

This 28th April is dedicated to those working in Difficult Profession

"We talked about those with the possibility of returning back home, but did not discuss those whose occupation requires them to join a 'last supper' with the family members every time they set out for work, unsure if they would ever return. The neglected are the workers in the mountaineering occupation from the Himalayan region of our country. No '28th April' to-date has spared a through for them in a true sense. Probably, we thought we should cry at those who died of mechanical fault or those perished under the heap of earth while digging a tunnel. However, we did not know what we should do when one is swept to death by an avalanche. We became deeply emotional when we saw burns or chemical injuries, but remained motionless when we saw frost-bitten limbs.

Hundreds of thousands of workers have become victims of workplace accidents in the world. Thousands have died due to occupational diseases. To remember and pay homage to them, the world trade union movement observes the 28th of April as the Day of Mourning.

We are deserting our village-communities for work. And in return, we get back three dead bodies on average per day. A family of a worker is always under stress and strain that their beloved might be the next to suffer. And the suffering can be a physical loss, psychological damage, sexual violence and cheating.

Today, we mourn those who have died while serving our society. For years, we have been gathering and organizing events this day to raise awareness about occupational diseases and the victims. At the mercy of the media, we are sharing our concerns and issues with the people at large.

Initially, our efforts were directed at the workers in the industrial world. When industries started to die and our colleagues started to emerge in the construction sector, our focus also expanded.

We then started to talk about those dying in the gulf of parching heat, but were not that careful about those toiling a risky life due to cold and hazardous occupation at home.

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If one looks at the death tolls from occupational accidents of the last 150 years, hundreds are found to perish not because of their own fault but because of the lust for money of those who make decision. According to the International Labour Organization, everyday 850,000 workers sustain injuries at workplace. Experts estimate this number could be over million; and there is silent death of more than 107,000 workers a year due to asbestos exposure.

We, Nepali, cry when we hear others dying, and publish news of sympathies. But we remain mum and careless when our neighbours meet a fatal death.

- In 1985, there was leakage of gas in Bhopal, India. Even the government statistics put the death toll at 3,785. We cried to hear the incident. We spoke for their rights. But we did not show a concern at the happenings at the fatal Union Carbide subsidiary – the Nepal Battery – at the border of the Balaju Industrial District in Kathmandu, close to our eyes. Not only unconcerned, we even scolded the workers voicing their rights. Our government was seemingly worried about the factory moving out of the country. The life and death of its citizen was secondary.
- After a year, Chernobyl burst. We were deeply shocked and worried about the Ukrainians. As to our people, however, we baton-charged when they demanded that radiated milk should not be distributed.
- A toy-producing factory – Kader – caught fire in Thailand claiming lives of over 180 workers. In 2012, 289 persons died of at Ali Enterprise Garments in Karachi, Pakistan. Last year in April 24- 1,138 workers were killed when a building collapsed at Ranaplaza of Bangladesh, more than 2500 got injured. We were sorry for this. But we remained emotionless when dozens of Nepalis were killed at a ‘Crazy Cap’ factory in Chakupat, Lalitpur a few years ago.
- Just two days ago, on 26th of April 2014, 16 of our colleagues buried in a tunnel of the Upper Madi Hydro Project in Kaski. After 16 hours, 13 of them were rescued. But we failed to save life if the remaining three – Sujan Gurung, Nagendra Tamang and Arjun Tamang.

Such cases abound. Many are yet to get a proper name and count. They relate not only to one sector, but many. Those bent on money-making do not take workers health and security into consideration. They just focus on money. We are also biased. We blame drivers and assistants for road accidents that are a daily occurrence, but do not see the fault of greedy public transport-owners and operators who force a driver to drive continuously for 14/15 hours a day in a bumpy road to save a few thousand rupees.

It has been 92 years since the record keeping began of accidents related to Mount Everest expedition. 104 Nepali high altitude workers have been killed on Mt Everest since 1922. According to a piece of news carried by the Nepali Times, percentage of deaths in avalanches between 1950-2009 is- 46.4 per cent Nepalis and foreigners 28.8 per cent. Death rate for Nepali high altitude workers on Everest between 2004 and now is 12 times higher than the death rate for US military personnel deployed in Iraq from 2003- 2007.

Still we are silent. Our society is amazingly tight-lipped, senseless and insensitive. To break this silence and senselessness, this programme has been organized jointly by three Nepali National Centre of trade unions affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). We hope this event will pierce those pretending to remain unaware and force them into opening their eyes.

We wish to dedicate this 28th April to those colleagues forced to take up the hazardous work in the high mountainous region; hence the discussion on "Workers in Difficult Profession".

I know little about mountaineering, expedition and related areas. What I am trying to say may thus be incomplete or not fully relevant to the core of topic we are discussing. According to Apa Sherpa, "Sherpa climbers are at risks from the moment they decide to go for expedition. They fill up insurance forms with heavy hearts. Some of them literally weep while doing so not knowing whether they will return home alive. They put their lives at stake from this very moment.

Troubles have multiplied in the recent years because of climate change effects as well. Earlier ice falls would form into pyramid shape. So the climbers would easily notice them. ... Now the ice falls remain in flat shape and they keep changing patterns, even moving. Crevasses open and close now and then, sometimes burying whole stretch of climbing ropes and ladders."

Yesterday, I saw some climbing footage stored by Dorje Khatri at the GEFONT archive. A worker colleague in the footage is heard singing a popular song-"where this life is taking me!" while readying heavy luggage for the climb. My body shook while listening to the line. Just above is the Himalaya signing brightly, very attractive to see, but equally risky to touch! Some of our worker colleagues are seen to serve food to clients, others are seen to help them fix their belts and prepare ropes. There is a game-like scenario. Perhaps our colleagues are tossing to decide who makes the first move towards the dangerous journey. Then, the colleagues are found to fix ropes, hang from the rope to make sure there is no risk and guide the clients toward the destination. Tired of difficult walk and panting, the colleagues take rest on the heap of ice, at 6,300 meters. But their mind is still focused on the remaining bit of the journey. They do not think beyond their work.

I recognized the voice, and the speaker. It is Dorje Khatri, the Vice prez of GEFONT affiliate, UNITRAV, who climbed Mount Everest nine times, carrying flags of different countries and agencies. He wished to bring the flag of workers as well – arguing that there would be no one except workers to carry their flags, and he would do so. He was permitted, and brought the flag of GEFONT, its affiliates, ITUC and GUFs atop Everest. It is through Dorje Khatri that our flags reached Mount Everest.

A day before his departure to Everest Summit of this spring session, he came to my office at GEFONT with his youngest daughter. I still remember what he said: "Comrade this is my last trip to Mt Everest. Already leaving a second life (he was nearly perished in an accident in one

of his previous expedition last year in Mt Himlung), I wish to work with you for the rights of workers upon my return from this trip.”

I had no doubt that Dorje would defeat all the difficulties and return safely as he did in the past. Unfortunately, he left us along with a dozen of other colleagues with the highest level of competence in the climbing profession. There is a coincidence that our colleague killed in the spring avalanche of 1922 was Dorje Sherpa. He was killed at the height of 6,800 meters. This time after 92 years, three of the killed at 5,800 meters are Dorje Sherpa.

Dorje Khatri is not only known to us. He is known all over the world. Sis Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, writes about the death of Dorje Khatri in a personal note to me: “We share your sadness. He was a beautiful human being and while he died on his beloved mountain it is tragic that you have lost him. ... Our thoughts are with you!”

Similarly, Noriyuki Suzuki, the General Secretary of International Trade Union Confederation-Asia Pacific region, thus says about our Dorje: He is our hero and we will remember him and his courage. Frances O’Grady General Secretary of TUC- UK adds: “we will remember his wonderful contribution.”

At the loss of these heroes, the whole world has been weeping, not just the family members. What reverberates behind this accident is the clarion call that our society should not just confine itself to the pain and misery of cities and industrial sectors. It should also open its eyes and ears to the pains of the communities in high mountain regions where people are forced to depend on the earning of three months to eke out a living.

On behalf the entire workers and Nepali trade union movement, we wish to pay our deepest tributes to: Mingma Nuru Sherpa, Dorje Sherpa, Ang Chhiri Sherpa, Nima Sherpa, Phurba Onglyang Sherpa, LakpaTenjing Sherpa, Chhiring Ongchhu Sherpa, Dorji Khatri Sherpa, Dorjee Sherpa, Phur Temba Sherpa, Pasang Karma Sherpa, Asman Tamang, and Ang Kaji Sherpa.

And, our heartfelt sympathies are with you all family members. We can realize the importance of these heroes to the family members. We also express our deepest sympathies to the families of the three colleagues – Ash Bahadur Gurung, Pemba Tenji Sherpa and Tenjing Chhotar Sherpa – who are still missing in the snow.

Bishnu Rimal

President, GEFONT

(Speech delivered at the ITUC-NAC programme held on 28th April, 2014)

