

# History & Current Dilemmas of Trade Unionism in Bangladesh

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*Trade unionism in Bangladesh has evolved through various socio-political changes, reflecting the country's complex history and economic development. This brief review covers the key stages of trade union development in Bangladesh. The roots of the trade union movement in Bangladesh can be traced back to the colonial period under British rule in India. Early labor movements arose from poor working conditions in industries such as jute mills, railways, and tea plantations. After the country's Independence in 1971, trade unionism began to decline due to various global and domestic factors. This article, therefore, delineates the historical background of trade unionism and the root causes of the current skepticism. The study not only highlights the challenges but also presents groundbreaking policy implications for developing and sustaining healthy trade unionism in Bangladesh.*

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## **Background**

Trade unionism in Bangladesh (former British India) had a golden past through anti-colonial struggles in the Indian subcontinent. After 1947, due to the partition of the nation-state by the British government, it largely faded into the labor movement in the newly structured states (West and East Pakistan). Trade unions in East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh) organized and participated in the liberation war against West Pakistan for an independent Bangladesh. However, after December 16, 1971, when the nation was born, unfortunately, trade unionism began to decline. When scholars try to explain the reasons for this predicament of trade unionism in post-independence Bangladesh, it is revealed through scholarly arguments that trade unionism has undergone multifaceted challenges (Taher, 1999; Rahman & Langford, 2012; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). These challenges, which in some ways have contributed to the declining trend of trade unionism in Bangladesh, mainly after the nation's independence in 1971, include

internal factors such as political changes and external factors such as the influence of neoliberal globalization (Rahman, 2011). The urgency of these findings underscores the need for immediate action to address the decline of trade unionism in Bangladesh, a task that requires the understanding and commitment of all (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

**The legal and regulatory environment for trade unions in Bangladesh has not been favorable.**

The legal and regulatory environment for trade unions in Bangladesh has not been favorable. According to international scholars and organizations, such as human rights organizations, trade unions in Bangladesh operate under a complex legal framework that often restricts their activities (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Huq, 2019; Ullah, 2023 & Human Rights Organization, 2013). Although the Government of Bangladesh ratified every fundamental ILO Conventions, including: “C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87)” and “C098 - Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)”, (These two significant conventions were ratified on 22 June 1972; ILO, n.d.), scholars have yet to see the obligation of the state members such as Bangladesh would take adequate measures to ensure those fundamental ILO conventions are well respected and enforced.

Scholars also point out that the economic pressures of a developing country

like Bangladesh are complex and challenging to ignore the country’s terrain conditions (Ullah et al., 2022). For example, other international studies, such as the works of Alamgir and Banerjee (2019), also indicate that Bangladesh has faced economic stress since Independence, forcing the Bangladesh government to focus on creating informal industries where minimum working conditions are not maintained or trade unionism. Moreover, the works of several international scholars have also highlighted significant issues. More precisely, scholars have stated that since the 1980s, Bangladesh, as a newly independent state, has adopted and practiced open market economic policy, a macro-market and an economic policy based on neoliberal ideologies (Rahman, 2011; Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Kabir et al., 2022; Ullah, 2023). In the phase of globalization and neoliberalism, trade unionism in Bangladesh has faced severe obstacles. This is because neoliberal globalization emphasizes a free-market economy and discourages trade unions, thereby contributing to Bangladesh’s declining trend of trade unionism (Panitch, 1981; Ullah, 2023).

Globalization and neoliberalism, a macroeconomic trade policy invented by Westerners and Europeans, are a sharp contributing factor to the low trade unionism experienced in Bangladesh, like other nations of the globe. Research shows that due to the emergence of globalization and neoliberalism, Western and European capital investment has taken a significant place in the changing socioeconomic situation in Bangladesh

(Harvey, 2007; 2016; Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). Nevertheless, Bangladeshi capitalists, mainly owners of ready-made garment (RMG) factories, and state government agencies, such as the police, often became aggressive towards trade union workers and considered them non-supportive and a burden for Bangladesh society. For example, Ahmed's (2023) article in the *Guardian* revealed that Shahidul Islam (45), a top labor organizer of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), was attacked and killed in Gazipur, a significant garment industry hub on the outskirts of Dhaka while rallying on behalf of workers and claim back pay from the RMG factory management. This is not a new case of the brutality against trade union leaders in Bangladesh. Another striking example is Aminul Islam (39), a Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) activist. He went missing on April 4, 2012. His body was discovered two days later, about 100 kilometers from where he was last seen. It showed signs of torture in circumstances that raised concerns about the involvement of Bangladeshi security forces (Human Rights Organization, 2017). So, in the neoliberal state, where capitalists have political and money power, trade unionism has been a real challenge to burgeon.

However, other research studies (Rahman, 2011; Rahman & Langford, 2012; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019) critically evaluated the political influence of trade unionism in Bangladesh. Regarding their critical reflection, trade union leaders are often politicized, which can support or

hinder their effectiveness depending on the political climate. So, while millions of workers in Bangladesh work in various informal industries, including ready-made garments (RMG), with no collective bargaining rights or much better provisions from employers, trade union political divisions make things more complicated for workers as they lose faith in trade unions in Bangladesh (Rahman & Langford, 2012; Haque, 2022; Ullah et al., 2024).

Other scholars, such as Ghosh (2024), pointed out that the communist movements support a social movement that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observed through the lens of their critical views of the political economy and capitalism rise in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. According to Marx and Engels, the capitalist economy is responsible for further exploitation by the reproduction of capitalism. Therefore, Marx and Engels had a visionary theory of social movement with the rise of workers' power and trade unionism, which has happened in many parts of the globe recently despite the arguments of non-Marxist criticism over that social movement theory (Ghosh, 2024). Nevertheless, the trade union movement in Bangladesh is questionable when union leaders are forced into the right-wing political parties and engaged in benefits maximization rather than considering workers' well-being (Rahman, 2011; Rahman, 2022).

Thus, while trade unionism in Bangladesh is associated with a golden past, this article, from aims and objectives, looks at the factual basis of the

declining trends of trade unionism in Bangladesh from the historical to the modern era and finds some fundamental factors between low levels of trade unionism or trade union participation, in the policy-making process for laborers and implementation of industrial relations in Bangladesh, a neoliberal state. The current article uses grey literature from international scholars' research work and international organizations' news articles, web portals, and archives for the methodological choice. After analyzing the reasons and facts, it offers practical solutions to strengthen trade unionism in Bangladesh, harnessing the potential of trade unionism and industrial relations structures in the fourth phase of the Industrial Revolution to provide a beacon of hope for the rights of millions of workers.

### Historical Background

A comprehensive historical analysis of Bangladesh's trade unionism movement, spanning the British colonial phase, West Pakistan, and modern Bangladesh, is paramount. While the history of trade unionism in Bangladesh is vast, this concise article primarily focuses on the pivotal events that transpired at different junctures. The trade unionism movement in Bangladesh, a testament to the resilience of its people, has a rich past - it battled against British colonialism (1757-1947) and West Pakistan's rulers (1947-1971) (see, for example, Rahman, 2011; Banglapedia, 2021; Ahmed, 2018; *The Daily Star*, 2023). In British India, the first Bombay Mill Hands Association was established on 24 April 1890, followed by

the inauguration of the railway line from Mumbai to Thane on April 16, 1853. In April-May 1862, the first railway strike by workers at the Howrah railway station – one of the railway stations in Kolkata, the capital city of modern West Bengal, India, took place. Consequently, in 1870, Shashipad Banerjee founded the “Working Men’s Club”, the first labor organization in Bengal. Research also indicates that in the same year, he commenced publishing *Bharat Shramjeevi* (Indian Worker), a journal exclusively dedicated to workers from Kolkata (*The Daily Star*, 2023). Industrial activities necessitated the enactment of industrial acts; hence, in 1881 the Indian Factories Act was passed. The Act prohibited the employment of children under seven and set a working time of nine hours daily, enforced on July 1, 1881 (*The Daily Star*, 2023).

The Indian Factories Act 1881 was amended with a weekly holiday provision in 1891. The significance of the Act was to see women's and children's working hours restricted before 5 am and after 8 pm. Another turning point for the Act was the child labor age restriction from seven to nine. Later, in 1905, the *Swadeshi* (nationalism) movement was led to be organized in the Partition of Bengal, creating robust social and political influence. As a result of the ongoing movement process, the Printers' Union was formed in Calcutta (the capital city of modern West Bengal, India). In the same year, several strikes were in place, particularly in the mills and railway sector in the Eastern Bengal State, following the strike for wage increase between November and

December 1907 in Bengal (*The Daily Star*, 2023). In 1908, the East Bengal city *Kushtia* (a city in modern Bangladesh) established the first cotton mills with the *Swadeshi* spirit, known as “Mohini Cotton Mill”. A few years later, in 1911, the Indian Factories Act again underwent amendment for men’s working hours to 12 maximum per day. The amendment also emphasized on health and safety of workers. 1919 was the turning point for global laborers as the ILO was established to advance social and economic justice by setting international labor standards under the League of Nations (Ullah, 2023b).

October 17, 1920, was the turning point for Indian trade unionism, as the Indian Communist party was established following the Russian communist revolution. In the same year, by October 31, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was established, which was a significant progress and supportive of popularising and establishing the concept of trade unionism in East Bengal (modern Bangladesh). However, by 20 May 1921, British colonial troops brutally attacked tea workers trapped at Chandpur railway station, commemorating the *Jallianwala Bagh* massacre. The political upheaval lasted about three months, from 3 May to 3 August 1921. A mass strike by tea workers was soon followed by equally significant strikes by workers on the Assam Bengal Railway and Inland Steamer Navigation (*The Daily Star*, 2023). Then, in 1923, the Workmen’s Compensation Act was enacted to allow or legally force employers to pay off employees’ compensation for injuries,

deaths, or disabilities caused at the workplace.

By 1936, the Payment of Wages Act was passed to ensure certain wages for specific employees or workers. In 1939, the Maternity Benefit Act was enacted – a turning point for women workers who had to work in the factory during pregnancy – the Act prohibited women worker’s work six weeks before delivery. Again, in 1945, “Sreehatta Zilla Cha Sramik Union” was established under the umbrella of AITUC. By May 1946, in the East Bengal district, Faridpur, the “Faridpur District Cycle Rickshaw Drivers Union” was formed. In September 1947, the “Eastern Trade Union Federation (EPTUF)” was formed with the effort of Dr AM Malik (president) and Faiz Ahmed (secretary). On 3 March 1949, Dhaka University, Bangladesh’s fourth-class employees, commenced a strike that continued for a month or so with the demand of the university admission system (*The Daily Star*, 2013).

In 1950, during West Pakistan’s role in East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh), in the city of Narayanganj, the world’s biggest jute mill was established. In 1953, the “Adamjee Jute Mill Union” was formed. Established in Narayanganj, “Adamjee Jute Mill” was once among the largest jute mills in the world. However, it ceased operations in 2002. In May 1954, riots began between Bengali and non-Bengali workers at “Adamjee Jute Mill”, followed by the “Karnaphuli Paper Mills” and “Ispahani Match Works” in Chittagong. However, despite the significant potential, the mill was under mis-

management, and trade union leaders were blamed for all these strikes and blackouts of the factory from time to time. Eventually, in 2002, the mill was closed.

In August 1955, the West Pakistan Government announced its first labor policy; however, by October 8, 1958, Ayub Khan imposed Martial Law and banned all trade union activities in East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh). In 1964, the “Purba Pakistan Chatkal Workers Federation” foundation in Dhaka called a strike for 22 days, which went through five industrial sectors, including the Adamjee jute mill. However, despite no sign of fulfilling workers’ demands, the strike was prolonged for 45 days. At last, the workers achieved their demands, demonstrating the strength of the trade union movement (*The Daily Star*, 2023).

In June 1966, in East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh), a robust anti-West Pakistan movement was prominent. The Awami League’s “Choy-Dofa” – “six specific points” was declared, and the movement was widespread in the industrial cities of East Pakistan, for example, Narayanganj, Tejgaon, Tongi, and Chittagong. West Pakistan’s rulers tried to control the workers’ movement and killed several of them, which led to the independence of West Pakistan. However, workers did not accept the brutal behavior of the West Pakistan rulers and, in defiance, began the movement towards Dhaka from Narayanganj, an industrial city of East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh). Then again, in 1969, the workers began protests and the famous

“Gherao Movement” was the turning point for the fall of Ayub Khan’s dictatorship. In 1970, “Nur Khan’s Labor Policy” was introduced (*The Daily Star*, 2023; Ullah, 2023b).

On 26 March 1971, East Pakistan revolted against West Pakistan’s rulers. The Great Liberation War began with the support of mass people in Bangladesh. However, workers played a pivotal role in the liberation war. The ILO’s 1973 report on Bangladesh’s war announced workers’ participation and how it was essential for the freedom of the people of Bangladesh. Surprisingly, after its Independence in 1972, the Government of Bangladesh nationalized all major industries, including paper, jute, and sugar. In June 1973, the Government of Bangladesh announced a wage commission for independent Bangladesh. Nevertheless, on 1 January 1975, there was a legal restriction on all kinds of trade unionism, for example, strikes and lockouts. Workers’ agitation has been widespread since then, and in Dhaka and Comilla region, the workers’ movement was founded. On July 26, 1980, the Industrial Relations Ordinance was enacted, restricting non-workers from joining trade unionism. However, there was political turmoil between 1975 and 1981, and consequently, on 13 April 1982, General Ershad seized power from a democratically elected government and further imposed bans on trade unionism (*The Daily Star*, 2023). Due to the banned trade unionism in Bangladesh, on 13 April 1983, around 12 trade unions formed “Sramik Karmachari Oikko Parishad (SKOP)”. This alliance had played a sig-

nificant role against the dictator, General Ershad, and eventually, trade unionism was regime by then on severe protestation. However, General Ershad's government agents killed Mr "Tajul Islam" the trade union leader of "Adamjee Jute Mill". Eventually, General Ershad stepped down from his power on December 6, 1990 (*The Daily Star*, 2023).

In the 1990s, labor groups from Bangladesh and their affiliated international bodies demanded the enactment of a new labor law. Moreover, the pressure of the Labor Court Bar Association was also significant towards a new Labor Act enactment. As a result, the Government of Bangladesh formed a Law Commission in 1992. However, the Commission submitted its draft and reported long after. 1996 was another significant year because the Trade Union Act was enacted to allow unions in the factories by following the legal provisions of the British colonial government. On 7 January 1995, Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) demanded that the Government of Bangladesh consider eight specific points, including the minimum wages signed between the government and SKOP in 1992. However, on 20 June 2000, SKOP went on a 24-hour strike on demand to build a constructive minimum wage structure, which has not been done yet (*The Daily Star*, 2023). In 2006, the first Independent Labor Act was passed in Bangladesh, and it was further amended in 2013 after the biggest Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh (amended in 2013) (Afrin, 2014; Ullah, 2023b).

## **Discussions, Recommendations & Conclusions**

The trade union is a supportive force for a social movement, and it fights against inequalities and capitalists who accommodate capital to further their interests through workers' exploitation. Trade unionism is also a supportive force in an industrial society for workers and a platform for organizational change processes. Trade unions participate in the organization or workplace to exercise legislative power to resolve issues relevant to the lives and welfare of workers. However, trade unionism faces social and legal obstacles regarding labor organization and the threat of organizing against the dominance of global capitalism. Trade unionism has, however, achieved some success in recognizing specific socio-economic demands through its movements around the globe in the recent past. However, it was not done at a grandiose scale. Based on our findings, trade unionism has yet to see fewer conundrums and state legislative barriers to benefit the world's trade union movement. It is observed that the presence of extensive legal restrictions on unions, the prevailing government structures governing trade unions and the alignment of union members collectively create significant barriers to the active participation of trade unions in Bangladesh.

**Trade unionism has yet to see fewer conundrums and state legislative barriers to benefit the world's trade union movement.**

The current study explored the demographic issues, specifically socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and socio-cultural diversity, that have adversely impacted trade unions' engagement in Bangladesh. Moreover, trade union activists and leaders' limited knowledge of ILO conventions and international treaties of the ILO, WTO and United Nations and inadequate awareness of trade unionism have created an antagonistic ambiance for trade unionism in Bangladesh.

In addition, a correlation between globalization and neoliberalism can be attributed to the plight experienced by Bangladesh's trade union activists. Since the 1980s, to support domestic entrepreneurs, mainly RMG factory owners who have close ties with Western and European capitalists, and to encourage foreign investments, the consecutive governments of Bangladesh have overlooked the essence of trade unionism in a rising industrial society. Since the Government of Bangladesh adopted and implemented neoliberal policies as the state's macroeconomic objectives, Western and European capitalists spurred massive investments in the nation's low-regulated and low-paid RMG industry, an extremely human-operated overexploited industry. The RMG sector's Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is a burning issue for international scholars, human rights organizations, and other international organizations, such as the ILO. Millions of RMG workers work in precarious factories and often face brutal factory accidents and unfortunate deaths due to the low regulation of the RMG industry. Nevertheless, the trade unions can recognize

OHS and underlying issues of the sector and play a decisive, responsible role in improving the industry's working conditions and workers' well-being. Therefore, the trade union movement should prioritize concentration, adherence to rights-based principles, efficiency, and alignment with the regulatory criteria outlined in the Bangladesh Labor Act (2006) and Labor Regulations (2016).

**Most importantly, trade union organizations must stop using workers for political gain and political protests against their opponents.**

Understanding and taking steps to disengage trade union leaders from political engagement is essential. Most importantly, trade union organizations must stop using workers for political gain and political protests against their opponents. Trade unions in Bangladesh can be used significantly for workers' rights, labor standards and overall economic development. Nevertheless, to achieve a common and significant goal through the trade union movement, Bangladesh's union organizations need to establish unity among all trade union organizations and avoid competing for a different political ideology. Furthermore, it is also essential to implement training programs for trade union leaders and members to enhance their understanding and knowledge of labor laws, ILO conventions, employment and industrial relations, human resource management, and negotiation mechanisms with employers and the state government. Developing leadership and

awareness programs to empower union leaders with the skills needed to represent and advocate for workers effectively is also essential. Democratic practices should be encouraged within trade unions, including transparent election and decision-making processes, to ensure accountability and member participation. Union members should increase active involvement in union activities and decision-making to strengthen solidarity and collective action. Workers' bargaining power with employers and government over minimum wages and other welfare services must be enhanced. However, it is also essential for the national government to provide better protection for workers and their rights and to update and strengthen labor laws to facilitate the formation and management of trade unions in Bangladesh. Implementing these strategies can help trade unionism in Bangladesh to create a more just and equitable labor environment, enhance workers' well-being, and contribute to sustainable economic development.

On a final note, trade unionism in Bangladesh has crossed a long river. However, its past glories have faded due to its internal conflicts, politicization, and the influence of neoliberal state policies, where state mechanisms and employers have stood against it. Nevertheless, with a remarkable history of fighting against the imperialist British colonial government and West Pakistani rulers, trade unionism in Bangladesh can regroup and ignite social movements that need to start today; tomorrow will be too late.

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