



STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY

WORKERS' RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS: DEMANDING FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND DECENT WORK FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

1-MAY-2026



Shramik Sanjal



International Labour Day, universally known as **May Day**, is a global recognition of the dignity, struggle, and integral contributions of the working class. Stemming from the historic 1886 Haymarket affair in Chicago, where labourers bravely organized to demand an eight-hour workday, safe conditions,

and fair wages, this day serves as a powerful reminder that labour rights are never freely given; they are won through collective yet valiant efforts.¹

In Nepal, the seed of the May Day spirit was first sown in March 1947 during the

¹ William J. Adelman, "Haymarket Riot," in *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago Historical Society,

2005), <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/571.html>.

historic Biratnagar Jute Mill strike.² This uprising marked the country's first organized industrial action against exploitative working conditions. In a struggle for democracy against the Rana regime, the mill workers demanded an end to the 14-hour workday and demanded fair wages. While the 1947 strike was a localized industrial dispute, it can be seen as the birth of the ideological foundation for International Labour Day in Nepal, shifting workers' status from "servant" of the state to "citizen" with rights. Over the decades, different trade unions emerged to rally for the labourers' cause, thus playing a pivotal role in institutionalizing "May Day" as a day of national mobilization, which latently ensured the legacy of the Chicago martyrs resonates within the factories and fields of Nepal today³.

For Shramik Sanjal, the relevance of May Day is rooted in our line of work, empowering migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia, and beyond. Sadly, migrant workers still face the relentless working hours without proper mandate on their contracts, lack of freedom of speech, and are vulnerable in the Countries of destination. By organizing like-minded workers, Shramik Sanjal supports them in every way possible.

Building Ethical Pathways: Our Effort

Over the years of experience, we have witnessed high recruitment costs trap workers in a cycle of debt, silencing their voices against exploitation as loan repayments loom over every decision. Shramik Sanjal directly confronts this vulnerability by contributing to institutionalize ethical recruitment pathways, ensuring that the "Zero Cost Recruitment" and "Employer Pay Principle (EEP)" model becomes a reality rather than a policy on paper. We do it by facilitating pre-departure orientations, providing mental well-being support through our programmatic intervention, and offering direct support for rescue and repatriation. We are paving our path to contribute to the migration corridors of the GCC and Malaysia.

On this day, Shramik Sanjal stands in solidarity with the millions of Nepali migrant workers across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Malaysia, and beyond, whose sweat and sacrifice sustain the economies of both host countries and of Nepal.

For Shramik Sanjal, this day is not merely a commemoration of past victories, but a living, urgent call to action. We align the historic spirit of May Day with the modern-day fight for migrant rights, honouring those who labour far from home.

² Parbat Portel, "Biratnagar's Chautari Where Nepal's Labour Movement Began," *The Kathmandu Post*, May 1, 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-1/2025/05/01/biratnagar-s-historic-chautari-where-nepal-s-labour-movement-took-root>.

³ General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT), *History of the Labor Movement in Nepal* (Kathmandu: GEFONT Publications, 2011), 18–20

A Collective Voice for Freedom

The core spirit of May Day is the right to collective bargaining and freedom of association. However, in many major destination countries for Nepali workers, trade unions are either strictly prohibited or legally inaccessible to foreign nationals. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has consistently emphasized that Freedom of Association (Convention No. 87) is a core labour standard applicable to all workers, regardless of nationality or migration status. When migrant workers are stripped of the right to organize, they are left vulnerable to wage theft, contract substitution, and dangerous working conditions, with no structural mechanism to demand redress.⁴

Shramik Sanjal's one of the pillars adheres to "Organizing". We organize the migrant workers in the Country of Destination on a voluntary basis and disseminate information. Our another "Direct Support" pillar then comes to light if any migrant workers are facing some problems, they are either solved on our own capacity or referred to the concerned authorities.

A Need for Decent Work

While we celebrate the contributions of workers today, we must condemn the systemic exploitation embedded in the *Kafala* system and opaque recruitment practices. According to the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), states must facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and

safeguard conditions that ensure decent work.⁵ Yet, migrant workers continue to face exorbitant recruitment fees, turning their labour into a mechanism of debt bondage.

"May Day" was born from the historic struggle of workers demanding an eight-hour workday, fair wages, and the right to organize. Yet, more than a century later, these fundamental rights are systematically denied to migrant workers. For the diaspora workforce, the struggle for basic labour dignity is not history; it is a daily reality."

Our Demands for Labour Justice on May Day

To honour the true meaning of May Day, Shramik Sanjal calls upon the Government of Nepal, destination countries, and international stakeholders to

1. Ensure Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining:

We urge destination countries to reform labour laws to allow migrant workers to form worker committees or community associations without fear of deportation or arrest.⁶ As a Civil Society Organization, Shramik Sanjal means no harm to the state sovereignty, laws, rules, and regulations of the Country of Destination; even then, the community organizing for the welfare of the migrant workers

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO), "Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (No. 87)," July 9, 1948, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:12030

⁵ United Nations General Assembly. 2018. *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*

Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2018. A/RES/73/195.

⁶ Amnesty International. 2020. *Reality Check: The State of Migrant Workers' Rights in the Middle East*. London: Amnesty International.



becomes difficult and a sensitive issue.

2. **Enforce the Fair and Ethical Recruitment**

model: We demand that our government strongly implement the Fair and Ethical Recruitment Model and eliminate worker-paid recruitment fees. True labour justice begins with ensuring that no worker is burdened with debt during migration to Gulf Countries and Malaysia.

3. **Ensure Wage Justice:** We call for strict enforcement of a robust Wage Protection System that ensures timely wage payments through banking and digital channels, guaranteeing every worker is paid in full, on time, and without arbitrary deductions.

4. **Inclusion in National**

Labour Laws: We demand that all categories of migrant workers, especially domestic workers who are often excluded from standard labour protections, be fully integrated into the labour laws of destination countries. It is high time that the Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) are revised to address these concerns.

5. **Ensure Social Protection and portability of the Social Security Fund;**

We demand comprehensive protection for migrant workers through fair and enforceable systems. Governments must guarantee the portability of social security benefits between countries of origin and destination through bilateral agreements. Insurance coverage should be provided continuously, from recruitment to return, encompassing accidents, illness, and death. Equal treatment must be ensured by eliminating wage discrimination based on nationality and by upholding dignity, justice, and rights for all workers.

May Day for us has always been a reminder of the rights of the workers, especially to those who have been deprived of it.

"Shramik Sanjal reaffirms its commitment to amplifying the voices of those who build economies but are treated as invisible."

We vow to continue our actions for the rights of all migrant workers, and they be treated with dignity, respect, and equality they deserve.