

MAY DAY 2011: REVIEW OF THE PAST AND COMMITMENT FOR THE FUTURE

***"The conflict exists because there are classes!
Classes do not exist because there is a conflict!!"***

A famous American community organizer and writer *Saul Alinsky* classifies humankind have been divided into three tiers: **the Haves**, the **Haves-Nots** and the **Have-a-Little, Wants more**. The Haves are always at the top of the social pyramid with the control over power, wealth, protection and luxury. Whilst they suffocate always in the limitless property, the Haves-Nots are often in the clutch of starvation. The Haves account minority of the population in the society but wants to keep things as they are and are opposed to change. Thermo- politically, they are cold and committed to freeze the status quo.

Underneath the Haves is the world of the Haves-Nots. The Haves-Nots are largest in number. They are threaded together by the common misery of poverty, scarcity, ignorance, malady, political impotence, despair and poverty-wage if they are employed. Needless to say, of these two classes, the strong always exploits the weak.

The conflict based on ethnicity, race, caste and gender do not directly fall in the sanctuary of class struggle; they simply are the manifestation of discriminations and exploitations rampant in the society. The class supremacy is the economic discrimination not in the colour of people, place of their origin and gender. An individual with ethnic, gender and regional identity may be an oppressor and s/he may fuel violence among the people with such identity. In such situation supporting either of the poor or the rich is positioning oneself against each other. When the time comes to take a side, the oppressed stands against oppressor, poor against rich and a class against another.

Today, we are observing the May Day. We observe the Day in festive mood. But question may arise, why this commendation of struggle even in the day of festivity?

Because, the flag of our May Day is pierced in the blood of world's working class who chose martyrdom against tyranny for the sake of dignity. The glory of May Day is grounded on the glorious struggle of working class against a handful of the Haves who belligerently freight oppression on many of the Haves-Nots. The history of May Day is the grandeur history of labour leaders in Chicago who were crucified by the brutal regime some 125 years back for a simple reason that the leaders dreamt of dignified, prosperous and creative life for their generations. In this way, the history of the Day is closely linked with the struggle against repressive past. On the top of it, the history of May Day is sprinkled by the blood of Nepali workers who waged struggle for democracy, equality and prosperity against all sorts of tyrannies imposed by 104-year Ran oligarchy, despotic regime of absolute monarchy in various forms including so-called *partyless Panchayat* system. The May Day is stood firm on the strong citadel of workers who chose death to despotism but did not give up their hope to prevail over oppression.

So we cannot help underscoring the glorious history of the workers when we talk about the May Day. Even last year, we bore in mind the *Rhododendron Revolution* scaled in 2006 by the Nepali people, which shook the fortress of feudalism in Nepali society. With the

change of 2006, we voiced with high expectation that the transformation is possible! But one year down the road since last year, the Nepali politics could not paint a rosy picture in its mandate to write a new constitution. It instead has been lost in the vortex of power struggle. While observing the May Day last year, we called the right opposition party to relinquish its obstinacy to capture state power from the street protest. As we foretold, their attempt to capture the state power could not yield result in their favour. Instead they got public opposition that obliged them to pull off their struggle. Now the characters in the power have been changed, method of stubbornness has been altered. Nonetheless, the lust of power among the political parties is still there by the same gravity as it was in the last year. There is no breakthrough in the statuesque of Nepali politics over the year.

If this is the case, is the current political leadership irrelevant?

We were firmly while celebrating the May Day last year that the drafting of a new constitution should have been accomplished by then. Article wise discussion of the compiled constitution-bill should have been accomplished by then. But progress to that direction has not been made by this time too. We are still in the same line of fall as we were before a year. Of the total members in Constituent Assembly (CA), the remaining task for 536 members now is to cast vote for or against the draft of new constitution to be tabled in the Full House of CA after the draft is prepared by the 65 members of the Constitutional Committee. But sadly, the discussion has not been started yet among the top leadership on how the remaining tasks of writing constitution can be accomplished within the remaining time of CA and how to manage the prolonged transition after May 28. The leadership instead has fallen in the gorge of irresponsible debate whether or not to extend the CA tenure. The debate simply is nothing more than a trick to escape the responsibility by shifting the blames onto others.

Why to extend the CA tenure? This is the question even us workers want to load on to the leaders who have belief in and respect for democracy. We need firm and convincing answer: have we achieved the mission of drafting and enacting the new constitution through elected CA? Or was the demand of Nepali people to enact new constitution through CA for 65 years now wrong? What is the alternative to the CA if it is dissolved as per the rumour on the surface? Is it the revival of interim constitution of 2006, or the revival of Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 or the presidential rule as a testimony to the failure of current political leadership?

On this historical occasion of the Day, this question is not only directed to the major political parties. We also put the same question to all parties representing the CA, the intellectual and the civil society who project themselves as 'opinion makers'. We are never tired of blaming and commenting on others 'failure' and 'inactions'. But what do you think to be the right alternative to CA? This is the question to the 'intellectuals' and the civil society answer of which is in pending on their part!

Obviously, all the faces in Nepali society are not new for the Nepali people. At a time when the highly acclaimed inclusive CA elected through exceptional momentum and elevated expectation could not yield results as per people's wish, how can we anticipate that the alternative institution of CA will hold water? How can we be convinced ourselves that the rumour of fresh elections is the right alternative? Can the elected body like CA be dissolved simply on the ground that it could not serve the

purpose of a few leaders who are defamed by their wrongdoings in the past? Or, can the political vacuum like before 2001 serve the purpose of CA?

It is definite that CA cannot be a 'writing team' of a group of people to draft a constitution. Neither can it dish up the interest of certain group of people or individual.

If so, a question may arise, was it the waste of time of CA over the past year?

Obviously, there are some complications in the political spectrum. However, we succeed to mellow some fruits in the world of work. Us workers thrive in materialising the Social Security System, the demand of workers that was pending for 20 years. The Social Security System is based on Social Security Fund collected through one percent tax on the workers who are entitled to regular-permanent jobs. We also succeeded to strike Collective Agreement between the employers and trade unions and thereby agree on the contribution ratio on the both sides; 1:1:2. The incumbent government has guaranteed the Tripartite Social Security Fund Management Board in coordination of Labour Ministry and is agreed for operational guidelines of the Board.

These definitely are the major achievements in favour of working class. Unlike the past agreements, the new agreement of the year is a landmark step to take our society forward to equality and welfare direction.

As a part of the social development process, the politics at present in Nepal is in the transition. As is the politics, so is the economy. As we are in transition, we are leaving the old legacy back but still to form a new but firm foundation. In other words, we are no more in the phase of destruction nor already entered in the era of construction. We are passing through the phase of deconstruction. Deconstruction per se is to leave out the useless things of the past and take those useful to create a new.

In the unequal society like ours, we do not put a hook on the rich people in their campaign for gaining wealth. Instead we opine to charge proportionate tax in them and use it for the support of low income people. Through the contributory Social Security Fund, provide social protection to those workers in employment with the benefits of education, health, pension and unemployment benefit. In the name of class struggle, instead intimidation, violence and maiming, we feel it as the practical method to address class struggle of Nepali society. We do not call them anymore the forms of class struggle. We have firm belief that we can develop labour force through this process. That's why we have applauded the Collective Agreement reached between the employers and the trade unions as 'historic'. That's why we have thanked the immediate past leadership of FNCCI who demonstrated adequate flexibility in recent agreement. And, it is on this ground we have hailed a slogan- 'world of work would get liberal policy; if the workers would enjoy employment and social security!'

Down the road to this May Day, a new leadership of the FNCCI has been elected. Last year, we urged the employers and their organisation to respect the rules of the game in letter and spirit and be abided by it. We feel the call that we made last year is still relevant this year too and we further ask them to implement the collective agreement in letter and spirit, and do not try to revoke the Social Security System in any pretext. We strongly support the businesspersons in their call to allow them work without hindrances and stop the goons to enter the workplace and let them live in looting. Once

again we reiterate our position: 'worker-employer relations do it as is the labour legislations! Oppose the highhandedness in our workplace!'

Last year we raised such important issues that have enduring effect in our world of work. After the present team of GEFONT ascended to the leadership, it has insistently brought to implementation the slogan "where workers there GEFONT". In a bid to put the slogan into practice, we have convened National Convention of different affiliates including 12 Zonal Committees. No matter on what terms of condition are the workers in workplace, we succeeded to reach out to them all and made the slogan "Rights to Union all, social protection to all" of theirs too.

Despite the achievements of last year, we still have to do more to achieve the following:

- Ratification of ILO Convention No 87
- Formation of constitutional and powerful National Labour Commission based on tripartite agreement and as per the spirit of 'Labour Commission' as enshrined in the Interim Constitution.
- Timely amendment to the existing labour laws and development of new and necessary labour laws like Social Security Bill
- Schemes design of Social Security System and management of Fund
- Guarantee of labour friendly new constitution with the inclusion of workers' issues in the draft prepared by the Thematic Committees of the Constituent Assembly
- Organizing the workers against the exploitative and inhuman labour practice and mobilizing them for dignified, prosperous and ingenious life.

These are the priority agenda of us workers in the coming year too. However, many of them rely on the action of the Government of Nepal. We the hardworking class people have the right to ask with the Right Honourable Prime Minister:

- Which force is impeding the Government to ratify the ILO Convention No 87?
- Who is the force to thwart the democratic reorganization of world of work?
- Who is that to hinder the introduction of labour friendly policy and programmes in the country like ours where nearly 50 percent of the population is below the poverty line?
- Who is that to put a spoke in you leaders' wheel to move forward to bring about transformational change in Nepali society?

We expect strong comment of the government. If the government is ready to address the agenda raised above, we on behalf of Nepali trade union movement with no hesitantly say that the world of work will be transformed into the "peace zone" in the days to come.

Finally, I on behalf of all Nepali workers would like to welcome you all guests and the invitees present here for your solidarity to the Nepali workers. I wish you all a happy May Day!

Thank you!

(Bishnu Rimal: Keynote on May 1, 2011)