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| <b>Article:</b>               | <b>Giving voice to the voiceless: Presentation of Labor Issues in Editorials of Elite Newspapers (2013-2018)</b>  |
| <b>Author(s):</b>             | * Muhammad Amer Raza<br>PhD Scholar, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore   |
|                               | Dr. Muhammad Rashid Khan<br>Associate Professor, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab<br>Lahore  |
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| <b>Author(s) Note:</b>        | * Muhammad Amer Raza is a PhD Scholar at the Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore<br>Corresponding Author's Email: <a href="mailto:m.a.raza78@gmail.com">m.a.raza78@gmail.com</a>   |
|                               | Dr. Muhammad Rashid Khan is serving as an Associate Professor at School of Communication Studies University of the Punjab Lahore<br>Email: <a href="mailto:rashid.ics@pu.edu.pk">rashid.ics@pu.edu.pk</a>   |

## ABSTRACT

Labor leaders and trade unionists often complain that newspapers do not give a proper presentation to labor issues. This research article is an effort to address their complaint and investigate the presentation of labor issues in the editorials of elite newspapers of Pakistan (Dawn and the News) from 2013-2018. Editorials present the case of the voiceless segment of society, and they also reflect general trends of coverage on news pages, because the editorials are written on important events and issues which emerged on news pages. They also present newspaper policy and generate debate in society on important issues. The selected newspapers have great importance in the public discourse of Pakistan, and they are read by the most influential segments of society. The period under the study was very eventful for labor in Pakistan. It is a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of editorials written on selected labor issues (trade unions and workplace security) by selected newspapers during the period under study. Applying the theory of agenda setting and framing the study has found that newspapers have given a very insufficient presentation to labor issues, but they positively presented the labor issues.

**Keywords:** Labor; trade unions; workplace safety; editorial coverage; content analysis; agenda setting.

## **Introduction**

A fire erupted in Baldia Town garment factory in Karachi, in 2012, it killed 250 workers and more than 100 were injured. In an interview, the general secretary of the National Trade Union Federation, Nasir Mansoor said that the media did not cover the incident as it should have. He said that the media took the narrative of terrorism rather than the violation of labor laws (Third Voice TV, 2019). Kashif Abasi (Third Voice TV, 2019) renowned TV journalist in an interview for a documentary on labor issues, said that after the Baldia factory media could run a vigorous campaign to create awareness about labor issues in society but it lost the opportunity. Corporate media has blacked out coverage of labor issues, labor beats have been abolished and newspapers are publishing business and financial pages which cater to the information needs of the business class (Raza, 2022 p.80).

In 2014 a survey was conducted by Gallup Pakistan, 9% of the respondents blamed trade unions for the bad economic conditions and social justice (47% of Pakistanis believe, 2014, August 4). This opinion poll shows that the public is not aware of the whole picture of trade unions in Pakistan Only three percent of the labor force is unionized in the country (Raza, 2016). It also shows that there are some problems with the presentation of trade unions in media.

Labor in Pakistan is facing several problems. Its leaders and activists have voiced their concerns on labor issues from time to time. They have pointed out several problems faced by labor which include, weak presence or complete absence of trade unions, unjust wages, contractual labor, and harassment at the workplace, workplace security, social security, long working hours, child, and bonded labor. These labor issues have their roots in the underdeveloped labor market and labor rights are not being enforced effectively according to the standards of International Labor Organization. The major reasons for this failure are the lack of implementation of labor laws, unemployment, and the inabilities of successive governments (Khan, 2019). Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research Karachi in its annual reports on the status of labor in Pakistan (Multiples, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), has expressed its dissatisfaction with the implementation of labor laws in the country.

Labor researchers (Munir et. al, 2015) have pointed out that the trade union movement in Pakistan remained weak after 1980, and it could not even ensure the labor rights guaranteed in the constitution of the country. Trade unions play an important role in shaping workers' lives, but in Pakistan, authentic data about trade unions is not available which make it difficult for the stakeholders to formulate evidence-based policy for labor (Christensen, 2018). The main reasons behind the endangered labor unions are changes in the political and economic system of the country, advancement of the neoliberalism, privatization of public sector industrial units under the bailout packages of the International Monetary Fund, and globalization of the textile and garments industry all have crushed the trade unions and turned the labor into a voiceless segment of society.

## **Important Labor Issues in Pakistan**

A careful review of literature available on labor leads to highlighting some important labor issues in Pakistan. Here is the summary of some important labor issues in Pakistan.

**Trade Unions:** the constitution of Pakistan gives the right to association and collective bargaining under article 17. It means that laborers have the right to form their union under the

constitution. But there are many lacunas in laws and factory owners exploit these laws and create obstacles to the registration of the unions. They have registered pocket and yellow unions which safeguard their interests. The process of registration is very complicated. Although after the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment in the constitution of Pakistan, labor has become a provincial subject but laws and rules regarding the formation of trade unions remained complicated and pro-industrialists. An ILO study reveals a steady growth in the registration of trade unions in Pakistan from 1947 to 2016, but also notes that less than one percent of workers are organized under trade unions (Mapping labor unions, 2021). Low membership rate, laws, and registration of pocket unions are the big issues faced by Pakistani labor.

**Workplace Safety:** this is also a big issue faced by Pakistani laborers. The labor inspection system is very poor and ill-managed. Pakistan has ratified ILO Convention No. 81 which ensures the regular inspection of labor, its health, and working conditions. But unfortunately, the system is not working properly, industrial accidents have become routine. In 2012, more than 250 workers have killed in Baldia Town garment factory in Karachi. In the coming years the labor inspection condition remained unchanged, 120 workers lost their lives in 17 industrial-related accidents in 2015. In 2016 again 17 workers lost their lives in an explosion at Gadani Shipbreaking yard (Sasoli & Shah, 2016).

**Contract labor** is also a problem for workers. Most of the workers are forced to work through third-party labor contracts. The labor leaders have voiced their concerns and demanded the government should abolish third-party labor contracts and the daily wage system completely. These two factors are major hurdles in the registration of labor unions (Labor leaders call for abolition, 2022). In other issues social security, child and bonded labor are also important labor issues in Pakistani labor market.

### **Labor Issues and Newspapers**

In this scenario, when the labor movement and trade unions are becoming weak it is the responsibility of the media to raise the voice for labor rights and create awareness about the labor issues in this society. The newspapers abolished labor beats during the mid-90s, and the reporting desks started to assign coverage of labor strikes, trade unions events, and industrial accidents to any available reporter who has no background knowledge of labor laws and ILO conventions signed by Pakistan. Labor leaders and advocacy groups raised their concerns about this practice. Addressing their concerns, a US-based NGO Solidarity Center in collaboration with the Institute of Research, Advocacy and Development developed a labor reporting manual for the reporters to cover labor issues (Jamal, S. & Baig, S., 2014)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Newspapers through the presentation of labor issues in news, editorials can set an agenda for the implementation of labor laws and advocate the need to improve existing laws. Newspapers especially, through their editorials raise the voice of the voiceless segment of society and represent the underrepresented groups of society. Labor is also an underrepresented and voiceless segment of society so there is a need to study the presentation of labor issues in editorials of elite English newspapers.

### **Objectives of the study**

Following are the objectives of the study

- To explore the extent of presentation of selected labor issues in editorials of elite English dailies during the selected period of study.

- To understand the nature of framing of labor issues in the elite English newspapers during the selected period.

### **Significance of the study**

Newspaper editorials play an important part in sensitizing an issue in public discourse. The study will be significant in exploring the role of editorials in the creation of awareness and generating debate on the selected labor issues. The study will sensitize the segments of media and society to coverage of labor issues.

### **Significance of Newspapers**

For this study two English newspapers, Dawn and The News have been selected. The Dawn has a large circulation in important and influential segments of society. The News International also has a circulation of more than 120,000 copies. Both newspapers also have a good presence on the internet and social media. The selected newspapers are widely read in important segments of civil society, legislators, advocacy groups, and diplomats.

### **Significance of Period of Study**

The period of study is January 2013 to 2018. This period has special significance as it starts after the Baldia Town factory fire and in the upcoming years there should be a debate on labor issues especially on workplace safety and labor unions because both are interlinked. The presence of labor unions can ensure workplace safety and social security after an industrial accident. So, there was a need to highlight these labor issues to avoid future incidents. This study has measured the extent and quality of the debate generated in the editorials of the selected newspapers during the period under study.

### **Significance of Editorials**

Editorials are the representatives of newspaper policy. They present facts and opinions and try to control public discourse on important problems of public life. Van Dijk (2006) considered editorials an institutional opinion. He has argued that editorials are the mouthpiece of owners. It depicts the stance of newspapers and reflects the position of newspapers under certain economic and political interests. Editorials through their structure present a case, narrate the facts, build the argument, and give a verdict on the issues. This process opens a logical debate in society which is very useful for the underrepresented segment of society and played an important part in advocacy journalism. These are the reasons to choose the editorials as the unit of analysis for this study.

### **Limitation of study**

This study is only limited to the editorials of selected newspapers during the selected period. The study is also limited to the selected labor issues.

### **Literature Review**

The initial studies (Sussman,1945; Pomper.1959 & DeFleur.1964) have been conducted on the coverage, framing, and portrayal of labor issues, strikes, and the public relations strategies of trade unions to improve their public perception. These studies were conducted at the time when media research and theory were in infancy, but these studies laid the foundation of labor research in media studies. Afterward, groundbreaking research was conducted by the Glasgow University Media Group in 1976, which found that television news did not cover many labor-related events and industrial accidents properly. TV bulletins had been given less time to labor news in comparison with other news. This study paved the way for further research on the coverage of labor in news.

Martin, (2003, 2004), introduced five frames for the coverage of labor news. He has argued that media cover labor issues through these five frames which are, 1) consumer is king, through this frame media cover news from its audience point of view it means that if there is strike media will highlight the disruption of routine life and neglect workers' demands, 2) media audience has nothing to do with the process of production, through this frame, coverage of events happening inside the factory are play downed, 3) media focus on corporate chief executives and give rare coverage to trade union leaders, 4) media coverage gives more importance to individuals rather than unions, it gives more stories of the personal struggle of businessmen, 5) media frame collective action of unions in a negative frame, it present labor strikes a disruption to the democratic system.

Under these frames coverage of labor issues has been changed into coverage of economic and financial news. Kollmeyer (2004) has argued that economic and financial journalism has its tilt toward the interests of the corporate sector. This coverage is supportive of privatization and neoliberalism and suppresses alternative discourse on the economy.

Park & Wright (2007) has examined the extent of business journalism in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Associated Press from 1980 to 2000. They have found that the extent of business news is greater than labor news.

Shaheen et al. (2021), have explored the reporting of social issues in Urdu and English newspapers with special reference to bonded labor. They have concluded that the media has given less coverage to labor news due to the pressure of its advertisers.

These studies map a trend in the coverage of labor issues in media. Some of the studies deal with radio news, tv news bulletins, and newspapers and explored the news coverage of labor has a negative trend. These studies do not measure the role of editorials in the presentation of labor issues. There is a need to explore this aspect of newspapers. This literature review drives toward the formulation of the following research question.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Did the selected newspapers give a presentation to selected labor issues in their editorials during the period under study and to what extent?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What was the framing in this presentation (Supportive or non-supportive)?

From the literature and coverage of trade unions and labor issues it has assumed

H<sub>1</sub>: Selected newspapers gave an equal presentation to selected labor issues during the period under study.

H<sub>0</sub> The News gave more coverage to selected labor issues during the period under study.

The literature set the direction of qualitative analysis for this study into the following hypothesis.

H<sub>2</sub>: Selected newspapers gave a non-supportive presentation to selected labor issues in their editorials during the period under study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is supported by the theoretical framework of agenda setting and framing. Agenda setting, introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, is a major theory in media studies, proves that media through salience of some issues make them important in the public discourse. It depicts the power of media which controls the power of thinking of the people by making them what to think about and how to think about the issues (Severin & Tankard 2001).

Riaz, (2008) has argued that mass media through its function of agenda setting can change the thinking of people. Through the agenda-setting role of media, the media agenda becomes the public agenda.

Ileri (2012) in his study “Comparing agenda-setting roles of newspaper columnists and editorials in Kenya” has argued that the role of newspaper editorials remained a less explored area under the agenda-setting framework. He said most of the work on agenda setting has been done in news. There is a space to find out the agenda-setting function of editorials in public discourse.

### **Farming**

Nelson et al. (1997, p. 221) have defined framing as,

"Framing is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy".

Frames are mental structures that help the public to understand the reality around them. According to Goffman framing is a “principle of organization that governs social perceptions of peoples (Goffman,1974). At the second level of agenda setting the concept of framing becomes important. At this stage, the media tells the public how to think about an issue. At this stage framing of the issue become important and construct an image in the mind of the public. And the public tries to understand the reality around them through that image in mind. The newspaper editorials as a combination of facts and opinions have special importance in the framing of labor issues. The framing theory is relevant to this study.

### **Research Methodology**

Quantitative and qualitative methods of content analysis have been used as a research methodology to investigate the problem under study. Editorials (leaders and editorial notes) have been used as a unit of analysis. All the issues of newspapers (Dawn and The News) 4380 issues published from January 2013 to December 2018 have been selected as the population for this study. Then purposively editorials published on labor issues have been selected according to chosen categories. The categories of labor issues are as follows.

A. Trade Unions: unions of workers in an industrial establishment registered under the laws and protect workers' rights.

B. workplace safety refers to the limitation of elements that can cause an industrial accident.

The direction of the content has been measured as supportive noted by (+) and non-supportive noted by (-).

For trade unions, an editorial is supportive if it advocates the role of the trade union to protect labor rights, and non-supportive if an editorial does not advocate the role of the trade union to protect labor rights. For workplace safety, an editorial is supportive if it holds industry owners and the government accountable for industrial accidents. An editorial is considered non-supportive if it blames workers for an industrial accident.

### **Conceptualization**

Elite newspapers refer to those newspapers which set the news agenda for other newspapers. These newspapers have greater resources than others and produce quality content. Labor issues refer to problems like the right to association (trade union), workplace safety, just wages, working hours, child labor, bonded labor, third-party contract, and social security are a few to mention.

Editorial and editorial note refers to an article that appears under the masthead of a newspaper on the editorial page and presents the policy of newspapers.

### Operationalization

Elite newspapers have been operationalized as Dawn and the News in this study.

Labor issues have been as the trade unions and workplace safety in this research

Editorials have been operationalized as editorials of Dawn and The News published on editorial pages of the selected newspapers in the study.

### Findings

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Did the selected newspapers give presentation to selected labor issues in their editorials during the period under study and to what extent?

Following are the distributions of editorials on Labor issues published by Dawn and the News according to the years under study.

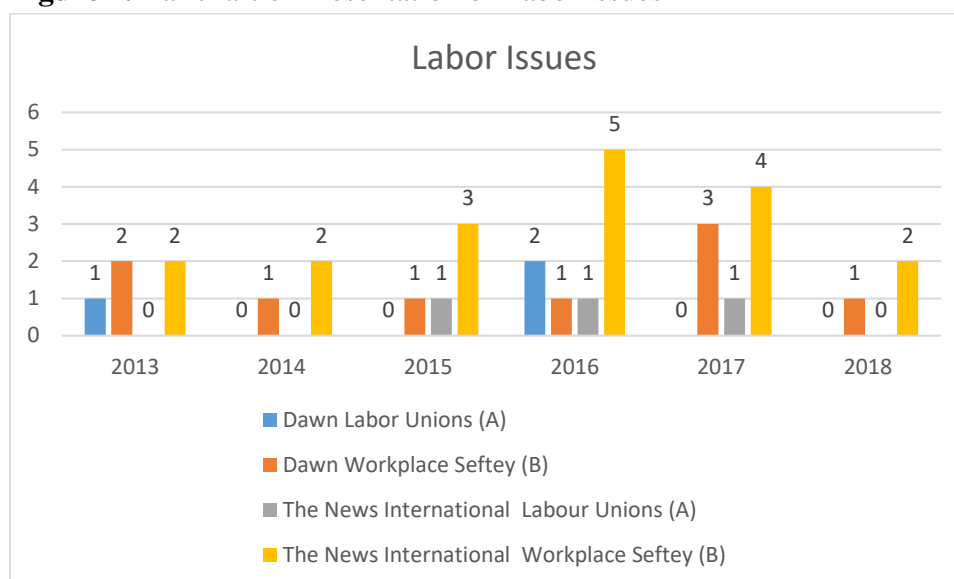
**Table 1.** Comparison Of Presentation of Selected Labor Issues in The Editorials of Dawn and The News on Labor Issues From 2013 To 2018

| Years | Dawn      |            | The News  |            |
|-------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|       | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| 2013  | 3         | 25%        | 2         | 9.5%       |
| 2014  | 1         | 8.3%       | 2         | 9.5%       |
| 2015  | 1         | 8.3        | 4         | 19.05%     |
| 2016  | 3         | 25%        | 6         | 28.57%     |
| 2017  | 3         | 25%        | 5         | 23.80%     |
| 2018  | 1         | 8.3%       | 2         | 9.5%       |
| Total | 12        | 100%       | 21        | 100%       |

**Table 2.** Presentation Of Labor Issues According to Categories

| Categories of Labor Issues | Dawn                  |            | The News              |            |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
|                            | Numbers of Editorials | Percentage | Numbers of Editorials | Percentage |
| A                          | 3                     | 25%        | 3                     | 14%        |
| B                          | 9                     | 75%        | 18                    | 86%        |

*Note.* Labor Issues. A: trade unions). B: workplace safety

**Figure 1.** Bar chart of Presentation of Labor issues

Dawn and the News published a total of 33(100%) editorials on selected labor issues during the period of study. Dawn published 12 (36.36%) editorials on labor issues, The News published 21(63.63%) editorials on labor issues. Further distributions show that out of a total of 12(36.36%) editorials Dawn published 3(25%) editorials on labor issue A (Trade unions) and The News out of a total of 21(63.63%) published 3(14%) editorials on labor issues A (Trade Unions). Out of 12 (36.36%) editorials Dawn published 9(75%) editorials on labor issue B (workplace safety) and The News published 18(86%) editorials out of 21(63.63%) on labor issue B (workplace safety).

The data shows that the presentation of selected labor issues is not only very low but infrequent in the editorials of selected newspapers. Dawn only 3 editorials on trade unions in 6 years (period under study) followed by The News which also published the same number of editorials. Dawn published 9 editorials on workplace safety in 6 years, but The News published 18 editorials on workplace safety. It was hypothesized that,

H<sub>1</sub>: Selected newspapers gave an equal presentation to selected labor issues during the period under study.

H<sub>0</sub> The News gave more coverage to selected labor issues during the period under study.

One-way ANOVA single tale was used to test the hypothesis.

**Table.3** Summary of The Test

| Groups                        | Count | Sum | Average | Variance |
|-------------------------------|-------|-----|---------|----------|
| Dawn Labor Unions (A)         | 6     | 3   | 0.5     | 0.7      |
| Dawn Workplace Safety (B)     | 6     | 9   | 1.5     | 0.7      |
| The News Labor Unions (A)     | 6     | 3   | 0.5     | 0.3      |
| The News Workplace Safety (B) | 6     | 18  | 3       | 1.6      |

| ANOVA               |        |    |       |          |          |          |
|---------------------|--------|----|-------|----------|----------|----------|
| Source of Variation | SS     | Df | MS    | F        | P-value  | F crit   |
| Between Groups      | 25.125 | 3  | 8.375 | 10.15152 | 0.000283 | 3.098391 |
| Within Groups       | 16.5   | 20 | 0.825 |          |          |          |
| Total               | 41.625 | 23 |       |          |          |          |

The result shows that there is a significant difference in the presentation of labor issues in editorials of selected newspapers [ $F(3,20) = 10.15, p = 0.000283$ ]. As the  $P$  value  $\leq 0.05$ , so the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a significant difference in the presentation of labor issues in editorials of selected newspapers, The News has given more presentation to labor issues during the selected years of study.

### Qualitative data

**Table 4.** Comparison of Presentation of Selected Labor Issues in The Editorials of Dawn and The News From 2013 To 2018

| Selected LI | Dawn                 |        |     | The News             |          |     |
|-------------|----------------------|--------|-----|----------------------|----------|-----|
|             | Number of editorials | A +    | B - | Number of Editorials | A +      | B - |
|             | 12(36.36.%)          |        |     | 21(63.63.%)          |          |     |
| A           | 3(25%)               | 3(25%) | 0   | 3(14. %)             | 3(14%)   | 0   |
| B           | 9(75%)               | 9(75%) | 0   | 18(86. %)            | 27(856%) | 0   |

*Note.* LI: Labor Issues. A: trade unions). B: workplace safety

The distribution shows that out of a total of 12(36.36.%) editorials dawn published 3(25%) supportive editorials on labor issue A (Trade unions) and The News out of a total of 21(63.63.%) editorials published 3(14%) supportive editorials on labor issues A (Trade Union). Out of 12 (36.36%) editorials Dawn published 9(75%) supportive editorials on labor issue B (workplace safety) and The News published 18(86%) supportive editorials on labor issues B (workplace safety) out of 21(63.63%) editorials.

It was assumed that newspapers had given a non-supportive presentation to selected labor issues during the period under study. It was hypothesized that,

H<sub>2</sub>: Selected newspapers gave a non-supportive presentation to selected labor issues in their editorials during the period under study.

**Table. 5** One-Way Anova Single Tale Was Used to Test the Hypothesis.

### SUMMARY

| Groups  | Count | Sum | Average | Variance |
|---|-------|-----|---------|----------|
| Total Positive Editorials on Trade unions (2013-2018)     | 2     | 6   | 3       | 0        |
| Total Negative Editorials on Trade unions (2013-2018)     | 2     | 0   | 0       | 0        |
| Total Positive Editorials on Workplace Safety (2013-2018) | 2     | 27  | 13.5    | 40.5     |
| Total negative Editorials on Workplace safety (2013-2018) | 2     | 0   | 0       | 0        |

### ANOVA

| Source of Variation | SS      | Df | MS     | F        | P-value  | F crit   |
|---------------------|---------|----|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| Between Groups      | 246.375 | 3  | 82.125 | 8.111111 | 0.035562 | 6.591382 |
| Within Groups       | 40.5    | 4  | 10.125 |          |          |          |
| Total               | 286.875 | 7  |        |          |          |          |

The result shows that there is a significant difference in the presentation of labor issues in editorials of selected newspapers [ $F(3, 4) = 82.12, p = 0.03556$ ]. As the P value  $\leq 0.05$ , so the null hypothesis is rejected. The editorials of the selected newspapers have given a supportive presentation to selected newspapers during the period under study but the amount of presentation of labor issues is very low and insufficient, especially trade unions received presentation in only 6 editorials in 6 years which is averagely 1 editorial in a year. Likewise, workplace safety is a very crucial issue it is linked to the lives of millions of workers unfortunately this issue also received a very little presentation in editorials of selected newspapers under the years of study. Both newspapers published 27 editorials in 6 years, on average they published 3.5 editorials during the period under study. It is also noted that these editorials were not lead editorials but only editorial notes on the lower half of the editorials page their placement shows labor issues are not on the main agenda items of the newspapers.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Some themes have also been identified in the editorials written on the selected labor issues according to the categories. Editorials dealing with trade unions took the government responsible for the weakness of trade unions. Dawn considered trade unions a strong defense against the retrogressive elements in a democratic society. It notes in its editorial that

“It has been said and it will no doubt be reiterated in the future that an organized workforce could provide an effective counter to the retrogressive elements in society, some of which go as far as wanting to derail the entire system.” (Absent Union: May Day, 2013, May 1)

In 2016 a strike in Pakistan International Airlines broke out and PIA worker unions went on strike. The government took a very hard stand against the trade unions in PIA at that time Dawn supported the trade unions’ demand and wrote in its editorial

“Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif adopted a hostile approach towards the union protesters” (PIA crisis needs cooler minds, 2016 February 4)

It shows that Dawn has a pro-trade union stance and considers trade unions an important political and economic institution of a democratic society. And critics of the inability of the state to protect and revitalize this institution.

Contrary to Dawn, the News also criticized not only governments for the weakness of trade unions but also took a strong stand against the neo-liberal economy and international financial institutions and considered them a force against trade unions. The newspaper noted:

“The ideology of the rulers, no matter which party is in power, is roundly pro-capita labor unions are reduced to pushing back against the tide of neoliberalism. International financial institutions like the IMF and Asian Development Bank push for economic growth and deficit reduction on the backs of workers.” (Labour and dignity, 2017, May 2)

The newspaper also criticized the role of respective governments and political ideologies in weakening the trade unions.

“in the country as a whole have been decimated. Unions were opportunistically weakened by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and then ideologically destroyed by every government that followed. As we have followed the neoliberal path, the idea of strikes, collective bargaining and restricting the power of capital have come to be seen as quaint. Government unions still retain more power than those in the private sector but even they have been ineffectual in stemming the privatisation tide”.

(Bringing Back Unions, 2016, April 2)

The newspaper also lamented that public sector unions had also been unable to put resistance against the advancement of the private sector and privatization policy.

In workplace safety, the Dawn held governments for industrial accidents and criticized its inability to implement industrial inspection laws.

The provinces need to address the yawning gap in the number of inspectors without delay. Some experts familiar with labour issues are of the opinion that in the post-devolution period, the system of labour inspections is relatively better in Punjab — though far from ideal.

(Labour inspections, 2015 September 23)

Regarding workplace safety, The News also took a tough stand and criticized the government. In an editorial, the newspaper has noted that

“In fact, Pakistan has even failed to ratify the ILO convention on health and safety in mines. While the death of workers in accidents is still catalogued, there is no data on workers who die from diseases suffered from the workplace”. (Miner’s protest, 2018, October 2).

Last but not least The News also has held Pakistani media responsible for not raising the voice of the voiceless. It noted in one of its editorials that “The media offers them little space and little time (The cost of life, 2017, January 12)”.

Not only media but media scholars and researchers have also turned a blind eye to labor. There are few research works present on the media coverage of labor. This paper also recommends future research on coverage of labor in news and the portrayal of labor unions both in the public and the private sectors. There is also a need to analyze the content of labor news and articles after the abolishment of labor beats. The media strategy of labor unions should also come under investigation.

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