set it on fire. When the workers fled to save themselves from being burnt, armed mobs opened fire on them recklessly. As a result, many workers were injured. 12 people were killed on the spot, and 31 were injured. This demonic murder took place on the eve of the expected first general election of the country.

Most of the time, workers protested for fair wages or wage increases. Factory authorities frequently exploited them in various ways, which fueled their anger. On October 7, 1973, approximately 2,000 workers at No. 3 Adamjee Mill suddenly went on indefinite strike, demanding fair wages.<sup>71</sup> Apart from this, wages were determined largely based on workers' skill levels and inefficiencies, but no training was provided to improve their skills. For example, a draft recommendation published by the Minimum Wages Board, set to take effect from December 1, 1975, fixed the minimum monthly wage for unskilled workers at 200 taka (based on an 8-hour workday and 26 working days per month), for semi-skilled workers at 250 taka, and for skilled workers at 290 taka. Those who had objections to the proposed wages were asked to submit their concerns to the Minimum Wages Board by December 14.<sup>72</sup>

Between 1970-71 and 1974-75, the daily wages of workers across the cotton textile, jute, sugar, biscuit, and mustard oil industries generally increased, although the rate of increase varied across industries and skill levels. From 1970-71 to 1974-75, the daily wages of skilled cotton textile workers increased from Tk. 6.11 to Tk. 7.94, while those of unskilled workers rose from Tk. 4.52 to Tk. 6.00. During the same period, the daily wages of skilled jute mill workers increased from Tk. 6.03 to Tk. 6.99, while those of unskilled workers rose from Tk. 4.50 to Tk. 7.99.<sup>73</sup>

Although wages had increased in most industries since independence, the rise was insufficient to keep up with the soaring prices of food, clothing, and other essentials. During the mass uprising of 1968-69 and the elections of 1970-71, amid intense nationalist agitation, the Awami League pledged to reduce the price of rice to 20 taka per mound. However, in reality, the average price of rice in 1970-71 was about 48 rupees per mound. After the country's independence, the prices of daily necessities,

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<sup>71</sup> *Purbadesh*, 7 October, 1973

<sup>72</sup> *Dainik Ittefaq*, 9 December, 1975.

<sup>73</sup> Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Establishment, *Bangladesh District Gazetteer: Greater Dhaka*, ed. Dr. Sheikh Maksud Ali (Dhaka: Bangladesh Government Press, 1990), p. 308.

including rice, began to rise steadily. At the same time, the real wages of the working class began to decline. The following chart illustrates the rise in prices of essential commodities during the period 1971-75:

**Table 1: Price increase of Essential Consumer Goods (1971-75)**

| The name of Commodities | Quantity | Price (in taka) |         |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------------|---------|
|                         |          | 1971-72         | 1974-75 |
| Rice                    | 1 mound  | 57.10           | 244.40  |
| Lentils                 | 1 kg     | 1.62            | 4.74    |
| Fish                    | 1kg      | 4.19            | 11.72   |
| Beef                    | 1kg      | 3.27            | 10.85   |
| Onion                   | 1kg      | 0.78            | 2.57    |
| Salt                    | 1kg      | 0.47            | 3.83    |
| Sugar                   | 1kg      | 2.52            | 5.82    |
| Potatoes                | 1kg      | 0.95            | 2.62    |
| Green chili,            | 1kg      | 5.23            | 46.66   |
| Kerosene oil            | 22 ounce | 0.83            | 1.79    |
| Mustard Oil             | 1litre   | 6.87            | 31.17   |

Source: *The Bangladesh Statistical Yearbook*, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1974, p. 372.

Despite widespread corruption through smuggling, hoarding, black-marketing, and adulteration, the root of the immense suffering endured by millions lay in the greed and selfishness of a small segment of businessmen.<sup>74</sup> Sometimes they created an artificial crisis in particular goods. For example, on 24 February 1974, an artificial salt crisis caused panic among consumers, prompting a rush to purchase it. For several hours, the price of salt soared to around Tk. 3 and was on the verge of climbing even higher due to the sudden spike in demand-until timely intervention by the police curbed the situation. The panic stemmed from a rumor, reportedly spread by a group of unscrupulous salt traders in Dhaka and Narayanganj.<sup>75</sup> As a result, the prices of essential goods rose beyond the purchasing capacity of people with fixed incomes, particularly the working class. On 13 May 1974, the Bangladesh Retail

<sup>74</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 26 January, 1974.

<sup>75</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 24 February, 1974.

Shopkeepers' Federation submitted a 16-point proposal to the government outlining effective measures to reduce the prices of essential commodities. The President of the Federation, Syed Mahbub Ali, stated that retail shopkeepers were not responsible for the prevailing high prices of daily necessities; rather, the blame lay with the middlemen in the supply chain. He further asserted that prices could be significantly reduced if 80% of total import licenses were allocated to genuine traders.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to demanding wage increases, many factory workers also protested for bonuses. On January 1, 1974, thousands of workers marched in Dhaka demanding food, clothing, and Eid bonuses. Workers from Postogola, Adamjee Nagar, Siddhirganj, Demra, and Tongi took to the streets with slogans, processions, and truck parades, surrounding the head offices of several sector corporations. A delegation of the protesting workers met with Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Ganabhaban to inquire about the government's decision regarding advance Eid payments.

Under the leadership of Jatiya Sramik League President Mr. Mohammad Shahjahan, around twenty thousand workers from various factories in the Postogola industrial area, including Chan Textile Mills, Dhaka Cotton Mills, Dhaka Match Factory, Habib Match Factory, Dhaka Jute Mills, Orient Textile Mills, and Ujala Match Factory, held a massive and militant protest procession. The marching workers surrounded the central offices of the Fertilizer and Chemical Company, the Textile Industry Corporation, and the Jute Mill Corporation in Motijheel, demanding that Eid bonuses be paid within the next twenty-four hours. Their slogans included: '*Ider age bonas chai (We want bonuses before Eid),*' '*Majuri kamisaner suparis manina (We do not accept the recommendations of the Wage Commission),*' and '*Sramik nirjatan bandha kara, Sosaker gadi jaliye dao (Stop the oppression of workers, burn the exploiters' mattresses)*'.<sup>77</sup>

At a rally held in Adamjee Nagar, the President of the Adamjee Mazdoor Trade Union, Mr. Mortuza Khan, strongly demanded payment of Eid bonuses before Eid. He also called for full rationing and the distribution of TCB cloth at fair prices among workers.<sup>78</sup> Protests were also held in the port city of Chittagong. Additionally,

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<sup>76</sup> *Bangladesh Times*, 13 May, 1974.

<sup>77</sup> *Ganakantha*, 2 January, 1974.

<sup>78</sup> *Sangbad*, 31 December, 1973.

a gherao movement took place at all jute mills in Khulna and Jessore, demanding Eid bonuses.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, during the period 1972-75, workers protested not only to improve their economic conditions, such as better wages and working hours, but also to stand against corruption by authorities, looting of resources, and acts of repression and injustice.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the preceding discussion, it can be asserted that, following independence, various government policies that disregarded workers' welfare led to widespread dissatisfaction among the labor class. The government's failure to keep commodity prices stable and the resulting disruption to daily life increased the hardships of the laborers, leaving them deeply disillusioned. At the same time, a small group of people was becoming very wealthy, often at the expense of workers. This sense of injustice stirred up widespread anger among laborers, who felt the elite were profiting from their hard work while they faced significant struggles. Due to such exploitation and inequality, laborers were compelled to organize and fight for their rights.

However, in the course of composing this article, a significant observation emerges: the nature of exploitation and deprivation in independent Bangladesh differed from that during the Pakistan period, and the character of the labor movement changed accordingly. During the Pakistan period, the class enemies of the laborers were the non-Bengali industry owners and the non-Bengali government. But in post-independence Bangladesh, the realization among laborers that they were being exploited by their own compatriots deeply distressed and disillusioned them. Furthermore, after independence, many political leaders established their own labor organizations, leading to fragmentation and division within the labor movement. Another crisis of this period was the emergence of opportunistic labor leadership that often failed to effectively represent workers' demands. Instead, these leaders engaged in corrupt practices, exploited opportunities for personal gain, and frequently disrupted factory operations to exert pressure. Such actions not only undermined the credibility of labor organizations but also hampered industrial production. As a result of this disunity and opportunism, the labor movement struggled to progress in a cohesive and effective way during the initial period of independence. However, by

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<sup>79</sup> *Dainik Ittefaq*, 3 January, 1974.

1974, in response to rapid increasing exploitation and repression, various labor organizations united to form the Sarbadaliya Sramik Sangram Committee (All-Party Labor Struggle Committee). This coalition adopted a firm agenda and coordinated collective action, ultimately contributing to the labor movement's renewed vigor and partial success.