

# **BANGLADESH METAL WORKERS FEDERATION**

## **Bangladesh: Current Position of Ship Breaking and Trade Unionism**

Ship breaking activities in Bangladesh is the ultimate consequence of some incidents. In 1965 a ship named "M V ALPINE" accidentally got damaged and anchored near Chittagong Sitakund seacoast and later was dismantled, a natural disaster especially a heavy cyclone occurred in 1970 in Bangladesh which damaged many sailing foreign ships in the Bay of Bengal and during the war of independence in 1971 the Indian Army bombarded some ships which had to be recovered and dismantled later on.

Ship breaking as one of the major industries in Bangladesh has recently developed due to the geographical location of the country and the constitution of continental shelf at its coastal belts. In Bangladesh it covers an area of more than 14 kilometers from Fouzdarhat to Kumira of Sitakund, Chittagong. Flat sea-bed, availability of cheap labour force, huge demand of scrap iron and other marine items, sluggish enforcement of law, lack of adequate vigilance and monitoring by the concerned government authorities, larger profit, easy availability of bank loan and comparatively low investment are the major causes for the flourishing of this industry with in a very short span, more precisely in last three decades.

Though ship breaking activities launched in Bangladesh in the mid-'60 but it started functioning commercially from 1982. At present, there are more than 100 Ship breaking yards in infrastructure. But 50-60 ship yards operate on regular basis all the year round. As per Bangladesh Ship Breakers Association (BSBA) web site information, they have 179 members or yard owners in total. Chittagong-based ship yards provide 12-15 lakh metric tons of iron each year as the country's demand of total iron-ores is 22-25 lakh metric tons. Nearly 325 re-rolling mills of Chittagong & Narayanganj depend on the iron-ores from these yards. Bangladesh government earns 6 to 7 billion taka as revenue per year from this sector.

At Chittagong Ship breaking zone, right at this moment, 30-35 ship breaking yards are functioning in full swing. Recently the ship breaking business is facing numerous problems in case of operation. For example:

- a) One of the leading shipping lines of the world **Hapag LLOYed** in August officially announced not to export/sell ships to Bangladesh due to unhealthy working environment, chronic workplace accidents & death of workers which may influence other ship exporters too
- b) Banks are not providing enough loans to the Bangladeshi yard owners due to their inappropriate monetary conduct and local yard owners are not financially capable enough to run the business on their own
- c) A few ship yard owners took loan from the bank and without carrying on the business left the country forever which has a very negative impact in the overall business. It is fact also a fact that, number of ships once used to be imported from various Asian and European countries has decreased. Therefore, due to less workload a few number of ship yards are active. Another reality is that, now-a-days, billets and scraps are being produced in some local industries like BSRM and elsewhere. Some importers are also importing these billets and scraps from abroad. So, direct dependency on ship breaking sector for aforesaid raw materials has so far been decreased.

Bangladesh Labour Act-2006 in its section-2, sub-section-61 and clause-Jha officially recognized ship breaking as an industry. But the truth is that, ship breaking is not at all functioning like other formal industrial sectors. In this sector, there are both permanent and temporary skilled and un-skilled workers and employees. The number of workers varies yard to yard. A total of around 2,000 labours and employees are appointed on permanent basis while more 8,000 temporary and contract-basis workers are working in

active yards. In addition, another 20,000 workers are engaged in ship re-cycling and metal-processing activities. So, the industry is providing employment to 25,000 to 30,000 workforces in total. Apart from supply of raw materials for re-rolling mills there are other valuable and useful materials in a broken ship such as furniture and stationary items. These have a big market in home and abroad. As a result, more 5 to 10 thousand workers are depended on this sector.

Bangladesh government declared minimum wages for the ship breaking sector workers in 2006 and 2009. But factually, the salary structures were not sufficient enough for the workers to lead a simple living in comparison with the existing market price and overall cost of living.

With no appointment letter or ID card issued, in a type of “hire & fire” basis recruitment procedure and most surprisingly in a completely unhealthy, unhygienic indecent and risky working environment ship breaking workers are being compelled to work for 10 to 12 hours a day. The organic, chemical, mechanical and environmental risks in the yards are causing health hazards and even death. Most yard owners and contractors do not provide any Personal Protective Equipments (PPE) to their workers. Lack of adequate fire fighting equipments is also obvious. In yards dusts of asbestos freely enters inside workers bodies causing cancer-like deadly diseases. Besides, gastro-intestinal disorder, muscular infection, dysentery, diarrhea, vision problems, cut-injuries and bone fractures are intensely predominant among the workers. In some cases, owners construct housing sheds for workers with in or near the yard on rental basis. In most cases, workers have to live in hired huts in the adjacent slums or nearby. Workers are commonly deprived from pure drinking water and proper sanitation. Ship yards are crammed with dangerous gases, chemicals, dust, and fume, asbestos, oil, mud and polluted water. The overall workplace environment is a clutter. Ship-breaking workers at one stage of occupational life get entrapped in the cycle of “borrow and repay” as they fail to cope with the increasing living cost and fulfilling basic needs. Life standard of the ship breaking workers therefore, is beyond description. In brief, it is totally inhumane and far below the minimum standard of living.

Ship breaking activities are causing severe environmental impact in the region especially at Sitakund, Chittagong. Asbestos, as one of the most harmful element putting damage marks in the local soil, air, water and human health as a whole. As an impact, agricultural output, in the meantime, has drastically been reduced. Various breeds of birds, worms and insects, flora and fauna now-a-days seldom seen in the locality. Terrible sound being produced day and night frequently makes normal life miserable. A good variety of fishes have become scanty due to the burnt oil, mobil, organic and inorganic chemical wastes dropped from the ships to the sea. Many fishermen in that region are now jobless and forced to change profession as a consequence.

With a view to raise awareness among ship breaking workers on existing labour law and legal TU rights, to help local TU organizers to form yard-based unions, to provide necessary support and assistance regarding workers occupational health and safety Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) and Industry All has been conducting survey, research, analysis, fact-finding, workers training and orientation, round-table, seminars, net-working meetings, Lobby meeting with stakeholders, general and physiotherapy health camps, organizers training and leadership development programs.

Industry All has been working in this sector from 2011 regarding workers rights, occupational health and safety, trade union and environmental issues. Industry All so far organized several training programs, policy meeting, rally, awareness building numerous campaign activities.

Officially on September, 2010 BILS established a wing-office entitled as “**BILS-OSH Centre**” at local level at Bhatiary, Sitakund, Chittagong with a view to conduct its LO/FTF project activities for ship breaking and

metal sector workers in cooperation with Ship breaking Workers Trade Union Forum (SBWTUF) in a comparatively more coordinated mode. BILS has brought, in the meantime, more than 1,100 ship breaking and re-rolling sector workers under its training fold and awareness building numerous activities. BILS has provided several ship breaking workers with legal aid, medical treatment and advocacy facilities. Beside, functioning as the office of Ship-Breaking Workers' Trade Union Forum, educational & get-to gather centre of local ship-breaking & metal sector trade union leaders, campaign for ensuring work-place safety, reducing rate of accidents especially in ship-breaking yards, increasing monitoring and vigilance activities of labour inspection department were also given priority as over all functions of this centre. Thus BILS and Industry All is playing the role of catalysts in terms of ship breaking and metal workers awareness building on law and rights, unionizing efforts and occupational health and workplace safety issues.

With the participation of the leading national TU federations Ship breaking Workers Trade Union Forum (SBWTUF) was officially formed in 2009. Since then this body is playing a vital role in protecting ship breaking workers rights.

Ship breaking Workers Trade Union Forum (SBWTUF), so far has staged many public and protest meetings, round-tables, seminars, human-chain formation programs, lobby meetings with labour inspection department officials as part of its continuous efforts to ensure overall workplace safety, implementing existing labour law and trade union rights in this sector. SBWTUF protested each and every yard accidents, workers injury and death through all possible manners.

Due to SBWTUF activities and efforts 6 separate yard based TU organizations has already been formed along with 2 cooperatives for the workers. Yet more than 30 yard-based unions are under legal and official process to be registered.

It is to be mentioned that, SBWTUF leadership took part in several tripartite meetings, policy adopting meetings and dialogues at both national and international levels. Some of SBWTUF leaders, even as part of national delegation visited China, Hong Kong, Germany, Belgium and India to see ship breaking activities abroad and participate in meetings and workshops from 2009 to 2014.

Ship yard accidents in Bangladesh are occurring almost all the year round. From September 2010 to September 2014 in recent 5 years in 55 yards 118 workers got injured and 51 workers died. Recently in August-September 2014, unfortunately 2 ship breaking workers even committed suicide due to unemployment.

Ship Breaking Workers Trade Union Forum observed that, though there is no legal bar in case of forming trade union but in Bangladesh employers are very much antagonistic to the TU activities. Legally or illegally they try to create obstacles to the formation of TU. The implementation of labour rights depicted in the labour law is very much miserable even the employers are very shy to issue an appointment letter to a worker.

However, we are hopeful that, the present scenario in Bangladesh ship breaking sector will change some day and we are struggling to make it happen.

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