

MAYDAY MAYDAY: We Are Starving

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*It is true: I earn my living
But, believe me, it is only an accident.
Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.
By chance I was spared. (If my luck leaves me
I am lost.)*

- To Posterity, Bertolt Brecht (1)

You wake up, put on your clothes, your shoes, you walk out of your house and walk along your clean street to take the bus to school with your breakfast in your hand. In this simple routine alone, you benefit from hundreds of workers' hard work. The house you live in, the clothes on your back, the shoes on and the pavement under your feet, the cleanliness of your environment, the bus that drives to your doorstep, the food in your hand, all brought to you by workers. Despite building the foundations of our society, often quite literally with their bare hands, the working class is potentially the least compensated group financially and socially. As if that is not enough, they also face violence on the one day that is dedicated to them.

Workers take on some of the most demanding jobs, often heavy manual work for long hours and weeks, and so they have terrible working conditions and generally low health benefits despite the risks (1). Not only are they usually paid the minimum wage for their work (2), some of them work for free. In five countries in the Asia-Pacific, ILOSTAT estimates that unpaid labor adds up to 187 million hours a day, 60% of this coming from women (3). Furthermore, some portion of workers today consists of the victims of modern slavery, estimated to be around 38 to 46 million (4) (5). For a more extended overview of workers' issues, please see our [previous article](#) on this topic.

There are many more statistics that could be presented, ranging from regional differences, racially motivated exploitation, gender discrepancies, and so on. Worker rights are continuously disregarded and swept under the rug by politicians, which reflects even more severely on minority groups that are pushed into low-benefit working conditions due to systemic poverty. A large group of people is continuously exploited globally right in front of everyone, and on top of all this, they also face violence from many governments around the world on the one day that is dedicated to them.

The COVID-19 pandemic the past year has made this situation worse, as expected. Many countries declared certain lines of work essential, therefore forcing them to be exposed to the virus on a daily basis to keep society going, while in the same breath keeping up with the narrative that these workers deserved minimum wage because they were doing unskilled work. This is a grotesque way to view human life as if they are some corks in a machine, entirely replaceable and otherwise meaningless. Additionally, there were those who lost their jobs and those who were prevented from running their businesses due to lockdowns without any financial help from their governments. This past year has witnessed an unbelievable shift in wealth as the poor became poorer than ever, and the richest people added billions upon billions to their already existing abundant wealth (6).

One of the major reasons the call for rights in this area often gets shut down is the belief that these people deserve to be in this position because somehow they lacked the will to do the hard work either

when they were young or when they were older. However, this is an extremely limited worldview. Access to and completion of higher education is established to be highly correlated with the family's financial status. While the chances of completing two years of college for students from the high-wealth quartile is 70%, this number drops to 41% for the low-wealth quartile ([7](#)). Poverty comes with significant costs, especially when it comes to mental and physical energy, as well as time. It is easy to feel as if your achievements are solely your own, but most of the time, for the average person, it is largely dependent on your family and luck. As such, these people do not deserve to suffer for being stuck in a system that was set up for them to lose.

There are many steps involved in righting these wrongs; access to education is definitely an important one. Additionally, it is also vital to increase the living standards for those who are currently in poverty or working long hours for minimum wage. People deserve more than living paycheck to paycheck, especially when that is the best-case scenario offered to them. To achieve this, a wage increase, better working conditions, and better health benefits are essential. A key step underlying all of these is not to teargas them when they speak about it.