

Unions or NGOs? Organizing Labor under the Neoliberal Gaze

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This paper examines the prospects and limits of conventional modes of organizing labor in Bangladesh's garment industry. The title alludes to the specificity of the labor rights regime in the country, in which the lines between advocacy by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on behalf of workers frequently bleeds into and is occasionally indistinguishable from the activities of some trade unions. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013, what could be called NGOised trade unions took on increasingly vocal and visible roles. The professionalization of the trade union model, I suggest, brings with it limitations thrown starkly into relief when we situate "the new trade unionism" within a longer history of labor activism in Bangladesh. Through a close reading of a notable workers' uprising in May 2006, I argue that fundamental contradictions and constraints remain untouched by the legal and other reforms made after 2013. Among other things, the discourse around reform effectively sanitizes worker resistance by invisibilizing structural barriers. I conclude that without bodily resistance -- the literal occupation of public spaces and streets as well as factories -- possibilities for meaningful change are minimal given existing political and legal infrastructures. Finally, I challenge culturalist explanations of why women in the garment industry are not more active in organizing themselves. I argue that dominant constructions of poor Bangladeshi women as passive and/or uneducated and so unable to recognize their own interests, displaces the political through cultural tropes that disguise relations of power.

A Note on Neoliberal Governance and its Sentiments

Neoliberalism itself is a much-contested category. My concern here is not with debates around definition or the specifics of normative prescriptions that go under the sign of neoliberalism. Rather, my analysis is informed by what I call neoliberal sentiment -- the discursive parameters and commonsense produced and promoted by neoliberal modes of governance. Here I approach governance as "a discourse to manage and promote the

social stability fundamental for capital's accumulation," a process that relies critically "on the networked active participation and self-management of non-state actors such as NGOs and other civil society groups as well as business (Massimo de Angelis 233-234)."

Among other things, neoliberal governance in the transnational realm relies on a language of democracy, equality and rights. By this logic, if the market is ultimately moral, then multinational corporations and their affiliates cannot be *seen* to be exploitative. In this context, the absolute horror of Rana Plaza as it unfolded in real time constituted a moment of acute crisis by exposing the underbelly of the global supply chain and potentially unleashing "market-unfriendly" sentiments.¹ The sheer scale of the damage ensured that Bangladesh and its garment-producing infrastructure would be subject to global scrutiny. Further, the industrial disaster threatened to undermine the powerful narrative of the market as site of female empowerment for women in the South.

In the circumstances, it is instructive that the collapse of Rana Plaza, a multipurpose multi-storied building that housed several garment factories, was widely understood predominantly to be the outcome of (a lack of good) governance, corruption and negligence as well as the greed of an individual factory owner. It goes without saying that implementation and oversight are shockingly poor in Bangladeshi factories, and within the construction industry. Regardless, no one associated with the numerous other commercial ventures housed in Rana Plaza lost their lives. Sensing imminent danger, these establishments shut down operations. Clearly, more than shoddy buildings and inadequate inspections were at stake. This line of inquiry cannot be easily accommodated in straightforward governance narrative.

Neoliberal sentiment is gendered; echoing its imperial originals, this framing makes women and girls central to the process of development. Correspondingly, female empowerment – of the girl child, of the laboring woman and so on – is invariably an individual endeavor. We see this in the many NGO efforts to empower Bangladeshi garment workers through training on legal literacy, as well as on improving bargaining and

¹ The title of a report issued by the Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University, *Business as Usual is not an Option*, captures the general mood of those associated directly or indirectly with the industry, from buyers and intermediate brokers in the global commodity chain to governments, labour advocates and multilateral organizations (Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly, 2014)

leadership skills. While such training is undeniably valuable, the premise underlying the approach (of teaching people to be responsible for their own fates) relies on the assumption that “the problem” is individual rather than systemic. Among other things, collective movements that mobilize for structural change in the long run are easily discredited in this environment.

Curiously, formal trade unions – at least those that fit within certain parameters – are no longer automatic objects of disparagement and mistrust in policy circles; indeed, some mechanism for collective bargaining appears to be a pre-requisite for attracting foreign investment in Bangladeshi Export Processing Zones. It is not incidental that unions have the potential to contain as well as promote labour militancy. Among other things, the situation calls for an interrogation of the broader political context that informs *processes* of union formation, including the extent of bureaucratic discretion in determining membership and agenda. It is equally critical to situate the new international desire for unions in shifting ideologies of neoliberal governance. The push by the United States and the European Union for some form of collective bargaining in EPZs signals a shift in the representational forms of transnational governance and registers of power

An implicitly modernist narrative arc that structures mainstream accounts of the post Rana Plaza period — of individual ‘tragedy’ in the global South that spurs legal reform and improved oversight through the application of external/Northern pressure — obscures critical ground realities. The persuasive power of this narrative depends upon the active forgetting of the past in which workers have secured meaningful change only after embarking on direct action through, often violent, street politics.

The Made in Bangladesh Label: A Race to the Bottom?

A set of serendipitous conjunctures, some related, led to the spectacular rise of the apparel export industry, which soon established itself as a central engine of the national economy, in terms of employment, foreign exchange revenue and multiplier effects. In 1984, 385 factories produced for the global market (Shahidur Rahman). Since then, by one estimate, the average growth rate from FY 1983-84 through FY 2009-10 was as high as 20.1 per cent (Yunus and Yamagata 2014). Accordingly, the number of factories registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers’ Association (BGMEA, established in 1982) went from 3480 in FY 2000-01 to 4296 in FY 2013-14

(BGMEA 2015).¹ Although several Export Processing Zones (EPZs) were established near Dhaka and the port City of Chittagong, currently only 257 of all enterprises are based inside EPZs.²

The industry's increasing significance to the national economy can be gauged by the fact that from the mid-eighties until quite recently, total exports and garment exports grew more or less at the same rate (Yunus and Yanagata 2014). During FY 2013-2014, RMG exports totaled US \$ 24.5 billion. In the third quarter of 2015, apparel exports accounted for 82 per cent of total export earnings (Bangladesh Bank 2015). At the global level as well, the industry made its mark. By 2010, Bangladesh was already the second largest exporter of garments in the world, behind China (BGMEA). It has continued to hold on to this position despite predictions to the contrary following the 2008 recession and competition from other low wage economies such as Myanmar and Ethiopia. Until December 2013, Bangladeshi workers earned the lowest wages in the world – around BD TK 3000, which is roughly \$38. The new minimum monthly wage of BD TK 5,300 (just over \$66) represents a 77 per cent increase. Notably, the government's decision to raise wages came after worker protests shut down around 100 factories in Ashulia, Savar, in November 2013 (Arun Devnath 2013).

The industry employs an estimated 4.2 million workers today, of whom 60 - 80 per cent is female.³ Feminists, as well as owners and policy makers frequently hail garment work as initiating a silent revolution in gender relations, offering a critical site of female empowerment (Azim 2005; Siddiqi 2009). To the rest of the world, Bangladesh's garment sector is known primarily for its feminized labour force, represented either as victimized sweatshop workers in need of rescue or as active subjects emancipated through entry into capitalist modernity (Siddiqi 2014).

The phenomenal success of 'garments' is often recounted as the story of heroic individual entrepreneurs risking their financial futures for the sake of the nation (see the BGMEA website). Alternately, it is 'a story of leaks, unintended consequences, and increasing returns' (Easterly quoted in Mahmud p. 6). In this paternalist re-telling, it is Daewoo's business expertise, shared with a select group of Desh Garments employees who then 'leaked' this secret knowledge to others that is ultimately responsible for global success. The condescension here is hard to miss. As it happened, converging national and global factors underwrote the remarkable expansion of the sector in its first two decades.

Along with changes in international trade agreements, the nascent garment industry benefited greatly from a complex interplay of shifting ‘local’ and global policy prescriptions. By the early eighties, the socialist policies of Bangladesh’s first post-war government had been replaced by the unreserved embrace of open market policies. The militarized regimes of General Zia (1975-1981) and General Ershad (1982-1990) favoured and enabled this distinct ideological shift. Around the same time, international financial institutions actively endorsed structural adjustment policies, ‘free trade’, and export oriented industrialization as pathways to economic development. Southern nations were compelled to liberalize trade policies in order to compete in the new regime of globalization. Bangladesh’s extreme dependence on donor funded development pushed the nation toward market liberalization. The ‘structural adjustment’ upon which International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loans were conditional ensured that the country’s macro-economic policies leaned heavily toward privatization and trade liberalization. With the closing of jute, sugar and other mills, investors in the apparel sector were prime beneficiaries of state support for the export economy.

The resurgence of ‘free market’ ideologies and neoliberal approaches to development also corresponded to the emergence of the global factory. By the 1980’s, rising wages and labour-protective legislation prompted many Northern corporations to relocate manufacturing units out of the United States and Europe to Asia and Central/Latin America. Multinationals in search of ever cheaper labour established post Fordist, ‘flexible’ assembly line production across national borders. This relentless search for increasing returns effectively *cheapened* labor as Southern economies vied with one another to attract multinational corporations, in what has been called a race to the bottom.

The global factory also brought about major shifts in the international division of labour. A predominantly female, ‘third world’ migrant labor force characterized the new global assembly line. As such, the emergent proletariat was raced, classed, and gendered in ways that reflected older colonial and imperial divisions of consumption and production, as well as of wealth and inequality. Labour precarity – high turnover, job insecurity, and casualization– marked work in export factories in Bangladesh as elsewhere. Bangladesh was well-placed to compete in this environment, which relied on a specific presumptive labor subjectivity of ‘third world women’ – docile, nimble fingered and willing to work

for very little. The seemingly elastic supply of young, female rural migrants, and the lowest labour costs in the world made the country an appealing destination.

Last but not least, the unfolding effects of the 1974 Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) enhanced Bangladesh's competitiveness as a manufacturing destination at a critical juncture of the industry's formation. The MFA, meant as a temporary measure, imposed quotas on yarn, garments and textile exports from 'developing' countries to 'developed' economies. The idea was to ease the passage into 'free trade' of older industrialized economies by giving them time to adjust to low cost, low wage imports from the global South. Designed as a protectionist measure for Europe and the US, the MFA inadvertently helped 'emerging' economies such as Bangladesh (Bannerjee 2014). Established manufacturing countries such as South Korea found their access to markets in Europe and America blocked. In an effort to bypass MFA rules of origin, they began to outsource the 'Cutting and Making' of garments to nations such as Bangladesh which were not subject to the same strictures. The quota regime proved to be a boon to Bangladeshi investors and the government, which dispensed licenses liberally to those it wished to patronize. It is no small irony that until the MFA expired in 2004, the specter of other countries' lost manufacturing opportunities underwrote the Made in Bangladesh label.

In short, any analysis of labour organizing in Bangladesh must keep in mind the conditions of precarity under which the garment industry 'took off,' the nation's place within global political-economic structures and the predicaments of producing for an export economy in a "race to the bottom." I should note here that economists and policy makers differ markedly on the meanings and implications of what constitutes a race to the bottom. According to Wikipedia, it is a socio-economic phrase used to describe government deregulation of the business environment or taxes in order to attract or retain economic activity in their jurisdictions. The implication of this ostensibly neutral but avowedly "free market" framing is that the situation will lead to sustained economic growth which in turn will improve the lives of all citizens, including workers (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_bottom).² This formulation does not address

² See Yunus and Yamagata (2014) for a different perspective on the prospects of Bangladesh's apparel export industry in lifting the national economy.

questions of who bears the cost of deregulation designed to attract or retain economic activity. If retaining competitiveness calls for slashing wages and living standards for workers, as it invariably does, then the long-term prospects for worker well-being for workers are not necessarily positive.

Bangladesh's exclusive 'comparative advantage' is its cheap(ened) and relatively unskilled female labour force. Paradoxically, what is an advantage for the national economy can actually be fatal for the union or individual worker demanding increased wages and improved working conditions. If low labor costs are central to being globally competitive then labor repression can be justified as a valid 'cost' of maintaining the nation's competitive edge. This line of argument becomes even stronger in a place like Bangladesh where the economy is inordinately dependent upon the apparel export industry. Labor resistance can be recast as sedition, as action that directly challenges the nation interest.

Colonial Legacies and Capitalist Presents

First formed under conditions of colonial rule, the appropriation of labour unions into political movements laid the foundations for a peculiar mode of politicization and extreme partisanship in postcolonial Bangladesh. Unions associated with the two main industries in British India, jute and textiles, quickly became part of broader anti-colonial struggles. Given their power to mobilize large groups of workers on the streets, labour unions became 'key organizations on the national political stage' (Rahman and Langford 2012).

A related but different legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, one rarely taken into account in analyses of contemporary labour mobilizations are the particular registers of public protest, 'of breaking the law peacefully,' that are deeply embedded, across the political landscape 'as a set of possible languages of political expression and dissent' (Blom Hansen 2008: 3). These possible languages include gheraos, blockades, sit-ins and hunger strikes, all modes of protest invoked by the labour movement in Bangladesh at various moments in recent history. If the idea of breaking the law peacefully seems counter-intuitive today, the institutional memory remains strong.

Pakistan's first military ruler, General Ayub Khan, introduced factory-level unions to counter what he saw as undesirable communist inroads as well as to extend his regime's hegemony over the working class. The Pakistani state's hostility toward communism and

progressives/leftists in the labor movement represented a critical feature of the country's evolving Cold War alliance with the United States. After a formal ban on the Communist Party came into place in 1954, progressive workers and organizers were forced underground. Political and union leaders found themselves under mass arrest during the martial law period. It was during the early stages of the Cold War, soon after independence that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the US based AFL-CIO first became active in East Pakistan. The AFL-CIO practiced 'Cold War Trade Union Imperialism', consolidating anti-communist trade union movements, long before its formalized overseas front the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) was set up in 1968 (Rahman and Langford) 2014: 174). AAFLI was originally targeted at labour in Vietnam, soon expanded its operations to include the Philippines and other Asian and Pacific countries. By the 1990s, it supported unions in approximately 30 countries in Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East, with resident representatives in Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Turkey (Sims, 1999: 59).

East Pakistan's labour movement was further divided by the ideological differences between the two opposition parties, the Awami League (AL) and the explicitly left-leaning National Awami Party (NAP) at the forefront of the struggle against West Pakistani economic and cultural hegemony in the 1950's and 1960s. Both NAP and the AL sponsored their own trade union federations. As in the anti-colonial period, union activities became subservient to the immediate needs and strategies of the party and the nationalist struggle. Workers were as involved as students in the mass upsurges of 1968-69, the strikes, blockades and torch processions that ultimately forced the military to call the first parliamentary elections in Pakistan's history.

The Awami League government of newly independent Bangladesh should have been labour friendly. It espoused explicitly socialist values, nationalized key industries and enacted several pro-labour laws. Unfortunately, geo-political and other considerations not entirely within its control soon compelled the new government to dispense with much of its socialist inclinations (Siddiqi 2010). Nationalization effectively politicized labour unions further. The result, among other things, was an increasingly authoritarian bent that eventually rendered the polity into a one party state. All trade unions – regardless of individual ideology – were forcibly incorporated into the ruling party's labour front. The more progressive voices were silenced or forced underground.

A bloody coup in 1975 ushered in 15 years of military rule during which time free market policies geared toward economic growth were consolidated. General Ziaur Rahman initially banned all union activity, but later rescinded the ban with severe restrictions. He also directed each political party to set up its own labour front, effectively diluting the impact of any independent militant unions (Ross 2014: 11). In a bid to secure political legitimacy, General Zia soon established his own political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose labour front was set up in 1979. Sensing the power of organized labor, Zia is said to have bought off labour leaders from the right as well as the pro-Beijing left (Rahman and Langford).

Zia initiated the privatization of state enterprises, a process his military successor, General H. M. Ershad carried forward. The large-scale retrenchment that followed weakened the labour movement greatly. Against the odds, and in response, existing private sector unions formed Sromik Kormochari Oikya Parishad (Workers Employees Unity Council) or SKOP. This proved to be a decisive and critical moment of rupture for the labor movement. Despite mounting considerable resistance, SKOP was not able to generate pro-labor policies. Continuing privatization resulted in a steep decline in unionization from which the country has never recovered. As unions affiliated with the ruling party spent their energies competing over political patronage and resources, state repression – by the police, army or increasingly by paramilitary forces – of independent labour became the norm.

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990 did little to shift the prospects of improved workers' rights since both the AL and BNP, which alternated in power until recently, embrace similar ideologies of free trade, open markets and export oriented development. Currently, the government has as an 'Open Door' policy with respect to foreign direct investment (BEPZA). Whatever their other ideological conflicts, both parties concur that economic policy should be geared toward growth, in this case, toward securing the stability and expansion of the garment industry, whatever the implications for workers' rights.

Rahman and Langford remark that the national political context in which the industry took off in the 1980s was not exactly propitious for labour organizing (2012). It was not only that party interests always trumped those of workers but the very idea of what

constituted workers' interests seemed to have been set aside. According to one study, the majority of Ready Made Garment (RMG) owners in the 1980s perceived unions as undesirable because they [owners] were still 'at the formative phase of their manufacturing businesses', and could not afford to be distracted by 'unreasonable' demands or 'unnecessary interruptions', by labour leaders who 'might try to pursue their own selfish agenda *in the name of workers' participation*' (Khan 2001: 169, italics added). Here we see owners deploying popular negative associations of unions to undermine genuine claims of labour. This was the phase of globalization when Southern nations were compelled to liberalize trade policies, as conditionality for loans but also to stay competitive under new global conditions. States desperate to retain foreign direct investment actively suppressed, often brutally, worker resistance and protest. Bangladesh was no different.

Trade Unions in Contemporary Bangladesh: Beyond the Numbers

The general impression that unions in the RMG sector are weak or non-existent is not entirely accurate. On the contrary, the bewildering array of garment workers' federations is difficult to keep track of at times. In 1996, S. I. Khan recorded the existence of five registered federations and ten unregistered ones. Of the five registered, one was inactive; of the 10 non-registered organizations, one was active full time (Khan 2001: 178). The fluid, often shadowy and somewhat indeterminate nature of federations renders the problem of numbers difficult to resolve definitively. It is possible however to get a sense of scale. A recent newspaper story lists nine 'leading' federations of garment workers, though there is no elaboration of the criteria used for inclusion into the category. According to this list in the middle of 2014, the number of individual unions was 142. This is in contrast to the ILO figure of 437. In either case, the numbers constitute a tiny proportion of the labour force of around 4 million working in over 4000 factories.

Curiously, this list excludes Garment SramikOikkya Forum (Garment Workers Union Federation) and Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Unity Council (BGWTUC), two small left wing federations that were critical to the 2006 mobilization. Instead, the editorial to which the list of federations was appended expressed serious concern regarding recently registered trade unions which, it pointed out, were overwhelmingly affiliated with a single US based NGO, the Solidarity Center. Acknowledging the need for legitimate unions, the editorial observed that the Center's accountability was to a foreign organization, 'with

motives that do not align with our national interests.’ This line of argument is not too far from left progressive critiques of the current spate of internationally sanctioned monitoring and organizing around the garment industry. Questions of accountability and national sovereignty have been paramount in relation to the much-lauded Accord on Fire and Safety (Siddiqi 2015). Yet when such an analysis comes from an avowedly liberal newspaper, owned in part by industrialists with ties to the ruling party, the question of ‘national interest,’ always an opaque category, becomes even more fraught. Whose nation and whose interests are served when the rhetoric of nation appears to be pitted directly against the interests of labour?

As in other fields, the lines between unions and NGOs in garments are frequently blurred in the Bangladeshi context. Several NGOs provide legal support and training on national and international labour rights to workers. They run the gamut, in terms of founding ideologies, funding sources and programmatic approaches. Longtime Bangladeshi NGOs such as INCIDIN Bangladesh and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), offer programs for garment workers as part of a broader agenda for the promotions of social justice. NGOs founded exclusively to deal with labour issues, such as The Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) and the Awaj Foundation operate on a somewhat different register. Executive Director Kalpona Akter who set up BCWS in 1991 makes clear that her organization eschews any form of street protest. A ‘close partner’ of the Washington DC based, AFL CIO affiliated Solidarity Center, BCWS offers training on labour rights and union formation, in addition to running a day care center for the children of garment workers (Solidarity Center 2012). The Awaj Foundation, which according to its website currently has over 37,000 members and 37 full-time staff helps settle ‘thousands of disputes’ regarding wages, overtime, holidays and maternity leave in hundreds of factories. Awaj founder Nazma Akter was originally a member of BIGUF, a federation closely associated with AAFLI in its early days. Kalpana and Nazma, both former garment workers themselves, are perhaps best known outside of Bangladesh. In contrast, the much smaller and radical Garment Sromik Shonghoti (Garment Workers Solidarity), a non-registered organization, does not accept foreign funds but engages in long-term worker mobilization. The Shonghoti coordinator, award winning photographer Taslima Akter has, with the help of colleagues, painstakingly documented the lives of the dead and the missing in Rana Plaza.

The question of why more garment workers ‘fail to mobilize’ given their large numbers has preoccupied scholars and policy makers across the political spectrum. It is tempting to attribute the lack of formal labour mobilization to the particular characteristics of the workforce. Most workers are young female migrants from rural areas with little formal education, minimal or no experience of industrial labour and shaped by a ‘culturally embedded deference to male authority’. While such features are no doubt disadvantageous in specific situations, they do not seem to have prevented the numerous spontaneous protests and wildcat strikes typical of the industry from its inception. In other words, a culturalist analysis, relying on tropes of deference, industrial inexperience and lack of knowledge provides a partial and ultimately inadequate explanatory framework.

Explicitly left wing commentators attribute low rates to several factors including, ‘fierce owner opposition,’ state-sanctioned repression, high labour turnover and lack of industrial experience as first generation workers (see, for instance, Ross 2014: 11). Others look to institutional culture as well as specifically gendered life cycle issues that might dissuade female workers from organizing formally. The garment workers to whom Mahmud spoke reported feeling isolated, with no external support when they raised their voice in protest. They had little incentive to go further. These workers saw themselves as temporarily in the workforce (before marriage or childbirth) therefore lacked what the author calls professional ambition. Mahmud reports that the workers had not absorbed the need for industrial regulations and discipline; at the same time they faced unprofessional conduct from management, which had yet to acquire a culture of accountability (Mahmud 2010: 9-10).

Mahmud also remarks that conditions of easy entry and exit, combined with informal and personalized recruiting techniques, also discourage collective action, with both employers and workers taking advantage of the possibility for high turnover. Finally, Mahmud argues that poverty and the lack of alternatives compels workers to accept exploitative labour conditions. The analysis, although useful in highlighting key issues, does not offer a sense of how these different factors should be weighted in relation to one another.

Informality is a recurring theme in the literature on Bangladeshi workers. Ahmed and Nathan (2014) remark that high rates of turnover (with attrition rates between 5 and 12 per cent) indicate that it is relatively easy for garment workers to move from one workplace to

another. The rapid expansion of the industry, the authors suggest, has increasingly opened up more exit options for workers, allowing them to have greater ‘voice’ than in the past, a suggestion echoed to a certain extent by Mahmud. In their words, the ability to switch jobs, “reduces the pressure to remain quiet about the negative aspects in any job, or, [...] in Hirshmanian terms, the possibility of exit gives more voice (Ahmed and Nathan 2014: 15):

The relationship between the right to exit, voice and agency may be less straightforward than theorized by Ahmed and Nathan. In the first place, high turnover is not new but has characterized garment work from the outset. Ironically, high turnover is cited as one reason for the non-sustainability of plant level unionization (Khan 2001: 174). Second, as we will see, the right *not to exit* (through unfair dismissals, or lodging of false criminal cases, for instance), rather than ease of exit is generally of more concern to workers. The pressure to remain quiet appears to be related to the relative ease with which dismissed workers can be replaced by others.

A study early on in the industry’s growth foregrounds reasons for low levels of unionization that continue to have resonance today (S. I. Khan, 2001). Drawing on data collected in 1996, Khan mapped the ways state and capital – in elaborate collusion with each other – systematically deployed bureaucratic power in addition to violent forms of policing to suppress attempts to organize labour. Rahman and Langford’s research, as well as my own experience, bears out the relevance of the issues raised by Khan (Rahman and Langford, 2012).

Moshrefa Mishu, Taslima Akter and others have remarked in conversations that plant level unions are rarely sustainable, financially or otherwise, without some form of external assistance. Individual units tend to fall inactive after an initial period of action, often as a result of harassment and intimidation (or alternately through “inducements” by management to refrain from action).⁴ The expulsion or dismissal of unit leaders on charges of ‘misconduct’, threats of physical violence by hired thugs and lodging false cases have long constituted standard retaliatory responses from management (Khan 2001). Most workers cannot afford to fight legal charges or even to pay union dues regularly. Federations ensure some kind of financial sustainability in the circumstances.

Until the 2013 reforms, unions registration required at least 30 per cent worker representation of an enterprise, approval from relevant state authorities and were subject to cancellation at any time by the Registrar of Unions (with the permission of the Labor

Court). Thus the Directorate of Labour, which supervises the process, wields enormous power, exercised as much through inaction and stalling tactics as through direct action. Such power also renders the DoL open to influence from all kinds of external actors.

Khan reports that the DoL routinely refused registration to independent left leaning unions, even if their paperwork was in perfect order, including proof of 30 per cent support at the workplace (Khan, 2001: 197). Thus, the culling of radical voices happens at the source. Should such applications slip through, their initiators would confront a host of other obstacles. Close ties between the DoL and factory owners/management enabled the latter to obstruct any effort at union formation. A ‘working relation’ with the Directorate of Labor, as well as placing ‘spies’ in the workforce itself, secures an elaborate and efficient network of surveillance. Khan found that DoL employees routinely tipped off owners about pending or newly accepted applications. Individuals responsible for initiating the effort, along with those who signed on in support of unions, were invariably subjected to retaliation by the management. Reprisal took many forms. Most obviously, workers marked as trouble-makers would be summarily dismissed, and their names circulated and publicized to enable blacklisting as a whole.

Intimidation and physical torture are other routinized modes of dealing with worker ‘unrest’ or efforts at unionization. Most factory owners maintain private security forces, which have close ties to the police. Labour leaders demanding back pay or better treatment find themselves threatened with violence or faced actual beatings (Khan *ibid*). It continues to be common practice (and public knowledge) that factory owners hire local *mastan* or thugs to rough up and intimidate workers they perceive as difficult or outspoken. This often takes place with the active cooperation of the police or paramilitary forces. Labour leaders also find themselves saddled with numerous false cases. Suffice it to say, none of these strategies is exclusive either to the garment industry or to Bangladesh.

More striking perhaps are documented cases of owners choosing to close down factories following a successful union drive rather than face the prospect of negotiating with unionized workers (Rahman and Langford 2012: 176). Closing down factories is, or should be, an expensive proposition. The extraordinary antipathy toward unions this indicates deserves further exploration. S. I. Khan notes that the first generation of factory owners maintained a strong grip on management and labour relations by taking ‘advantage’ of informal labour recruitment practices and work place policies (Khan 2001: 168).

Practices in question include recruiting workers without appointment letters, and authorizing supervisory staff to hire and fire semi-skilled casual workers. Here I can only speculate but perhaps it was the fear of a more formalized management structure -- the potential loss of conditions of control on which low labour costs hinged-- that explains the extent to which some factory owners went to avoid unions in their own factories.

Discharging workers recruited ‘informally,’ that is without a formal appointment letter, is relatively simple since in the absence of documentary evidence of employment, workers cannot contest arbitrary dismissals. Even if documentation is available, owners were/are able to draw on the language of the law itself to dispense with ‘troublesome’ workers. My conversations with workers reinforce Khan’s finding that the vague and open-ended category of ‘misconduct’ under Section 18 of the Employment of Labor (Standing Orders) Act 1965 offers a legal way to dismiss individuals deemed undesirable by management (Siddiqi 2004 and 2015). Last but not least, one of the major reasons for worker protest is the delayed payment of wages, sometimes for months at a time. Workers who are sacked are rarely compensated for back wages and overtime. The near-certainty of not being paid arrears becomes another factor that discourages workers from speaking out, voicing concerns or organizing.

The absence of a space for the legitimate voicing of grievances is the other side of numerous spontaneous, demonstrations, blockades, sit-ins, marches and destruction of factory property seen in the garment sector as early as the 1980s. The Sparrow apparel strike of the mid-eighties was one of the first sustained actions of this kind (Interview Lovely Yasmin). By the mid 1990s, Khan noted an increasing trend of ‘physical assaults, gherao, demonstrations, rallies, work stoppages, and lay-offs’ (Khan 2001: 171).

In contrast to this reality, an aura of celebration surrounds news of the increasing number of plant-based unions, the proliferating programs to train workers on legal literacy and the reform of the labor law ostensibly to ease union formation. In this (neo)liberal telling, modern labour subjectivities (of individuals armed with knowledge of laws and their rights), were waiting to be called into being. Workers are now able to exercise citizenship rights, some newly formed, because they have finally acquired the requisite self-hood. In this account, the absence of the modern worker who knows and demands her rights signals the failure of the elite/state/NGOs to produce a culture of liberalism – including that of appropriate managerial accountability -- in which such subjectivities seemingly flourish

(see Vijay Prashad 2015). Recalling a mode of developmentalism rooted in colonial hierarchies, this construction erases the agency of Bangladeshi garment workers and their rich history of resistance. In stead, the focus on individual consciousness renders invisible the structures of power through which some accounts are privileged while others are dismissed.

May 2006: Reservoirs of Discontent Spilling Over⁵

From late May to the end of June, 2006, Bangladesh's garment industry experienced protests on a scale not seen earlier. In the course of just a few days, workers from around 4000 factories in and around Dhaka city went on a wildcat strike, took to the streets in demonstrations, participated in sit-ins, and blockaded critical highways in support of their demands. The Bangladeshi state responded in full force, sending in police in riot gear armed with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets, and the feared paramilitary force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The Ashulia-Gazipur area around Dhaka that housed the main EPZs, as well as parts of the capital, turned into combat zones. The protests spread to workers' neighborhood where pitched battles with police and private security forces took place. When the movement showed no signs of abating, the government brought in the Army to 'restore order.' Massive, unprecedented and virtually leaderless, the movement quickly became a source of concern and, alternately, of hope.

Events unfolded in a predictable pattern, with the expression of grievances in one factory spreading to others. In early May, workers at S.F. Sweater Factory in Gazipur began protesting non-payment of wages. Management retaliated by having two workers arrested and firing others. The small, left wing Garment Sromik Oikkyo Forum/Garment Worker's Union Federation (GWUF), which had already been organizing workers at the factory, helped organize a protest on May 19. Management responded by locking the striking workers in and cutting off power and water supplies. The workers fought their way out, took over the adjacent highway, and were joined by colleagues from other factories. This time, the police used real bullets, killing a worker, and injuring 70 people, including journalists. News of the killing prompted outraged workers from surrounding factories to pour into the streets. The leaders of GWUF announced a dawn to dusk strike in Gazipur for May 23. The Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Unity Council (BGWTUC), another small left wing federation, announced its support for the strike. BGWTUC, had been

mobilizing workers at Universal Garments who were owed three months back wages. They had planned a 'grand garment workers rally' on May 23. The convergence of two unrelated calls to action drew thousand more workers to strike on May 22 and 23.

At this juncture, the protests moved much beyond the remit of the small federations and issues with which they were originally. What happened next can be seen as the breach of 'reservoirs of discontent' that had been building up over the years. Moshrefa Mishu of GFUW remarked that 'workers had no choice but to go on the street. The violence in Ashulia was an expression of long-simmering resentment/long-suppressed grievances. There was no option but this was a fluid movement incorporating all kinds of people and groups.' Kalpana Akter of BWSC, whose organization formally eschews any kind of 'agitation' recalled a similar sentiment. In her words, 'we couldn't control the workers' rage because their resentment had reached such a point. Let me tell you the story of a simple, ordinary woman, around 29 or 30 years old. She came to the office boiling over with anger'. 'I just threw a brickbat in the glass pane of a factory. They kicked me out without paying the 14 days wages I was owed. So today I went and threw a brick at the factory'. 'This was the only way their anger and frustration could be expressed' (Kalpana Akhter, interview).

On the first day of the strike, factory 'security staff' attacked the workers of Universal Knitting Garments. The latter went to neighboring factories, asking for support. A several thousand strong procession of workers quickly assembled, as clashes ensued with police armed with real bullets. Unidentified forces set two factories on fire. Five buses were torched and \$2 million dollars worth of clothing destroyed. In solidarity, garment workers shut down the industrial areas of the capital Dhaka. Nine separate protests rallies were held on May 23. Mass demonstrations demanded an end to repression, release of arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay for extra work. As clashes with security forces continued, 16 more factories were set on fire and 200 vehicles destroyed. Many owners opted to shut down production temporarily. The government called in the Bangladesh Rifles from their border control duties to help contain the 'unrest.' A reported 3000 armed police, members of the feared paramilitary force RAB and soldiers had been deployed by the end of the day. The authorities arrested the labour leader Moshrefa Mishu and filed 19 charges against her. Detained for 4 days, she was threatened with death 'by crossfire' during her time in remand.

Despite the violence and associated danger, the protests drew in ‘common people’, passersby as well those in the immediate locality whose lives were disrupted. The details of an eye witness account are telling of a potentially dangerous class solidarity in the making:

The day the ‘riot’ broke out I had been on my way to the office. It is not new, these agitations here in my locality (lot of RMG factories are situated here)...I have been witnessing this from a year or more... What struck me most was how this sort of happening readily unified street vendors, rickshawallas in one single angry ‘mob’, which was throwing stones, crashing cars, setting fire on big Volvo buses. If it’s sort of an anarchy, I am for it with some fears inside....’ Eye witness testimony 26 May, 2006 in *Garment Workers Revolt* p. 2).

When it became clear the standoff would be impossible to resolve through the ‘routine’ application of force, the government finally persuaded the BGMEA members to sit down with the striking workers. It arranged for garment workers to be represented through SKOP, with the government as a third party. The resulting tripartite talks led to a ‘historic’ Memorandum of Understanding on June 12, 2006, a seeming victory for labor. The BGMEA accepted all union demands which included: issuing appointment letters for all workers; increase in minimum wages; weekly holiday; maternity leave; withdrawal of all cases against workers; the right of trade unions to represent workers. The formation of a Minimum Wage Board was another significant outcome of the agreement. However, the government conceded to BGMEA’s demand for the formation of a security force exclusively for the industry.

Complications arose immediately. SKOP had less than neutral credentials in the eyes of many garment workers, who worried it would side with the government and BGMEA. The proliferation of federations– across the ideological spectrum – rendered the question of who could best represent workers interests necessarily fraught. Fault-lines were exposed in the debate around why the new minimum wage was eventually settled at only Tk. 3000 (US\$ 38), much lower than the subsistence wage of Tk. 5000 (US \$63) that most workers had demanded. Mutual suspicion and accusations of complicity surfaced immediately. Rahman and Langford contend that ‘collaborationist’ unions affiliated with BGMEA acted

to undercut the workers' initial demand. Long time left wing political workers and labour leaders as well as those affiliated with international labour movements, agree with this assessment.

Ultimately, few factories bothered to implement the terms of the agreement, perhaps with the knowledge that the state would remain indifferent at best. This was a reality to which workers were accustomed. It is difficult to cultivate or sustain faith in bureaucratic and legal proceduralism when numerous past agreements have been ignored with impunity. Disenchantment with the system is inevitable. Other more 'violent' waves of demonstrations followed, most notably in 2010. '2010 was even more massive. Because what they learned from 2006 was not about organized movements but a negative lesson: *If we block roads or destroy property, our demands will be heard*' (Kalpona Akhter, italics added).

Left wing labour activists see 2006 as a point of no return, one that established a degree of continuity with later protests and that showed the power of collective action (Zonayed Saki, Gono Shanghati Andolon, 2016). In the long run, an intangible but fundamental gain of 2006 lay outside the legal realm. The sheer scale of events secured garment workers public recognition as a constituency with legitimate rights, as a force to be contended with. It also displaced in the public imagination garment owners as the central actors whose interests were to be protected at all costs, 'challenging their previously unquestioned ownership rights' over the fate of the industry (Rahman and Langford 2014).

One rarely noted fallout of 2006 was the consolidation of surveillance of labour activists by state intelligence units in the name of protecting national interest and security. In other words, it is not only hired thugs or the police that labour organizers must fear. During the 2010 protests, three prominent labour leaders, including Moshrefa Mishu and Kalpona Akter were detained for a month. In 2012, Kalpona's colleague Aminul Islam 'disappeared'. His tortured and mutilated body was found in a ditch several months later. Three years later, there are no signs of solving the mystery behind his death. It is widely assumed that Aminul was abducted and murdered by the paramilitary RAB. In addition, the government has set up Industrial Police which has sanction to 'control' workers in the EPZ when and as needed.

Back to the Future? Beyond the 2013 Amendments

Faced with the worst ever industrial disaster in the country, the Bangladeshi government rushed through passage of the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2013 less than three months after the collapse. Hailed as pro-worker by mainstream commentators, the amended labour law— among other things —appeared to remove extant barriers to freedom of association, setting trade unionism ‘free,’ as the country’s leading English language newspaper proclaimed proudly (*The Daily Star* July 15, 2013).

Indeed, the number of registered trade unions rose dramatically in the following months. By December 2013, 96 new unions sought registration from the Directorate of Labour (DoL), compared to only two in the previous two years (ILO 2014). Within just over a year, the garment sector had a total of 464 trade unions, up from 132 in 2012 (ILO 2015). With respect to union formation at least, the amended labor law seems to have ‘paved the way to improve conditions, workers’ rights’ (ILO, 2014a). At an orientation program on Freedom of Association for leaders of such unions, an ILO representative declared, ‘The formation and registration of new trade unions is the sign of a new era of collective bargaining and freedom of association in Bangladesh which can act as a catalyst for change in other industries’ (ILO, 2014b).

It should be evident from the foregoing discussion that until recently, unionization efforts have been met with definitive state and capitalist violence. Much of this violence is openly sanctioned by the state. The ‘problem,’ as I indicated earlier, is not one of a pre-modern labour subjectivity waiting to come into its own, of workers needing to be educated into their citizenship rights as enshrined in the law. The question is who mobilizes, and under what conditions? The title of a recent Human Rights Watch Report, *Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most* aptly evokes the fear of reprisal that discourages labour mobilization (HRW 2015).

In light of the analysis above, how should we read the increase in unions since 2013 and the amendments to the labour law?⁶ What are the implications – of control over union actions and agendas – when the process of union formation is top down, not to mention under the gaze of key global players? Under what circumstances would these unions constitute a social force that operates at a level of scale beyond the factory, and would be able to link up with other movements? The answers appear glaringly obvious in some ways.

Key provisions of the 2013 amendments of the labour law leave the discretionary power of the bureaucracy intact. Under the new amendments, the registrar for trade unions can deny workers the permission to unionize if the official is unsatisfied with the petition. ‘This provision has angered workers and labour rights activists alike, given the country's infamous history of corruption. The registrar, they worry, may end up catering to powerful businessmen and denying workers their union elections’ (Hossain 2013). In addition, as in the past, it is evident that radical left wing unions find it almost impossible to obtain registration. The general impression is that only unions formed with the help of externally funded NGOs (the implication being that they are shorn of any militant agenda, are deemed reasonable/pliant) tend to get approval. According to a sociologist studying post Rana Plaza union conditions, many leaders of newly approved unions are already disillusioned. They come with high expectations but find that they possess little actual power.

The trope of *dalal*/double agent is a recurring one in labour narratives of unionization, not surprisingly given the account of surveillance, spying and retaliation noted earlier. Most independent labour leaders see the new unions as company shops, working in the interests of capital. Paradoxically, the amendments have actually made it less cumbersome for owners to dismiss workers accused of ‘misconduct’; they can do now without payment. If past practice is any indication, this provision will be used even more to target union activists.

Finally, the government reserved the right to prevent any demonstration or strike it deems ‘disruptive’ to the community or harmful to the ‘national interest.’ Suffice it to say, what counts as the national interest or as disruption is open to the logics of power. As one commentator observes, ‘Since the rise of Bangladesh's garment industry in the late 1970s, every decent-sized demonstration has been declared disruptive. Even the 2006 labour unrest – which, after decades of industrial growth, led to the formulation of the country's minimum wage – was identified by the government as an international conspiracy to destroy the country's garment industry’ (Emran 2013). The issue of national interest is especially complex because it can be mobilized by those on the right in the language of anti-imperialism. Further, the notion of a conspiracy invalidates labour voice and agency.

The post Rana Plaza period has seen more continuities than ruptures. What then of workers’ rights? Perhaps it is time to ask, following Vijay Prashad, if – under prevailing conditions – conventional trade unions are the best form to capture the discontent of

workers and to transform their lives? (Prashad 2015:189). It may be time to turn to a broader social movement for change.

Acknowledgments: My sincere thanks to Hanako Nagata and Momoe Makino for their thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this essay. Special thanks to the organizer of the 2017 FINDAS International Workshop on Women’s Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism Toshie Awaya, and to Maya Suzuki for her assistance throughout.

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¹ There is some discrepancy among sources on the actual number of factories at present. Some of this can be attributed to a general lack of documentation of small enterprises, especially if they are subcontractors lower down on the commodity chain. Questions of categorization also produce discrepant figures. As of writing, the exact number is the subject of considerable contention between the BGMEA and the Stern School of Business at New York University. In a recent study, the latter concluded there were over 7000 factories, a figure considerably larger than other estimates. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the issue in detail here. It appears the dispute is primarily around the inclusion of certain subcontractors who may or not be producing for the global market. See Dhaka Tribune "BGMEA Slams New York University Study on Bangladeshi RMG Workers." December 21, 2015. <http://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2015/dec/21/bgmea-slams-new-york-university-study-bangladesh-rmg-workers>

² According to the annual report of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA), there were 104 garment enterprises, 72 garments accessories enterprises, 40 knitting and other textile products enterprises and 41 textile product enterprises in FY 2012-2013. See http://epzbangladesh.org.bd/files/reports/file_1448276002.pdf

³There are differences in the estimate of how many women are employed in the industry. The conventional figure of “90% women” does not capture the heterogeneity of the industry. Knitwear, for instance, which accounts for over 40 percent of apparel export, is produced primarily by male workers.

⁴ Section 195 of the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 (amended 2013) outlaws numerous “unfair labor practices.” For example, no employer shall “dismiss, discharge, remove from employment, or threaten to dismiss, discharge, or remove from employment a worker, or injure or threaten to injure him in respect of his employment by reason that the worker is or proposes to become, or seeks to persuade any other person to become, a member or officer of a trade union.”

⁵ The phrase is Vijay Prashad’s (Prashad 2015: 183).

⁶ On a related note, Sanchita Bannerjee’s comparative research makes an important intervention by delinking the abstract concept of “improved labor conditions” and “worker empowerment.” She argues that one should not assume that better labor conditions automatically translate into an empowered workforce. She also concludes that change and improvements stemming from top-down programs, though they may be initially effective in improving basic standards, do not help in furthering coalitions with labor groups and institutionalizing their role in policy making (Bannerjee 2014).