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## What do Workers Hope for?

Let's create a way of work that affirms life

By: Manu Majdoor

*The world's production capacity is immense, so why then should workers toil so much for two meals a day? We should aspire for a way of work that does not degrade but affirms life. A worker in a textile factory talks of his life, work and hopes.*

I am a 29-year-old tailor and I live in a one-room tenement in the Okhla industrial area in Delhi. I learned stitching in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh and came to Delhi when I was 16 years old. Over the past 13 years, I have worked in more than 40 factories and fashion boutiques in Delhi, Gurgaon and Faridabad.

At present, I work with a luxury couture and bridal wear manufacturer in South Delhi alongside more than 60 other garment workers. November to April is the season when the rich organize weddings, so there is far more work, a lot of work in the night shifts too. A tobacco baron's granddaughter is getting married, and we are stitching clothes for the entire family.

I wake up at 5:30 am, cook lunch for myself and take a bus to work. I start stitching at 10 am and work till 8:30 pm at night, and on other nights, till past midnight. I take the bus back home at night and collapse with exhaustion, only to start again the next morning.

On the nights we work overtime, the company gives us Rs 50 to buy dinner outside at around 9:30 pm. The law requires overtime work after eight hours to be paid at double the hourly wage rate. At the minimum wage of Rs 17,991 a month for skilled workers in Delhi, the hourly wage comes to Rs 89.9 and overtime would be Rs 179.90 an hour. But the company pays only Rs 56 an hour as overtime to tailors, and Rs 35 an hour to "helpers", who emboss crystals or stitch sequins on the cloth. They are skilled artisans kaarigar, who ought to be paid the same as us.

Some workers would perform better, some poorly. By the end, the company's accounts always evened out, but ours never did.

There are more than 60 of us, but only seven of us get health benefits and only three workers have a provident fund. The company runs 11 fabricators for embroidery and beading through contractors and those of us employed through these contractors are not shown in the books as the company's workers.

Before this, I worked at a garment factory in Okhla. The company hired me as a casual worker under a piece-rate system, paying me for every garment I stitched. I also worked at a garments export house, in a "chain system" (in an assembly line in which one worker stitches the collar, another a sleeve, and so on). There the company gave us targets to stitch a piece every 10 minutes, promising an incentive of Rs 16.50 a piece if we worked faster than the target, deducting wages if we took even a minute longer. The company employed 300 of us and made 50,000 pieces in two to three days. Some workers would perform better, some poorly. By the end, the company's accounts always evened out, but ours never did.

### Disappointment with unions

There are systematic restrictions on workers, enough to scare individual workers into submission.

If one goes back seven years to February 2013, did anyone know what was going to happen in Okhla? Could anyone have predicted or anticipated it? (Workers in the Okhla Industrial Area damaged 15 factory buildings on 21 February 2013, the final day of a nationwide strike called by central trade unions.)

That day, I remember, workers were going from factory to factory, pelting stones, overturning luxury cars, shouting, 'Yeh car kachre ka dibba hain, jala do inhe' (These cars are waste bins, burn them.)

How did it feel? If you break down the walls of the space where your blood and sweat is extracted every day, how would you feel? Other strike calls followed over the years, but that sort of a moment when you felt free, has not recurred. Each time a worker picks up a stone, the trade unions say do not do *tod-phod*, don't cause damage. It makes a worker wonder, 'Why should we come along with you then? Let the union go on its own.' Then only 10 or 20 workers are left standing there.

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Over the past decade of working in the Delhi region, I have witnessed several changes. Earlier, workers joined unions, but are now fed up with them because in a few instances the unions sold their interests or they turned out to be ineffective.

Let's talk of union representatives. A few months ago, a union leader active in my neighbourhood asked me to accompany their cadre to Telangana Bhawan to demonstrate in solidarity with 48,000 employee of the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation, who were on strike since October 5. I asked, but isn't it a Sunday? Why have you organized a struggle on a Sunday? 'You probably want to meet some commissioner there at Telangana Bhawan, but who will be there on a Sunday, tell me? You have planned a protest, but who will witness it on a Sunday?' I asked him.

Perhaps an official had advised them, 'Why don't you do a demonstration on Sunday, and on Monday a smaller group of you can come to submit a memorandum'. Or, perhaps the union thought that more workers will join them on Sunday. But even when they do this on a Sunday, ultimately, only 20 workers join them in protest. It is not as if on Sunday thousands gather with the union. Then, would it not be better to go even as a small group of 20 on a working day like Monday? At least the Telangana Bhawan's other staff would witness our action.

The union leader exploded in anger at me. He told me, 'You are anti-worker, and you stifle and block others too if they try do something'. I burst out laughing, how have I stifled dissent?

### **What is the role of intellectuals?**

Intellectuals also do not make much sense. It is obvious and clear that in this system, if you try to react, you will be ripped apart. That is clear and apparent. There is very little scope to manoeuvre, that is clear. But what are pro-worker intellectuals saying? What are they writing?

Unions shuffle a foot from here to there, from there to here, causing little difference to the status quo. But if the intellectuals can perceive and understand that unions are no longer effective, then what are intellectuals writing? If this is the situation in India, if this is how things are for workers, what should we do? That is the question for intellectuals. But they have no response.

Every day I work myself to the bone, I am at work 14-15 hours a day, yet I have no permanent means of sustenance. Every day, I am aware that while some people are getting richer, my life remains like this. What should I do? Should I form an organization? Should I join others in a similar state? I should do something, right? Is there an activity like that? No, there is none.



A view of a garment fabrication unit in Okhla, New Delhi | Anumeha Yadav

### **The changing nature of work**

Right now, there is a need and a space for a new system, a new way of struggle, but we are not able to see a new way immediately. But we must at least have the carefreeness, the freedom, the abandon to gather, assemble, sit together and exchange thoughts with each other.

But what happens if your neighbour or colleague is scared and asks: “If I do something, what would happen to my spouse or my family if I am imprisoned?” This is a common fear. Many are apprehensive of the same.

I saw a video from America where a labour activist was talking about an eight-hour working day. That seemed like a conversation from the age of steam engines, to work with coal and steam, entire families worked long hours, with 5-7 children, aunts, uncles everyone worked together. That is when someone asked, let a person earn enough to sustain the family after an eight-hour working day. But now production is 100 and 1000 times more than that.

Where we should be able to get by with working one hour, or two hours, or five minutes, why are we asking for an eight-hour working day? This is not possible. It is not possible because in capitalism, as machines develop they do not need human labour as much, so the workers keep lowering their price, they try to sustain themselves using the least possible means. Perhaps human nature is that they do not want to fight till water flows over their heads. That is how we keep degrading our lives. If we had to eat dung to preserve ourselves, we would. That is the stage our reluctance reaches -- when we have no life left in us.

|| [W]ork as it happens now does not affirm life, it degrades lives. We want work that affirms life, supports life, promises life.

When it reaches that stage, then capitalism has no use left for you. In that stage, it becomes self-destructive, it starts to destroy everything, on one pretext or the other --- it could be a denial of the cost of living allowance, or water, or a blanket in winter; or it could be in the form of the poor dying from illness, hunger, and malnutrition. People are dying, this system of production is destroying people. In such an era, you are saying, ‘Give us an eight-hour working day’. When our production capacity has reached a stage where we do not have to work at all, we should talk on that basis. This new conversation should be widespread. But the leaders do not talk like this.

Maybe they do not talk like this because unions leaders themselves lead a higher standard of life than us. In the United States, residents cannot easily get a domestic worker, but here our intellectual leaders can one get easily. This shapes them, and how they act.

### **The future of work**

If machines do the work, does that mean we will not or should not work? No, it is not that if I was free, I would not work. But I will do the work I *need* to do. Why should I work as per their needs? That is wrong. Because work as it happens now does not affirm life, it degrades lives, *jeevan hith mein nahi hai*. We want work that affirms life, supports life, promises life. This system is not pro-life, it does not favour life.

We need a system that respects life. Why is this question not raised? If 100 years ago, someone raised a demand for eight-hour working day thinking the system will give us a good life or a “proper job”, why are we still speaking the same old language?

Why don’t we talk of ways that affirm life, support life; why are we talking of perpetuating systems that degrade our lives? Today, production is so much that the Earth cannot bear it. The Earth cannot bear it anymore, and we are now sitting on an ecological explosion. But we are still seeing progress, “vikas”, defined as roads must be broad, that we need jet planes. We do not ask what these are needed for.

|| They are now talking of detention camps. Those will be an extension of “labour camps”, the industrial units that we toil in.

What work respects life? Work that will respect life would be that where you could teach my child, and I could stitch cloth for you, maybe my family can make food for you, and you can do something else for us. How is it acceptable that for me to get two meals you get me to work 12-14 hours?

If I am stitching clothes for an actor, what relation do I have with them? None. If I stitch something for a rich actor or celebrity, they ought to at least offer me a cup of tea, but would they? I want a system where both you and I find dignity.

I am not advocating that we go back into a forest; no one needs to go back into the forest. The production capacity is so much, why the panic to produce then?

In a way you can say technology is so advanced that humans are no longer born only to work. We ought to use machines, not only for the profit motive, which ails us and has become destructive for most humans, but to affirm life.

### **The limits of alternative proposals**

There is a basic income debate. But do you think corporations or governments can provide a basic income? If the corporations and government pay Rs 6,000 after making one work 12 hours, what would it mean for the same entities to give Rs 15,000 to an Indian worker every month?

These same people who today make others work for them for Rs 6,000-7,000 a month, will they provide Rs 15,000? On the other hand, if for 5 kg of rice at a ration shop, you have to give your fingerprints scans to the Indian government (the government has linked all social schemes to a biometric ID number Aadhaar, for which it scans fingerprints before giving food subsidies and pensions), will the same government give us Rs 15,000 as an unconditional income? They are now talking of detention camps. Those will be an extension of “labour camps”, the industrial units that we toil in.

All this inequality must go. If the market system has created a lot of freedom, then why do we need an army, bombs, weapons, all this military might for? But if political leaders get no income or a higher status from doing their work, if no army saluted them, would they do this work?

Even if animals fight, they don't plan to murder each other. But humans kill each other over small things. I wonder if it was after Krishna gave a sermon in the Gita that only the body dies but the soul is immortal, that the murders and killings began.

*As told to Anumeha Yadav*