

Globalization Batters Bangladesh

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Are the global problems of grinding poverty, illiteracy and hunger faced by a majority of the world's population a mere accident of history? Is the enormous inequality and underdevelopment of the formerly colonized countries of Africa and Asia due solely to the crimes of conquest by European colonial powers 100 and 200 years ago?

Or does U.S. imperialism and modern finance capital in the drive to maximize profits bear the greatest responsibility for continuing and actually intensifying this historic inequality?

These are the questions that were discussed again and again during a visit to Bangladesh to attend the convention of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh as 2009 ended.

Following the party's dynamic convention in Dhaka, the Socialist Party of Bangladesh made every effort to introduce the international delegates to as much of the struggle around the country as possible.

The SPB-arranged trip was accompanied by party General Secretary Khalequzzaman and several other party leaders from the capital, Dhaka, a densely populated city of 14 million, to Chittagong, the industrial port — a city of 4 million. The U.S. military continues to pressure Bangladesh to grant port facilities and landing rights at this strategic seaport on the Bay of Bengal.

After attending a rally of about 1,000 people in Chittagong, the international group traveled to the southernmost tip of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal, then to the border of Myanmar, and to an island off the southern tip, where the U.S. is also pressing for a base. Then it proceeded to the east of Dhaka to the tea and rubber plantations of the hills in the Syhlet district. Delegates had the unique opportunity to attend organizing meetings of tea and rubber workers and to meet with activists working to organize garment workers and rickshaw drivers.

The trip was an opportunity to see how the imperialist countries enforce the serious underdevelopment of Bangladesh despite the enormous resources and potential of the country. Delegates were also able to observe the organizing efforts of the party in major cities and rural areas.

Roads were often single lanes of blacktop clogged with old trucks, dangerously overcrowded buses and countless rickshaws. Bicycle rickshaws propelled by human labor provide most transport for people and materials even in the capital, where there are more than 1 million rickshaw drivers in motion almost round the clock. It is a brutal job with no security.

Lowest pay in the world

Lining the roads of Dhaka are thousands of garment sweatshops, easily identified by the rows of fluorescent lights glowing inside. In the near dark of early morning, millions of garment workers, primarily young women, rush to arrive on time for 12-hour work shifts. It is dark again as they leave.

The pay in Bangladesh for garment workers is the lowest in the world. Garment workers in India, Vietnam and Thailand now earn an average of \$60 a month, a desperately low wage. But in the capitalist race to maximize profits on a global scale Bangladesh now has the largest garment industry in Asia — workers are paid only \$20 per month with no benefits and no job security.

Large retail trading companies in the U.S. and Western Europe give most of the orders for Bangladeshi garment products. A handful of Western banks control the capital funds. The garment industry has been a main source of foreign exchange in Bangladesh for the last 25 years. Women garment workers are now trying to organize for higher pay and improved working conditions.

Chittagong's ship-breaking yards

The ship-breaking yards of Chittagong service another industry that reflects a globalized market's ruthless exploitation of low wages in Bangladesh. The shipping industry is the backbone of international trade. It is also the source of major environmental toxins.

The SPB arranged to get a few delegates into the internationally notorious yards, along with video cameras. There had been a deadly explosion in one of the yards the day before the international delegates arrived in Bangladesh. Security in all the yards was tight.

At high tide a spent vessel is driven onto the beach. It is then pulled apart by thousands of workers laboring with bare hands or using acetylene torch cutters to break huge carriers down into small pieces. Workers wear no helmets, gloves, goggles, restraining harnesses or even shoes.

This inferno of fumes and toxic chemicals creates hellish working conditions. Asbestos, lead, chromates, mercury, metal shards, radiation, noise, intense vibration, and welding and cutting fumes all mix together.

The industry is subject to no environmental laws and no health or safety requirements. No statistics are kept of accidents.

This toxic industry could not exist without the active complicity of the largest shipping conglomerates. Hundreds of ships from cargo vessels, bulk carriers, fish factories to super tankers ride at anchor in the sea waiting to be scrapped at over 70 ship-breaking yards.

Previously ships could be scrapped in two weeks in a modern shipyard using union labor in Britain, Japan, Germany, the U.S. or other countries where ships used to be built. In the last 25 years of the globalized labor market, all this has changed. Breaking up one ship now takes over six months on a beach with unskilled labor. This is now a cheaper way to recycle parts of an aging ship. Thousands of small shops, each selling a few recycled electronic or metal pieces of salvage, line the roads to the ship-breaking yards.

Ever since International Monetary Fund bankers denied credits and forced Bangladesh to

shutter its steel plants, Bangladesh depends on ship breaking to meet its domestic steel requirements.

China once had a major ship-breaking industry. But as soon as China began enforcing environmental and safety laws, this dangerous industry became unprofitable there. In international shipping there is a race to find countries where no occupational health and safety standards are enforced and where wages are the lowest — a race to the bottom.

Tea and rubber workers organize

A major cash crop in Bangladesh, tea is bought and sold on the world market by a handful of large corporations. The tea pickers are mainly women and children. Men do the pruning, cutting and road work.

A high moment of the trip was attending a night meeting of hundreds of workers on an isolated tea plantation in the Syhlet district. Their very moving meeting was a vibrant mix of music, chants and talks of labor conditions. Based on their organizing, the workers at several plantations had finally won a 50 percent pay increase from \$10 a month to \$15 a month. They were determined to win their demands for schools for their children and basic health care.

Ratan Rajequzzaman, a leader of the Socialist Workers Front, explained in depth about both working conditions and organizing efforts.

British colonial plantation owners had imported tea workers from southern India more than 150 years ago. These workers have lived in both cultural and linguistic isolation ever since. They work under conditions of modern-day indentured slaves and depend totally on management for food and all basic necessities. These workers, who are victims of the greatest abuse and discrimination, seldom leave these extensive plantations.

Tea and rubber plantations are often combined, with tea bushes on one side of the road and rubber trees on the other. Tea plantations are idyllically called “tea gardens.” Picnicking in a tea garden is a popular tourist attraction for middle-class and returning Bangladesh immigrants. But picturesque photos of women bending and stooping to pluck tea leaves can hardly convey this backbreaking work or show that there is no protection from dangerous fertilizers and pesticides.

Archaic equipment for drying, shredding and bagging tea leaves exposes an industry that has changed little in decades. But now the old relations are being challenged with new energy.

Challenging the theft of resources

Along with its focus on labor organizing, the SPB has helped in organizing broad coalitions to challenge the grossly unequal contracts presented by such multinational oil corporations as Chevron, Shell and Conoco for development of Bangladesh’s gas, oil and coal resources. The oil giants are demanding contracts of between 6 and 21 percent royalties after exploration costs are met.

On Jan. 12, the final day of the visit, Michael Kramer, representing the International Action Center, was able to participate in human-chain demonstrations challenging these outrageous leases that were organized across the country by the National Committee to

Protect Oil-Gas-Natural Resources. (The coalition has also opposed open-pit coal mining, which has resulted in destruction of wide areas of arable lands, water reservoirs and fish ponds.) The human chain was formed at 150 points along the cross-country line from Teknaf, the southernmost city, to Tentulia in the north.

Past challenges to unequal and secret leasing of national resources have led to important victories. A long march from Dhaka to Chittagong led to the cancellation of a 199-year lease of the country's main seaport to a U.S. company.

In Bangladesh despite its enormous problems, made much worse by the global capitalist market, there are revolutionary forces who are confident that, with socialist planning and the creative involvement of the most oppressed and lowest paid workers in the world, the challenges to develop their rich resources are solvable in ways that will benefit the whole population.

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