



Unraveling Injustice: May Day, Shrinking Freedoms, and the Garment Industry

May Day greetings to you all!

On this International Workers' Day, we continue to fight for regulation, redistribution and democracy within global supply chains - committed to a future where workplaces are free of exploitation and repression. Workers across Asia toil under the weight of a system prioritising profit over people. Their labour is the backbone of the garment industry, yet fashion brands relentlessly chase profits – sacrificing worker wellbeing by forcing them into unsafe working conditions and impossibly low wages.

Compounding these hardships is the systematic silencing of worker voices. Workers are often denied the right to speak out about abuses or organise for better working conditions. This stifling of dissent happens through various means, from intimidation and threats to the suppression of trade unions. This undermines the very foundation of a fair labour system and leaves workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

The Struggles We Face, The Injustices We Fight

The challenges faced by the labour movement in Asia are immense and multifaceted. Indonesian workers navigate a labyrinth of complex labour laws, erratic currency fluctuations and restrictive union regulations that hinder their ability to organise and bargain collectively.

A recent proposal for 12-hour workdays in India represents a blatant disregard for workers' physical and mental health. Such gruelling schedules not only rob workers of rest and family time but also increase their risk of injury and workplace accidents. Rising temperatures due to climate change exacerbate workplace safety issues as workers endure the stifling heat.

Economic instability compounds these hardships. Inflation in Pakistan erodes workers' already inadequate earnings, plunging families deeper into poverty. In Sri Lanka, IMF-backed austerity measures further squeeze an already struggling population, disproportionately harming those who rely on daily wages. In Bangladesh, inadequate wages force them into impossible choices between basic survival and their families' well-being.

Everywhere, women workers bear the brunt of exploitation and inequality. Unsafe factories and male-dominated hierarchies leave them vulnerable to violence and harassment. Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) is a daily reality for women workers.

Across Asia we struggle against widespread political decay – workers' ability to advocate for themselves and challenge injustice is severely undermined. In Cambodia, political repression is on the rise as labour activists increasingly face intimidation and arrest. The military coup in Myanmar casts a long shadow over the future of democracy in the country and progressive movements across our entire region.



Hope Amidst Hardship: The Dindigul Agreement at Two Years

Yet, amidst these struggles, beacons of hope shine through. This May Day, we celebrate the second anniversary of the groundbreaking Dindigul Agreement, won by a majority Dalit women workers' union to combat caste-based discrimination and gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH). Spearheaded by the Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), and the Global Labor Justice (GLJ), this agreement marks a significant step toward justice.

Prioritizing the agency and autonomy of women workers, most of whom are Dalit, adopting global GBVH standards (ILO C190), and enshrining the right to form unions - the Dindigul Agreement strengthens the position of those who are most at risk. AFWA's Safe Circle Approach embedded in the Agreement's program trains workers to recognise and report GBVH, while worker shop floor monitors support survivors. Its worker-led grievance mechanism holds those in power accountable, ensuring transparency. The Dindigul Agreement blazes a trail, proving that union-driven solutions can dismantle systems of exploitation.

Demanding a Just Future

Inspired by such victories, we refuse to be defined by hardship. We at AFWA stand in unwavering solidarity with workers across the world, amplifying their voices and demanding:

- **A Living Wage:** A woman-centered, cross-border living wage that considers the food and non-food costs of garment workers along with the cost of unpaid care work. This ensures not just survival but the ability of workers to contribute to their families' well-being and dignity.
- **Safe Workplaces for All:** Zero tolerance for gender-based violence, health hazards, and workplace discrimination. Our workspaces must have a safe and inclusive environment, fostering a culture that respects the dignity of all workers, particularly women who face unique challenges.
- **Unwavering Freedom of Association:** Trade unions are the backbone of a fair labour system, and their suppression must be met with global resistance. As AFWA emphasises, workers must have the freedom to organise and bargain for their rights collectively.
- **Respect for Democracy:** As workers and citizens, we hold an inalienable right to shape our workplaces and societies. Labour has always been a voice for democracy. We will not be silenced.

The Power of Solidarity

This May Day, let us honour those who came before, the sacrifices that paved the way to a more just future. We celebrate worker-led victories across borders, a testament to the enduring power of collective action. However, the fight for workers' rights is far from over. May Day is a day to affirm our collective power and determination to create a world that values and prioritises workers' dignity and rights. In a world marred by inequality and exploitation, May Day is a call to action. Let us rise, shoulder to shoulder with workers across the globe, and continue to fight for a world where all workers thrive.