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ON THE CALL OF

All India Scheme Workers Federation

**TO ASSERT RIGHTS AND DIGNITY
SCHEME WORKERS' MASSIVE SIT-IN
(MAHADHARNA) BEFORE PARLIAMENT**

21ST NOVEMBER 2022, JANTAR MANTAR

DEMANDS

- Status of Government Employee to Scheme Workers (ASHA, Mid-day Meal, Anganwadi, etc.)!
- Fix Rs. 28,000 per month Minimum Wage at national level! Fix Working Hours! Guarantee Comprehensive Social Security including Pension!
- Set-up Gender Cells to Stop Gender Exploitation at Work-place!
- Stop Privatization/NGOization of these Schemes (NHM, Mid-day Meal, ICDS, etc.)!
- Appropriate Compensation to the Families of Scheme workers who lost lives during Covid!

All India Scheme Workers Federation (AISWF) & AICCTU

VISION SHRAMEV JAYATE@2047: A DOCUMENT OF DECEIT AND LIES

★ MAITREYI KRISHNAN

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.”

**- Joseph Goebbels,
Minister of Propaganda
under Hitler**

In his speech at the National Labour Conference of Labour Ministers and Labour Secretaries of States/UTs organized by the Government of India at Tirupati on 25–26 August 2022, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about how the government had taken initiative to abolish the laws from the period of slavery and how the new “simplified” labour code would ensure “the empowerment of workers through minimum wages, job security, social security, and health security”. The lies and deceit of the present regime continues as it attempts to deprive workers of their basic hard-won rights and push the working class into a condition of slavery.

Building on these lies, a document titled “Vision Shramev Jayate@2047” makes tall claims about the impact of government policy level reforms on the workforce. However, a reading of the

document would go to show that the claims made by it are in direct contrast to what the impact of the reforms would actually be, i.e. the increased exploitation of workers and the enrichment of the corporate classes.

GENDER EQUALITY AT WORK AND BETTER JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

The document claims to further gender equality through measures including “flexible workplaces”, improving workplace safety, provision for employment of women in all establishments and increase in maternity benefits. However, a reading of the changes made would show that they in fact make women workers more vulnerable and allow for discriminatory conditions of work.

1. Leveraging flexible workplaces and digital economy:

“Flexible workplace” is just another name for unbridled power of the employer to exercise complete control over the terms of employment and to terminate workers at will. As Ambedkar said the failure of the State to intervene in economic and

private affairs would result in the dictatorship of the private employer. While questioning the claim that such non-intervention would result in liberty, Ambedkar questioned to whom and for whom is this liberty. It is, as he says, “for capitalists to increase hours of work and reduce rate of wages”. This is precisely what the present regime is attempting. Flexible workplaces means flexibility of the employers to act according to their whims and fancies - flexibility to deny workers their rights.

Further, Modi in his speech at the Conference emphasized on the work-from-home ecosystem as opportunities for women's labour force participation. This idea of work-from-home for women can be seen as a reinforcement of the Manuvadi idea of confining women at home.

Flexible workplaces, which compel workers to work under insecure working conditions and allow for easy termination, will allow various forms of violence, including sexual violence and discrimination, to go unchecked. Previous experience with “flexible workplaces” of contractualization and

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informalization has shown that it is the historically oppressed sections of society – Dalits, women and other exploited communities, that primarily form this workforce. Thus, “flexible workplaces” would in fact result in denying already vulnerable and exploited workers, especially women workers, their most basic rights.

2. Improving workplace safety and gender-specific facilitation at work

While there is the claim of improving workplace safety and gender-specific facilitation, in reality the new Labour Codes result in reduction of workplace safety and reduce even existing minimal facilities.

“Flexible workplaces” that deny workers job security and rights become places of violence as the constant threat of termination reduce the ability of women to raise complaints against acts of violence and discrimination. Thus, “flexible workplaces” are workplaces that are unsafe and in fact, sites of greater violence.

Moreover, the new Codes take away even minimum protections offered by existing labour laws. For instance, at present, a number of sectoral statutes mandate the provision of crèche and statutorily, the manner of maintenance of such crèches are laid down. However, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 (hereinafter referred to as OSH Code), has done away with the sector-wise mandate of crèches and factories with 30 women workers but less than 50 workers would now be excluded from the coverage. Further, the base criteria for such crèches, including ventilation and sanitation, are no longer statutorily mandated.

Article 39(d) of Constitution envisages that the State shall direct its policy towards ensuring equal pay for equal work for both men and women. However, the new Code legalizes discrimination by allowing for unequal wages and discriminatory working

conditions. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, mandates for non-discrimination in payment of remuneration and conditions of service. The new Code on Wages maintains the façade of it but makes substantial changes that hit at the root of the premise of equality itself. While the 1976 statute envisaged that all remuneration be equal between men and women for same or similar work, the new Wage Code excludes any bonus, value of house-accommodation, special allowances, gratuity, etc. from the definition of wages, thus allowing the employer to deny women workers the same.

3. OSH code has made provision for employment of women in all establishments covering all types of work

This claim is based on Section 43 of the OSH Code that removes the prohibition against employment of women in night shifts and permits employment of women in night shift with their consent. However, by removing this prohibition, women will be forced to work in dangerous and unsafe conditions. Also, what is crucially important to be noted here is that while dealing with highly unequal power structures, consent cannot be assumed to be of free will and volition. Consent would be nothing more than an unfree choice, founded on fear and coercion.

The said prohibition was previously provided for under the Factories Act, the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, the Mines Act, 1952, the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, and the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Central Rules, 1971. Women workers under these are highly exploited, and with no real choice whatsoever.

Thus, the deletion of prohibition against employment in night shifts is not so much about choice as that of extension of exploitative practices against women workers.

Further, the OSH Code goes a step further in

exploitation of women workers by permanently rendering a large section of them as contract workers. While the OSH Code prohibits employment of contract labour in core activities of any establishment, it excludes from the definition of core activities various works, including housekeeping and laundry services. Housekeeping, a euphemism for sanitation work, is a caste-ordained occupation primarily done by Dalit women, and by virtue of such exclusion are compelled to work indefinitely in insecure working conditions as contract workers.

Thus, the OSH Code does not make true provision for employment of women. Instead it compels women to work under extremely hazardous, exploitative and insecure conditions.

4. Maternity benefit increased from 12 weeks to 26 weeks:

While the period of maternity leave has been increased by an amendment to the law, the Code on Social Security effectively diminishes the maternity benefit by the manner in which it defines wages. “Wages” which ought to have been all-inclusive, now excludes any conveyance allowance, special allowance, house rent allowance and remuneration payable under any award or settlement. Thus, the maternity benefit actually paid would get reduced.

SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL SECURITY

It is claimed that there is provision of universal access to comprehensive and sustainable social security and portability of social security benefits. However, the reality is that the Code on Social Security (CSS) puts workers in a state of insecurity.

The CSS says that the government ‘may’ frame schemes for the benefit of these categories of workers and in complete contrast to the rights based approach leaves it to the discretion of the government. This lack of right based approach clearly exposes

the malafides of the government, and leaves workers at the mercy of the incumbent governments.

Further, the Code allows the government to permit the employer to opt out of EPF compliance if the Central Provident Fund Commissioner is satisfied that there is an agreement between the employer and majority of the employees to this effect. The right to social security being a fundamental right can not be waived and such a clause effectively allows for the same. The unequal power relations between employer and workers would result in workers being compelled to give up their right to social security.

EMERGENCE OF GIG AND PLATFORM ECONOMY

The document claims that several steps are being taken with regard to the gig and platform economy.

The document characterizes the relationship between the platform owner and the workers as “other than one of employment”, thus placing 77 lakh workers outside the purview of the law. In fact, the relationship between the platform and the worker is one that clearly falls within the definition of an employer and employee. The UK Supreme Court in Uber BV vs. Aslam confirmed that Uber drivers are workers and therefore entitled to receive the rights under employment law and more recently, this position was reiterated by the Courts in New Zealand. The document by erroneously characterizing the relationship acts against the workers interest by attempting to place lakhs of workers outside the purview of the law, which, in fact, they should be covered by.

Even the claim made by the document that gig workers and platform workers would have schemes framed for them relating to life, disability, accident, etc. is also a hollow one. In fact, the Social Security Code, as detailed above, makes absolutely no social

security rights to accrue to them.

PROVISION OF DECENT WORK FOR ALL

The Vision 2047 document claims that the key focus areas would include generation of full, productive and freely chosen employment, decent work for all and transition from informal to formal economy.

The ILO understands decent work as work that is (a) productive and delivers a fair income, (b) provides security in the workplace and social protection for all, (c) better prospects for personal development and social integration, (d) freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and (e) equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

An understanding of the Labour Code would show that the codes in fact crush the Constitutional guarantee of decent work.

The introduction of a national floor wage and the manner in which minimum wage is calculated would result in wages being

fixed less than the actual minimum wages, leave aside a fair wage. The increase in the threshold of various laws, the power of the government to exempt establishments and the definitional changes to exclude establishments would result in workers who were previously protected under legislation, being excluded from it. Thus, the codes result in pushing lakhs of workers outside the law and the informalization of the currently formal workforce. The Industrial Relations Code directly attack the rights of workers to organize and strike attacking the basic rights of workers to express their concerns and organize. As seen above, the new codes allow for discriminatory practices against women workers.

The claim of the document that the new codes would provide for decent work is nothing but a blatant lie. On the contrary, the codes push workers into conditions of slavery.

It is necessary to go beyond this web of deceit and recognize the grave danger that lies before the working class. ■

DEMANDING JUSTICE FOR INVISIBILIZED MINE WORKERS OF BALLARI

★ MAITREYI KRISHNAN

Shantamma worked for 30 years in the mines of Sandur, Ballari district in Karnataka – from earning a mere Rs. 50/- a month. Her children were born in the mines and grew up there. In 2011, she was thrown out of employment, and not paid a single rupee as compensation. Today, she works as an agricultural worker earning a mere Rs. 100/- a day when there is work, and with no earnings whatsoever when there is no work.

Umesh suffered serious damage to his eyesight and his respiratory system due to his work in the mines. He was forced to spend lakhs for

his medical treatment. After being thrown out of employment, he was unable to find any job. His sons were forced to discontinue their studies and had to start working to sustain the family.

Amaresh was born and grew up in the mines at Ballari. His mother, a mine-worker too, had to take care of the entire family with Rs. 200 a week. The school he studied in was over 20 kms away, and there was no transportation available. Poverty, lack of transport made him give up school mid-way, and he became a helper in the mines.

Shantamma, Amaresh, Umesh and his sons

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came together with thousands of other mine-workers from 11th to 13th October for a padayatre from Sandur to Ballari demanding compensation for the mine workers of Ballari who had lost their employment when the mines were closed in 2011. Their struggle of over a decade is for their rightful share.

EXPLOITATIVE CONDITIONS OF WORK OF MINE-WORKERS

As of 2011, Ballari district had 148 mineral leases covering an extent of 10,868.44 hectares and employing more than 25,000 mine workers directly. The rampant illegal mining since the 2000s came to light with the report of the then Karnataka Lokayukta, Justice Santosh Hegde and culminating in the Supreme Court directing the closure of all mines in Ballari in September 2011. The extent of illegal mining, the huge amassing of wealth, especially by the Reddy brothers were written about. But, what was invisibilized was the tens of thousands of workers whose

labour was exploited for decades in the mines and who found themselves without any employment or compensation overnight.

In July 2011, with the orders of the Supreme Court, more than 25,000 workers were thrown to the streets. The mine owners used the pretext of the Supreme Court orders to further deny the workers their statutory rights pertaining to dismissal, retrenchment and compensation. While the mine-owners had made raging profits between 2003 to 2011, the workers, who had not been paid even minimum wages were thrown to the streets all of a sudden without any recourse, and denied any statutory process and benefits that accrue under law. The workers who were primarily from the neighbouring villages were largely from Dalit, minority and other vulnerable communities, with a large number of the workers being women. With the closure of the mines, the workers and their entire families, numbering more than 1 lakh people, including young children and senior citizens,

were left with no source of livelihood and nothing to fall back upon.

The condition of the mine workers, from the beginning has been highly exploitative - not paid minimum wages, no basic facilities, no safety equipment, etc. It was through the exploitation of the workers that the mine-owners made huge profits. Any attempt at unionizing resulted in immediate termination of employment and even threats to life.

The Report of the Karnataka Lokayukta on the allegations of illegal mining activities in Ballari found that there was a complete collapse of the administrative and governance system, and found that "...it is observed that due to a big margin of profit in this illegal trade a mafia type of operation have started with the full connivance and support of Politicians, Officials of the Department of Police, RTO, Mines, Forest, Revenue, Commercial Taxes, KSPCB, Labour, Weight and Measurement department and others."

EXPLOITED BY THE MINING COMPANIES, IGNORED BY THE STATE

While on the one hand, the mining companies who have built their profits on the sweat and exploitation of these workers have not provided them with any compensation. On the other hand, the government has completely neglected these workers, and have not taken any steps to ensure that the mine workers complied with the law while denying them employment or taking any steps towards their rehabilitation. While steps are being taken for the rehabilitation of the environment, these workers and their families, who are thrown to the streets have been completely ignored.

In fact, several of these mines have restarted operations while others are now being auctioned and there are employment opportunities in the same. However, these illegally retrenched workers whose rights were grossly violated when the mines were operational and then closed, are even being denied their statutory right to 'first right

under law' to re-employment. Instead new persons, especially migrant workers from other states, are being employed through an illegal system of labour contracts and sub-contracts. Thus, even though the mining work has restarted, the mine-workers who had lost their employment are not being given employment, in complete violation of the law.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court in the case related to illegal mining in *Samaj Parivartana Samudaya vs. State of Karnataka* directed the State of Karnataka to draw up a Comprehensive Environment Plan for Mining Impact Zone (CEPMIZ) to look at ameliorative and mitigative measure for socio-economic development and eco-restoration in the mining impacted regions of Ballari, Tumakuru and Chitradurga districts. Through the orders of the Supreme Court, an amount of Rs. 19,443 crore were collected as fines. However, the plan fails to acknowledge the suffering of the workers and ensure a comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation of the workers.

PADAYATRA TO DEMAND A COMPREHENSIVE REHABILITATION PLAN FOR WORKERS

The Bellary Zilla Gani Karmikara Sangha, affiliated to the AICCTU, undertook a Padyatra of 70 kms over three days from Sandur to Ballari from October 11th to 13th. The padayatre was inaugurated by Social Activist Medha Patkar and social activist and Kannada cine-actor, Chetan Ahimsa.

In her inaugural address, Medha Patkar noted the importance of the padayatre, which was for livelihood, equal share, for change and for justice. She spoke of the need for the working class and the farmers' struggle to come together to fight against the pro-corporate anti-people government that is looking to privatize 'jal, jangal, zameen', and the need to show that India is built by the farmers and workers. Stressing on the need to fight the communal agenda of the government, she said that we would not allow

the people to be divided on the grounds of religion or caste. The Government is saying that they will only give minimum to the people – minimum wages, minimum support price, but we will not accept this – we want our equal share, she said. Our fight is for what is rightfully ours, our fight is to protect the core values of the Constitution, she declared.

Chetan Ahimsa spoke of how struggle is the only way for justice, and the manner in which the farmers' struggle had compelled the Government to withdraw the anti-farmer laws. He declared his complete support for the mineworkers and their demands.

Thousands of workers started the padayatre from Sandur highlighting that the Rs. 19,443 crore that was collected as fines was all a product of their labour and demanding their rightful share in the same. Women, children, senior citizens were part of the padayatre that went through several villages highlighting the

demands of the workers, with the residents of the villages also assuring complete support to the struggle.

After 70 kms, the padayatre culminated in a protest outside the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Ballari on October 13th. The workers were assured that their concerns would be looked into and the officials agreed that it was necessary to have a special rehabilitation plan for workers. A meeting was set up to discuss the special rehabilitation plan proposed by the workers under the chairmanship of the Ballari Deputy Commissioner.

The rights of workers can no longer be ignored and it is necessary that the Government immediately steps in and set right the historical injustice that has been done to the mine-workers. The struggle of the mine-workers of Ballari is one for justice, dignified life and equal share. ■

SLAVISH EXISTENCE OF CONTRACT WORKERS IN INDIAN RAILWAYS

★ NN BANERJEE

When the Railways came into being in British India, the daily rated workers were employed for laying track of 34 km between Bori Bunder (Bombay) and Thane during 1850's. This workforce was of poor peasants uprooted from village and artisans facing gradual destruction of independent crafts. Even in plague affected areas such workers were forced to work as slaves for long hours and stacked in godowns like cattle. Without medical aid, living room and proper food/drinking water, they had a subhuman existence with premature death, disease and destitution awaiting them. With their sweat and blood, the first train finally steamed off

Bombay to Thane on 16 April 1853.

CONTRACT WORKERS IN POST-INDEPENDENT ERA

The post-independent era begins from the I Five Year Plan proposed by the Planning Commission. It laid stress on rapid expansion of railways to the remotest corners of the country as a cheap mode of people's transport. To construct new railroad across the country, huge contract workers were to be recruited from nearby villages. Such workers were termed as casual labour on 'no work, no pay basis' without the benefits of PF, gratuity or pension. Only in the event of accident on duty, free medical treatment was given by the Railway Hospital. It is noteworthy that during

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this period no intermediary agent used to be engaged. Local officials were authorised to recruit the workers as the direct employer. Meanwhile, the First Pay Commission fixed Rs. 55 (Rs.30/+ Rs.25/ as D.A.) as minimum salary for the govt. employees including Railwaymen. In sharp contrast, the daily rated workers were recruited with less than a Re.1 of wages. During the 1950's Communist Party of India (CPI) played a pioneering role in organising this large contingent of unorganised workers into union and achieved casual status through consistent struggles. During the historic 1974 nationwide strike, about 3.5 lakh casual workers too joined the strike along with 16.5 lakh permanent workers. One of the 6 point charter of demands was decasualisation and the same demand was acceded to by the then govt. This was possible through the unity and solidarity forged through 20 day strike of Railwaymen, both casual and permanent workers.

CONTRACT WORKERS IN NEO-LIBERAL ECONOMY :

From mid-80's ban on recruitment of casual/ substitute workmen in railways by the local authorities was imposed and gradually the system of such recruitment was dispensed with. In the 1990s – the era of liberalisation, privatisation and globalization, the contract system was introduced. The railways being the principal employer started engaging contractor as intermediary agent to undertake the outsourced job of non-core activities in railways and soon a portion of core activities were brought under contract system. A section of railway bureaucracy in connivance with contractors denied statutory minimum wages. Social security benefits like EPF, ESI and weekly rest were denied. In a month, 26 days wages are paid after deducting 4 days wages on account of weekly rest. No appointment letter has been issued as the contractors resorted to 'hire and fire' policy. The workers are forced to work for 12 hours without any extra remuneration. The payment

of monthly wages are inordinately delayed. Those who raise voice of protest against the high-handedness of contractors or take leading role in union formation are summarily retrenched and even false cases filed against the union leaders by RPF officials in connivance with railway bureaucracy. In fact, an oppressive rule of contractor backed by a corrupt nexus of bureaucracy, contractors and Railway Police Force (RPF) continues in Indian Railways.

NEW CODE ON OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY, HEALTH AND WORKING CONDITIONS (OSHWC) AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTRACT WORKERS

The CLRA (Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition Act), 1970.

The CLRA aimed at regulating employment of contract workers as well as protect them against exploitation. Now under Modi Regime the CLRA is subsumed by OSHWC Code by doing away with crucial provisions in regard to the responsibility and obligations of the principal employer for the protection of the rights of the contract worker. It also weakens the role of statutory tripartite machinery for negotiated settlement of disputes. It further transpires from the confusing definition of core activity that there will be no bar in employing contract labour through a registered contractor for any core activity. In railways, almost all work related to operation, maintenance and other services is perennial in nature. It is apprehended that in near future 50% of maintenance work is going to be handed over to big companies like L&T, KEC International. It is further clear that the workshops are likely to be sold to the corporates with the closure of COF MOW (Central Organisation for Modernisation of Workshop) from December 1, 2022, as advised by the Principal Economic Advisor and Finance Ministry. Thus, oppressive 'contract raj' will rule over the railways.

As per an independent survey conducted by IREF, at present 2.5 lakh contract workers are

engaged in core & non-core activities in Indian Railways. The need of the hour is to unionise the vast youth of unorganised workers who form the backbone in carrying out the day-to-day operations of railways. Indian Railway Employees Federation affiliated with AICCTU, a lone LEFT Federation in the railways, a crusader

against privatisation has been working hard towards the direction of organising the most exploited unorganised workers in the railways and developing class consciousness by building the bridge of working class solidarity between the organised permanent workers and the contract workers. ■

IMPACT OF LABOUR REFORMS – A NUMBERS GAME

★ AVANI CHOKSHI

INTRODUCTION

For several years, the Union Government has been pushing through deregulatory labour reforms to promote ‘ease of doing businesses’ and economic growth. Since labour is a subject that both Centre and States may legislate upon, the reforms have been implemented by States based on the Union’s scheme across the country at different times. Ultimately, the scheme of ‘reform’ is made clear in the four labour codes that seek to replace existing labour legislation and has been passed in parliament.

In August 2021, the V.V.Giri National Labour Institute and the Indian Institute of Public Administration came out with an Interim Report titled ‘Impact Assessment Study of the Labour Reforms undertaken by the States’. The Report looks at primary and secondary data pertaining to select states to draw conclusions regarding the impact of four legislative reforms and four administrative reforms. It purportedly seeks to look at the impact of 4 legislative changes and 4 administrative changes in six select states. The legislative reforms include increase in thresholds for applicability under three laws, being the Industrial Dispute Act (1947) [“ID Act”], Factories Act (1948) and Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 [CLRAA] as well the introduction of Fixed Term Employment. The administrative reforms include Self-Certification,

Single window clearance system, Transparent Inspection system, and Online Filing.

A close reading of the report shows that authors have engaged in selective picking and choosing of data to come to unsound and unwarranted conclusions. The fact that the primary data has been drawn only from employers’ associations is a clear indication of the unsoundness of the data to draw conclusions. All the existing studies relating to negative impacts of de-regulation have been excluded from the table of ‘Results of Important Studies on Labour Reforms’ leading to a false impression that the studies are uniformly in favour of deregulation.

SHIFT IN EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The report looks at employment trends during two periods – the first period (2004-05 to 2011-12) and the second period (2011-12 to 2018-19) to conclude that there have been increases in overall employment in the country. Importantly, absolutely no link has been made to the labour reforms in this section and the trends perceived to exist are not even claimed to be attributable to the labour reforms. The report suffers from a number of flaws, most importantly the use of absolute numbers conceals more than it reveals. It also ignores important data about increasing number of unemployed persons in the same secondary data that is being referred to. It also tries to highlight a transition towards



formalization of employment in a flawed manner.

It is found that while the number of workers who are given the social security benefits associated with formal employment, such as has increased, the number of workers without the benefits has also increased. In this context, a conclusion that there has been increasing numbers of workers with the above benefits is not only disingenuous but also, does not reflect the number of workers in true formal employment.

Pertinently, the increase in jobs in the formal sector is equal, and even higher in states such as Tamil Nadu, which have not implemented the reforms, so no conclusion can be drawn on the impact of the reforms on the perceived increase in formal employment.

The report also strenuously highlights the increase in directly employed workers in the second period. Importantly, the increase in directly employed workers (43%) is also mirrored in an increase of contract workers (38%). The term 'Directly employed' has not been defined, would also include casual workers and workers on FTE, whose nature of employment is not formal at all.

Importantly, the increase in employment in the organized manufacturing sector was less in the states that had implemented the reforms, including Rajasthan and Maharashtra, as opposed to Tamil Nadu, which never implemented the reforms.

The Report also tries to highlight a shift in distribution towards larger plant size. However, no connection has been made with the labour reforms. In fact, it would be a logical fallacy to suggest that the legislative changes exemption smaller enterprises from the ambit of regulation could increase the number of large establishments that continue to be regulated!

IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF LABOUR REFORMS

The report attempts to assess the impact of the labour reforms through a Difference-in-differences [DID] analysis to test changes in states where the reforms have been amended as opposed to states where they have not

been. At the outset, it may be noted that the analysis is limited to the legislative changes and not the administrative changes. Hence the impact assessment of administrative changes is solely through employer association data in a subsequent section. Even in this section, the analysis fails to make out any substantive indications of improvement after the labour reforms.

Though the analysis attempts to introduce control variables to account for the differences in the industry, State and year, there remains serious flaws in the analysis. Taking two comparisons as examples, we see the following:

1. Rajasthan to Jharkhand

The report concludes that there is no significant increase in employment outcomes in the post amendment period as compared with the pre amendment period. Even in the analysis, the base year was taken as 2013, with the assumption that amendments were made in 2014-15. In fact, FTE was affected in 2006, so no conclusions on FTE may be drawn from this comparison.

2. Andhra Pradesh to Tamil Nadu

Here, the base year was taken as 2014-15 and analysis was conducted till 2017-2018. However, Andhra Pradesh only implemented FTE in 2018 so no conclusions on FTE may be drawn from this comparison.

PRIMARY DATA AND EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE

As already discussed, the only primary data analyzed in the interim report is the data / opinions provided by four employer associations, which naturally embrace the changes. However, the reasoning adopted by the employers is very revealing in terms of the adverse impact on the workers. For example, merits of the amendment in threshold in the CLRAA according to these associations include flexibility in maintaining efficiency and productivity, reduction in long-term labour costs and shorter hiring process and ease of separation, whereas the amendments demerit the unavailability of skilled contractual

workforce on demand and need for training every time the contract workers get replaced. Workers are reduced to their mere labour potential with no thought to their lives or security.

A convoluted argument is made that contractualisation of workforce effectively amounts to increasing formalization! The reasoning is that they are formalized under the contractors, which leads to improvement in the employment quality as such workers are offered better working hours and working conditions and social security. Effectively, the establishments are being enabled in contracting out of liabilities towards workers despite taking their sweat and blood.

Notably, barring one association, all others agreed that reform in the CLRAA has encouraged engagement of more contract labourers. However, the authors of the report do not analyse whether this is a positive or negative step that ought to be encouraged by the State – though in a different part it had been argued that the shift towards directly employed workers was a welcome development given the increasing contractualisation of the workforce.

In respect of FTE, one of the associations reported that as many as 50 per cent of all new jobs are given by FTEs for short periods extending up to one year. Only 20% of such jobs are renewed.

UNFOUNDED CONCLUSIONS

The labour law reforms essentially push workers into informality and dilutes the rights of workers in small industries. However, the study concludes that “the impact of the four major legislative reforms and the four major administrative reforms have had their own significant positive impact on different sectors of the industry and businesses ecosystems in terms of ease of doing business; employment generation, especially in the formal sector; attracting new enterprises/start-ups; attracting investments; increase in size of establishments; according social security benefits to employees; growth of certain labour intensive sector like

textile, apparel and leather and finally on the overall economy.”

1. This is simply not a conclusion that can be drawn from the material in the report! Disaggregating, this overbroad conclusion finds positive impact in terms of seven aspects, all of which are deeply problematic.
2. Positive impact in terms of ease of doing business privileges the employers' perspective.
3. Positive impact in terms of employment generation, especially in the formal sector is unsubstantiated. While some trends of employment increase were noted in the period in question, there was unemployment increase as well. Moreover, the employment increase was high in states where the reforms had not been implemented.
4. Positive impact in terms of attracting new enterprises/start-ups has not made out clearly in the report. In fact, the data suggests that the number of new entrants has decreased.
5. Positive impact in terms of attracting investments is made out only by the subjective statements of the employers' associations.
6. Positive impact in terms of increase in size of establishments is unsubstantiated. While some trends of increase in size was noted in the past decade, there was no correlation drawn to the labour reforms, and the increase in size cannot be attributed to the reforms.
7. Positive impact in terms of ensuring social security benefits to employees has been suggested without any reference to the labour reforms.
8. Positive impact in terms of growth of certain labour-intensive sector like textile, apparel, and leather and finally on the overall economy, is an extremely far-fetched conclusion. ■

FASCIST ASSAULT ON THE WORKING CLASS

★ CLIFTON D'ROZARIO

One does not go to a convention against fascism to get hold of a definitive analysis of fascism. One goes there to see what fascism means and does to people of different modes of existence, and how – and how effectively – they are resisting it.

- K. Balagopal¹

Talk given at the 13th Balagopal Memorial Meeting held on 9th October 2022 at Hyderabad and organised by Human Rights Forum (HRF)

The working class is being rendered evermore precarious with insecure jobs, lack of social security, exploitative working conditions, low wages, and union-busting. The reality is that over 90% of the workers are in unorganised sector² and 60% workers earn less than Rs. 375/- per day. Unemployment, is in fact, at a 40-year high. Indeed the precariousness of workers today is reflected by the fact that daily-wage workers account for more than 25% of the deaths by suicides annually in the country, which was a staggering 42,000 lives lost. Majority of workers belong to the category of the working poor, having to negotiate their daily needs through uncertain livelihood opportunities that make them, in the words of Jan Breman “wage hunters and gatherers” and “footloose labourers”.

At the same time, caste-feudal and patriarchal structures continue to dominate in several sectors. For instance, sanitation workers and manual scavengers are mostly Dalit, scheme workers and domestic workers are predominantly women, while bonded labours are mostly Adivasi. The proportion of women workers remaining low even as the gender wage-gap continues to grow.

Not only has the promise of 2 crore jobs been all but forgotten, the Union government's economic policies continue to snatch existing

jobs and exacerbate unemployment. This unemployment crisis is pushing entire sections of workers, particularly those from marginalised and oppressed sections, back into poverty, debt-traps, insecure livelihoods, hunger and further marginalisation.

FASCIST ASSAULT ON THE WORKING CLASS

The spectre of Fascism looms large over India. Indeed there is battle for the idea of India, which has no parallels in history. Many people make the mistake of equating today's political situation with the Emergency forgetting the fundamental distinguishing features, most importantly that the present-day Indian brand of fascism is rooted in ideology, Hindutva if you please, and the Union government with Modi as its face, is the front-office of RSS and its vast network of organisations.

Some of the stand-out features of the Indian brand of fascism commonly deliberated upon include the mockery of the Constitution and parliamentary democracy, dismantling of institutions of democracy and accountability, persecution of any ideological dissent, the discourse of Hindutva nationalism, the privatisation of violence in hands of Hindu supremacist organisations, the coding of Hindutva into the law (abrogation of Article 370, Citizenship Amendment Act, proscribing Hijab in education institutions in Karnataka, etc.), the unprecedented communal polarisation and marginalisation of Muslims and the consolidation

[1] “Rise of Gangsterism in Politics”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 4, 1989

[2] As of 2018, India had about 461 million workers (some estimates put it at 470 million), with 80% of them working in the informal sector, such as in agricultural work and in MSMEs with not more than 10 workers. The remaining 92 million workers are designated as being in the formal sector, of whom 49 million are employed as informal workers and called variously as contract labour, daily wagers, outsourced staff, etc.



of caste and belligerent caste aggression, and of course the naked pro-corporate agenda of Modi regime.

Another core feature is the open ruling class war being waged on the working class on four key planks.

NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, CORPORATE RAJ AND CRONY CAPITALISM

“A populist fascism, for instance, would today have made a big show of opposing the new economic policy. The BJP will not only not do that, it offers the most brazen arguments in defence of liberalisation of the economy.” – K. Balagopal³

The neoliberal prescriptions to the global economic crisis, of liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation and withdrawal of the welfare state, have decimated the lives of workers causing increasing unemployment, precarious working and living conditions, and ever-sharpening inequality. Unsurprisingly, this has provided a base for fascist and authoritarian regimes to come to power across the world. In this overall global climate of rise in reactionary bourgeois regimes, Hindutva fascism returns in the unconditional defence of a crisis-ridden capitalism.

The entire Indian economy is now opened to foreign capital, whether in the name of ‘Make in India’ or ‘National Monetisation Pipeline’, through systematic privatisation and outright sale of public sector establishments. This along with the combined effect of demonetisation, GST and the authoritarian imposition of lockdown has further pauperised the workers with the parallel unprecedented increase in the wealth of the corporates and elite. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few corporates (Adani’s wealth has grown thirty-fold over the past eight years) as a result of transferring public assets and resources to the corporates, enabling monopolies in all sectors, is the result of the

most brazen variety of crony capitalism.

One of the direct consequences of this transfer of public assets into the hands of corporates, is that the employees will be thrown out of their jobs and the reservation policy for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes will be abandoned.

A taste of things to come is evident from the experience of Air India. On 8th October 8, 2021, the Union government announced the sale of Air India to the Tatas. In June 2022, Tata-owned Air India launched a Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) for its employees while at the same time announcing that it intended to hire the “right persons” for important positions. Hiring and firing simultaneously!⁴

CONTEMPT FOR THE WORKERS

The open defence of capital by the Union government is not merely a quid pro quo offered to corporates for fund-rolling the BJP’s election campaigns, but derives from an ideology that is inherently anti-worker. At its core, Hindutva fascism has sheer contempt for workers as rights-bearing, militant, non-submissive, organised citizens demanding their due of what their labour power has produced, as a step towards the capture of state power. On the contrary, it patronises a relationship between the employers and the workers, premised on servility and subservience.

Relentlessly batting for corporates, Modi has condemned the *“culture of criticizing industry and corporates” since he believes they are doing exemplary social work alongside their business. In his election victory speech on 26th May 2019 he stated: “Now, there are only two castes living in the country and the country is going to be focused on these two castes. In the 21st century, there is a caste in India, the poor, and other castes in the country who have some contribution to free them of poverty. There are the ones who want to come out of poverty and*

[3] “Why did December 6, 1992 happen”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1993

[4] <https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/tatas-aim-to-right-size-air-india-by-hiring-and-firing-simultaneously>

the one who wants to bring people out of poverty. We have to empower these two.” Immediately thereafter, in his Independence Day speech on 15th August 2019, Modi celebrated wealth creation is a great national service, and warned against seeing “wealth creators with suspicion”.

In the eyes of this regime, the workers whose labour power produces everything, are not the wealth creators. On the contrary the corporates, who accumulate wealth by the sheer exploitation of labour and resources, are supposedly the wealth creators and while workers are to be grateful to them!

One of the many policy attacks on the working class was demonetisation which caused untold devastation with workers struggling to meet expenses of basic needs including food, medical expenses, school fees, transport, etc. Compelled to stand in long queues for days on end, workers lost their livelihood and wages. Utter contempt marked the manner in which this was imposed and implemented.

The 4-hour notice for imposing the Covid lockdown further revealed this contempt for workers, their lives and livelihoods. Announced on 24th March, the last week of the month, it enabled employers to deny workers their wages thereby facilitating wage-theft. Workers and their families faced impoverishment, starvation and destitution. Migrant workers were compelled to walk back to their homes thousands of kilometres and many hundreds lost their lives. Indignity was heaped on the migrants in various ways. In Bareilly, UP they were sprayed with disinfectants in the middle of the road, while in Bihar they were refused entry at the border itself. Incidentally in June, 2022, the UP government earned Rs 21 lakhs from auctioning the thousands of cycles confiscated from laborers going towards their homes in lockdown!

The contempt for workers is further seen in the increasing criminalisation of working class struggles. The migrant workers in Surat, who during the Covid lockdown, protested demanding that they be allowed to return to their homes, were tear gassed, lathi charged and then

arrested. Another shocking indication of this trend is the experience of the 5 contract workers working at Reliance Energy Ltd., Mumbai and members of the Mumbai Electric Employees Union, fighting against the precarious working conditions and for the basic rights of workers. They were implicated in false cases and charged under UAPA for their Union activities. They have since been released on bail after spending between 2-3 years in jail. Incidentally one of the allegations against them is that deliberately stopped the work of Reliance Energy Ltd. for one day! With the coming of the new Labour Codes, the Union government has made clear its intent of destroying even the most basic rights of workers and any struggles against it will be met with brute force.

DISMANTLING THE EXISTING LABOUR LAW PROTECTIONS

In previous regimes we have witnessed two strategies to deny workers the benefits of existing labour laws. The first strategy par excellence, which has defined labour law, ever since its inception, has been the startling discordance between the law on the books and the law in action. The fact that these legislations were not being fully implemented reduced workers to a condition of precarity. The second is the gradual whittling away of labour protections through judicial interpretation. The locus classicus (among many others) in this hall of constitutional shame is the judgment in SAIL, which has effectively gutted the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.

Now, what we are witnessing is the complete dismantling of entire labour law protections itself. Even as the country was battling Covid, the Union Labour Ministry issued a communication on 05.05.2020 to all the State Governments mandating that in order to address the “... challenges emerged due to COVID-19 pandemic, it is requested to undertake labour reforms on priority basis”, namely enabling self-certification, reduced inspection system, and effecting labour law

changes including:

1. Increase in threshold from 100 to 300 workers under the ID Act
2. Increase in threshold under the Contract Labour Act from existing 20 workers to 80 workers
3. Increase in threshold under the Factories Act from 10 (with power) and 20 (without aid of power) to 20 and 40 respectively
4. Fixed term employment

INCREASING WORKING HOURS FROM 8 TO 12

Simultaneously the Union government went ahead with getting the 4 Labour Codes passed in Parliament, thereby declaring a veritable war on the working class. These Labour Codes take away most hard-won rights of the workers. They have increased the thresholds for applicability thereby placing workers outside the protection of law, attacks the workers' rights to organise and strike, withdraws several protections to women workers, institutionalises contract labour, etc.

Importantly the Labour Codes are an attack on the workers rights as envisaged in the Constitution. For instance, while the Constitution envisages "living wages", the Codes institutionalise "starvation wages"; the Constitution mandates state policy towards participation of workers in management of industries whereas the Codes institutionalise dictatorship of the employers.

Interestingly Ambedkar, who the Sangh Parivar pays pretentious respect to, had this to say, which has huge relevance!

"In an economic system employing armies of workers, producing goods en masse at regular intervals someone must make rules so that workers will work and the wheels of industry run on. If the State does not do it the private employer will. Life otherwise will become impossible. In other words what is called liberty from the control of the State is another name for

*the dictatorship of the private employer. How to prevent such a thing happening? How to protect the unemployed as well as the employed from being cheated out of their Fundamental Rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness ? The useful remedy ...is to invoke the ordinary power of the Legislature to restrain the more powerful individual from imposing arbitrary restraints on the less powerful in the economic field. It seeks to limit not only the power of Government to impose arbitrary restraints but also of the more powerful individuals or to be more precise to eliminate the possibility of the more powerful having the power to impose arbitrary restraints on the less powerful by withdrawing from the control he has over the economic life of people."*⁵

MANUFACTURING CONSENT FOR HINDUTVA AMONG THE WORKING CLASS

Another plank of attack on the working class is the concerted effort to blunt the revolutionary potential of the working class and simultaneously manufacture consent for Hindutva. It must be understood that the neoliberal project necessarily requires the crushing of the organising and fighting capacity of the working class and their trade unions. This has now coalesced with Hindutva, an ideology that eschews a class-conscious militant working class.

We have reached a stage where a section of workers subscribe to the communal, Manuvadi and fascist political ideas and influence. Studies reveal that, even during the colonial period, sections of the working class were seen to participate in communal violence. Instead of "class consciousness", these sections of workers exhibited some "community consciousness" but this could not deter their unity in working class struggles. Today, however we are faced with a section of workers who are completely persuaded by the ideology of Hindutva.

In no uncertain terms this has been facilitated by an uninterrupted continuity of ideology and

[5] Appendices, States and Minorities

mobilisation of the masses, particularly the working class by the Sangh Parivar. Let's remember that the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) has been engaged in the mobilization of workers under the banner of Hindu nationalism for decades.⁶ Formed in 1955, BMS was established to work among the working class with RSS ideals. It claims that "Bharatiya culture" forms its ideological basis and "that National goal cannot be achieved if there exists any feeling of enmity" and "all the constituents should act and work in unison", which can be achieved by "developing the concept of "family" in the industry." On this basis, BMS outrightly rejects class struggle, and promotes the concept of "industrial family". Comprising more than 5000 affiliate unions It has a membership of almost 1 crore in all States and is the largest central trade union in the country. It has played an instrumental role in blunting workers' class consciousness and manufacturing consent for Hindu nationalism.

Moreover, informalisation and poverty coupled with communal riots in previous decades, and a fascist ideological onslaught now, make workers an easy prey to fascist political influences. Jan Breman while studying the communal riots in Ahmedabad argues that there is "a direct causal relationship between the massive expulsion of labor from the formal sector of the city economy and the eruption of communal violence at the end of the twentieth century."

RESISTING FASCISM

If Hindu Raj does become a fact it will no doubt be the greatest calamity for this country. It is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account it is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost. - Ambedkar

The working class has a history, and the subjective necessity to fight this fascist assault. During the Indian freedom struggle, workers again and again rebuffed divisive communal politics and united to deliver

spirited blows to the colonial powers. Even a fascist Nazi rule faced a fight-back in the form of, what Timothy Mason calls, political resistance of the German working class and workers' opposition.

More recently, we have witnessed the heroic struggle of the farmers, one of the largest protests in independent India. The Union government bulldozed its way in Parliament to pass the 3 anti-farmer pro-corporate laws, yet the unprecedented farmers' movement brought this tyrannical regime to its knees. The Union government, with the media as its mouthpiece, failed despite all possible tricks to demonise and divide the farmers. Indeed it was a defeated Union government that was compelled to finally repeal the farm laws.

The working class has to draw inspiration from this courageous farmers' resistance and mount a spirited resistance to this fascist assault. Militant struggles, without falling into the trap of economism, have to be the guiding norm. The joint central trade union protests and strikes are necessary, but insufficient. To escape the trap of economism, it must be understood that the class question being a social question, class struggle cannot be solely economic struggle and is basically the struggle against all economic and social oppression including class, caste and gender. In particular gender equality and the annihilation of caste must be an integral part of the working class organising and struggles. Fighting communal divisions is a principal task of the working class, not because they divide the working class, but because these are facets of the Indian brand of fascism that spells disaster for the entire country. These are part and parcel of the democratisation that is necessary for any justice to the working class.

As against "communal consciousness", we must strive for real unity of, and fraternity amongst, the working class. Bhagat Singh who saw revolutionary Marxism as the

[6] "Workers and the Right Wing: the Situation in India", Smriti Upadhyay, Johns Hopkins University

answer to communalism, was of the view that: *“To prevent people from fighting each other, “class consciousness” is the need of the day. The poor labourers and the farmers must be clearly taught that their real enemies are the capitalists.”* This can be effectively done by moving beyond the confines of the factory gates, and building the movement of the working class in their localities and as citizens.

Balagopal⁷ said:

The only hope is the resistance that the people have been expressing time and again,

[7]Supra note 2

and their capacity for not only uncontrolled outbursts but also disciplined and organised protest... It would be cheating oneself to believe that the resistance is strong enough to overcome the fascist onslaught; but then it is only by courageously facing the onslaught that resistance can strengthen itself.

Workers, desirous of a life of dignity, have no choice but to fight this assault. Let us draw hope from the struggles against fascism growing across the country.

After all, this is a resistible fascism! ■

RELEVANCE OF COMRADE SHANKAR GUHA NIYOGI'S WORK AND POLITICS FOR THE WORKING CLASS TODAY

★ SUDHA BHARADWAJ

For anyone associated with the working class movement in the state of Chhattisgarh, one cannot but feel a great nostalgia for the militant and creative movement led by the charismatic leader Comrade Shankar Guha Niyogi from 1977 onwards till his assassination in Bhilai on 28th September 1991, at the young age of 48. Comrade Niyogi's journey is associated with the glorious history of Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) and movement of the contractual workers in Bhilai. It has been well reflected in the most comprehensive work on his life and politics - “Sangharsh aur Nirman”

In the present article, I shall concentrate on limited aspects of the movement which I feel have important lessons for the working class today, and hope that I will arouse enough

interest for the reader to delve deeper.

A CENTRE FOR PEOPLE'S POWER, A WORKER-PEASANT ALLIANCE: THE CREATION OF CHHATTISGARH MUKTI MORCHA

The movement Com Niyogi led, arose from the crucible of a militant revolt by around 15,000 contractual mine workers in the captive iron ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant at Dalli Rajhara. These workers had enmasse revolted against the unions of permanent workers led by the INTUC and AITUC and were squatting on strike in the *lal maidan* for 56 days, and finally their leaders went to approach Com Niyogi - just then released from detention under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) after the lifting of the Emergency. Their very first struggle for “*bans balli*” (bamboos for repairing huts after the rains) ended in severe repression and police firing martyring 11 workers in the intervening night of 2nd and 3rd June 1977. The newly

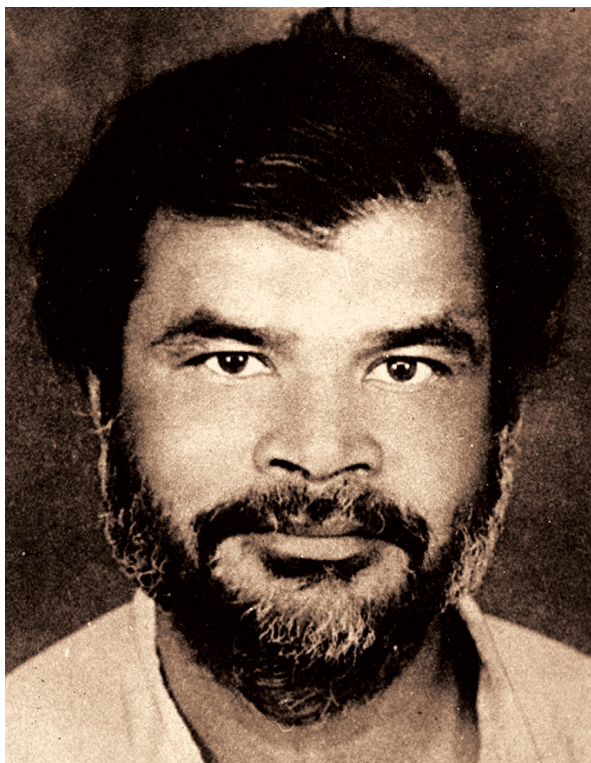
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formed Union - Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh waged relentless struggles from then onwards till, by the late 1980s, the workers became the highest paid contractual iron ore miners in the country, mostly organised into Co-operative Societies.

But more importantly, the new Union had a Red-Green Flag symbolising the Worker-Peasant alliance. Right from its inception, the union and its organisers would respond to the issues of hundreds of adivasi dominated villages of the Dondi-Lohara Tehsil surrounding Dalli Rajhara. These struggles were mostly against the atrocities of the Forest and Revenue Departments. While this concrete solidarity arose from the organic links between the workers in the mines and their peasant families in the surrounding rural areas, it was theorised and built upon. Union organisers would lead peasant movements, and in turn, peasants would flock to Dalli to attend the Shaheed Divas programmes. It was the mass political consciousness that this spawned that became the basis for the formation of the umbrella organisation called the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM).

Comrade Niyogi often used to say that history has had two major engines - class struggle and national liberation movements, and combining both would create a powerful vehicle for change. He conceived of a movement of the Chhattisgarhi nationality in the leadership of the working class. He was aware of the pitfalls of a nationality movement led by the middle class force like the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena which became a chauvinist movement targeting the poor of other nationalities. On the other hand the purpose of the struggle by the CMM was to build a New Democratic Chhattisgarh - a New Chhattisgarh for a New India - which was to be a real federation. The agenda of the working-class-led movement for Chhattisgarh would be to best utilise the rich resources of Chhattisgarh for the betterment of its toiling people, to balance investment in industry with the need for irrigation in agriculture, to forge a solidarity of all toiling people in Chhattisgarh



against the most hated nouveau-riche crony capitalists, to strengthen the positive and democratic aspects of Chhattisgarhi culture while yet promoting a scientific temper and opposing old and regressive traditions of 'witchcraft', caste discrimination, alcoholism and patriarchal practices. The movement tried to popularise the glorious history of struggles of the adivasis, dalits, peasants and workers. It envisioned the need to preserve the immense biodiversity of Chhattisgarh, while adopting scientific methods in agriculture. Com Niyogi defined a Chhattisgarhi as "one who toils in this land and struggles for its future". Thus the question of treating other migrant workers of UP, Bihar etc who were in large numbers in the industrial areas, or the rickshaw pullers, who are mainly Odiyas, as "outsiders" never arose during the movement. In fact, in the Bhilai firing of 1992, of the 17 workers who were martyred in the movement of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha - Keshav Gupta hailed originally from Uttar Pradesh, Aseem Das from Bengal, Lallan Chaudhari from Bihar and Pradeep Kutty from Kerala.

The dream of Naya Chhattisgarh, as articulated in a poem in a CMM poster was “Where all will get drinking water/ Where every field will be irrigated/ Where every hand will get work/ Where the peasant will get a proper price for his crop/ Where every village will have a hospital/ Where there will be a school for every child to study/ Where each one will get land and a house/ Where there will be no poverty, exploitation and capitalism/ When will such a Chhattisgarh be made? When there will be the “Raj” of the workers and peasants in Chhattisgarh/ It is to create such a Chhattisgarh that the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha is struggling!”. The dream of this Naya Chhattisgarh - located somewhere between today’s pure economic struggles and tomorrow’s abstract aim of revolution - something which was already historically and culturally familiar and dear to the people - was the secret of the mass politicisation, and we know regionalism/ federalism is a bulwark against fascism.

The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha office at Dalli Rajhara - centre of a militant working class movement having deep and wide links with the peasantry and embedded in the context of a broader “sub national” movement for a New Democratic Chhattisgarh - became a centre of people’s power, from where solidarity would flow to Bailadila in Bastar, Abhanpur, Baloda Bazar, Rajnandgaon, Hirri (Bilaspur) and Bhilai.

INVERTING THE PYRAMID: THE STRUGGLE OF THE CONTRACTUAL MINERS AGAINST MECHANISATION

When the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh came into existence, the contractual miners were at the bottom of the pyramid of power in Dalli Rajhara. The contractual workers were doubly burdened by exploitative collusion of the district administration, public sector management and contractors on the one hand, and subordination by permanent workers unions on the other. When the Bailadila Mines of the NMDC in Bastar were forcibly mechanised, retrenching and repressing thousands of miners, not only

did the CMSS reach out in solidarity sending a truckful of rice to the beleaguered workers and adivasis of Bailadila, but it simultaneously started a vigorous campaign against the proposed mechanisation of the Dalli Rajhara mines. Unions are not permitted to negotiate issues of the method of production used by an employer. Yet Comrade Niyogi took the help of progressive engineers like AK Roy (Dunu) to work out a plan of “Semi-Mechanisation” and showed this to be a superior alternative in terms of cost and quality efficacy, with no need of retrenchment and great saving of precious foreign exchange. Not only did the Union claim the moral high ground in this manner, it mobilised the truck owners and operators, shop-keepers and traders who would lose their business if transportation was to be carried out by conveyor belt, and if the retrenchment of manual miners was allowed to turn this thriving mining town into a ghost city. Comrade Niyogi made calculations to show how it was the wages of miners which, as purchasing power, was not only circulating in the town’s economy but, more importantly, generating investment in agriculture in the surrounding villages. The united struggle of the residents of Dalli Rajhara and people of the surrounding villages led by the contractual miners resulted in the delay of mechanisation of the mines of Dalli Rajhara by a generation. This “inversion of the pyramid” required the maturity of the working class union to ally with small and medium businesses to resist massive displacement of livelihood. This is a lesson to learn for today’s “underdogs” to lead alliances against the all encompassing profit mongering of big capital.

CREATING AN ALTERNATE HEGEMONIC CULTURE OF THE WORKING CLASS, RESISTING COMMUNAL POLITICS

Comrade Niyogi used to say, our Union is not an 8 hour union but a 24 hour union which touches every aspect of a worker’s life. He would often talk about the dichotomy between the economic life of the worker and her social/ cultural/ political life. Once the CMSS was

formed, 17 departments were formed under it - some thrived and flourished, others withered away. Kisan Vibhag became the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha; Mahila Vibhag after leading a highly successful anti-alcoholism movement became Mahila Mukti Morcha; Swasthya Vibhag was epitomised by first the Shaheed Dispensary run by progressive doctors which has later developed into a unique pro-people hospital with all modern facilities; Bachat Vibhag - whereby miners were taught to save, particularly what they gained from enhanced wages by giving up alcohol and predatory borrowing, resulting in the State Bank of India Branch of Dalli Rajhara receiving a prize for the maximum number of fixed deposits in a rural town; The Shiksha Vibhag set up 11 Schools of which 9 were finally taken over by the Government; Khel Vibhag organised the Shaheed Sudama Football Club which, coached by an enthusiast from Kolkata, won many prestigious tournaments. The Nava Anjor cultural team helmed by miner Phaguram Yadav - a people's bard - would use traditional Chhattisgarhi folk theatre to depict the history of Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh - an adivasi leader of 1857 who fought a guerilla war against the British and was finally hung in public in Raipur. 3rd June Shaheed Divas and Veer Narayan Singh Shaheed Divas became as important to the miners of Dalli Rajhara as any religious festival - the Shaheeds were their "Gods". Families visiting Dalli Rajhara, would inevitably be taken on a tour by the proud miner couple and be shown "our (union) office", "our hospital", and "our Shaheed Stambh" (Memorial to the 3rd June Martyrs). To end the separate over-spending of workers' families during the Durga festival - the Union would organise a collective "Sarvajanik Durga Utsav" - a huge cultural affair with the best fireworks of Dalli Rajhara town. It was thus that Comrade Niyogi instilled pride in the working class that those workers who "create every object in the world through their labour" could also "build a new society of their own."

But the most amazing action of the Union was in 1984 during the Sikh riots. Just after the

news of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi broke out, Comrade Niyogi realised what could follow. The Union made announcements all over the Dondi-Lohara Tehsil in Dalli Rajhara inviting all Sikh families to the Union Office. Dozens of families came from all over Chhattisgarh and camped for days and weeks. The most remarkable aspect of this was, that at the time, some prominent liquor contractors against whom the Union had waged a massive anti-alcohol struggle and who were widely believed to be behind assassination attempts on Niyogi, and a prominent mine contractor against whom a struggle for "fall-back wages" was going on - were all Sikhs. Shunning opportunist politics, the Union took a principled stand that the struggle of the workers could never be used to inflame communal frenzy. Even after Comrade Niyogi's martyrdom in 1992, the Bhilai movement used its influence in Bhilai, in the midst of a life-and-death struggle, to take out peace marches after the Babri Masjid demolition, defying the phoney curfews of the then BJP Government, to maintain communal harmony in the cosmopolitan city. Anti-communalism in action and not just in words became deeply embedded in the psyche of the Union. The slogan coined by Comrade Niyogi in 1991 - "*Mandir-Masjid to ek bahana hai, Mehengai-Berozgari se dhyan hatana hai*" is sadly still too relevant. Thus the CMM movement, which became the go-to place for poor people in all situations, developed a mass political, cultural and social consciousness which was powerful enough to dominate reactionary and communal discourse in its area of influence.

The historic Farmers Movement of 2020-21 also had many of the above elements and taught us all precious lessons. The staying power of the rich farmers of Punjab, the rallying of the entire Punjab society from dalit landless to NRIs behind them; the remarkable maturity shown by 28 farmers organisations of widely differing ideologies to stand united in their year-long struggle, the reaching out to the farmers of Haryana despite long standing water disputes; the efforts that the movement made to assert

greater solidarities - with Rakesh Tikait admitting that the movement in UP had earlier made mistakes in alienating Muslim brethren during the Muzaffarnagar riots; the assertion of women farmers by driving tractors down to the borders and observing Women Farmers Day; and this despite all the repressive tactics used by the Government - these were all pieces of a most remarkable mosaic of struggle.

Today it is the turn of the working class to

fight against the 4 labour codes. It is true that within one week of the lockdown, even by official figures, 1.14 crore workers started walking home. Yet, I feel that in various regions, the organisations of the working class are strong and mature enough to forge solidarities, to come together and force state governments, state labour departments, and local politicians to listen to them, and to ensure that these pro-corporate laws are not enforced. ■

RIISING INFLATION AND EUROPEAN ECONOMY: WORKERS FIGHT BACK!

★ ATANU CHAKRABARTY

Aspectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Strike. Strikes of this scale and dimension, and with such enthusiasm and resoluteness had not appeared in the advanced capitalist countries for past many decades. The organised working class of Europe has chosen the right moment as the neo-liberal economy is on the cusp of deep crisis, unable to find ways and means to come out of this catastrophic situation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), which in last October expected a strong recovery post the pandemic which bruised and battered the global economy, has revised, rather downgraded the growth projections for the year 2023. The IMF chief also warned of increasing recession risks amid constant shocks inflicting the global economy that, as she informed with great dismay, likely stares at an output loss of about \$4 trillion by 2026. She reminded that this "\$ 4 trillion global output loss is of the size of German economy — a massive setback for the world economy."

The highest rates of inflation in four decades are squeezing the common people while the corporations are doing well. It has been noted by the USA's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) that while the wages and other forms of personal incomes continue to fall behind the

inflation, corporate profits have been soaring to newer heights. In a report, BEA recorded that the after-tax corporate profits rose at a 41 percent annual rate after the inflation in the second quarter of the year and have risen at a 17 percent annual pace since the pandemic recession started two years ago. Meanwhile, the inflation-adjusted purchasing power of individuals' after-tax income has fallen for five quarters in a row.

In USA, the Economic policy Institute has shown that increasing corporate profits have contributed disproportionately to inflation. From the second quarter of 2020 to the last quarter of 2021, corporate profits were responsible for 54 percent of overall inflation—a dramatic increase from the 11 percent they accounted for in the previous four decades (1979-2019).

By contrast, unit labour cost were responsible for less than 8 percent of the inflation compared with the 62 percent that it was during the previous decades. Indeed, because of the recent price rise, the real value of federal minimum wage is now at its lowest point in 66 years!

In Spain, Greece, France, Germany and Belgium workers' are demanding higher wages to offset the inflation which in Eurozone had climbed to 8.9 percent in July. Even Germany,





France, October 2022

which was relatively less affected by strikes in the past in comparison to other European countries, is witnessing strikes for higher wage demands. Workers in the transport sector, both in the Netherlands and Germany have been on strike: the railway workers in the Netherlands, and airlines workers in Germany. The situation is going to be worse as winter approaches, as the sanctions against Russia would greatly reduce the supply of oil and natural gas causing a devastating impact on the economy. Stated simply: workers' share of the national pie is shrinking while corporates are grabbing far more than before!

The inflation rate in Britain is at a 40 year high, reaching to 10.1 percent compared to the July of the previous year. This economic crisis has snowballed into political area and within a short span this country has witnessed several changes in the highest political office, and within the ruling party. Britain is currently facing a spate of strikes by railway workers, postal workers and dock workers demanding higher wages to offset the erosion of the purchasing power due to rising inflation. Even lawyers and teachers are not far behind. They are demanding higher salary as inflation is proving difficult to tame,

and is expected to touch 13 percent this year. In the USA also, the share of wages has rapidly diminished because of inflation.

German air carrier Lufthansa, Europe's second largest airline, reached an enhanced pay deal with Verdi Trade Union which would raise salaries for thousands of ground staff. The agreement would increase monthly basic salaries by 2.5 percent beginning in January 2023. Salaries would further increase by another 2.5 percent on July 1 next year. This deal, valid for 18 months will impact some 20,000 Lufthansa ground staff represented by Verdi. The management was forced to negotiate with the union after Lufthansa ground staff's strike paralysed the carrier's operation on July 27, leading to cancellation of over 1,000 flights and stranding passengers. The airline workers of France, Sweden, Norway and Denmark have also resorted to strike demanding higher wages.

Norwegian offshore oil and gas workers went on strike over pay hike in the month of July, and the first day of planned industrial action threatened to slash the country's gas exports by almost 60 percent and further exacerbate the supply shortages caused by the Ukraine war. The Norwegian Government intervened and

pay hike paved the way for amicable settlement with the striking union.

In recent past, Britain has witnessed an unprecedented explosion of industrial action in various sectors, something not witnessed in last many decades. Rail workers across the country, bus drivers, call centre employees as well as criminal defence lawyers in England and Wales are among those who have gone on strike against rising prices and demanding higher pay and secured workplace. The rail strike this summer—the largest in three decades—brought much of the Britain to a standstill. Demands for higher pay amid soaring inflation at 10.1 percent—the highest in 40 years—and 80 percent increase in energy bills have led hundreds of thousands of people in Britain to go on strike, bringing to halt the train services, trash collection and port shipments around the country.

Across the board, the strikers argue that the company's multi- million pound profit last year showed that it could afford to raise wages for workers who feel undervalued after working through the pandemic. The New York Times reported that at the end of August 115,000 postal workers in UK went on strike and letter delivery was cancelled. For over 500 years, mail was part of the state, but Royal Mail group is now fully privatised and its largest shareholder is a Czech billionaire. This unprecedented wave of workers strike was described by the British press as 'summer of discontent' and the issues at the heart of strikes included privatisation of public services and weak pay growth. Added to these were impact of pandemic lockdowns that further gave rise to unimaginable inequalities.

The criminal defence lawyers went for indefinite strike affecting thousands of court trials. The lawyers—members of the Criminal Bar Association—were trying to force the government to increase their fees to prevent an exodus of lawyers from legal aid system. A large body of civil service union is preparing for a strike and similar preparations are undertaken

by several National Health Service workers and teachers' unions.

Workers Union organized a march of 100,000 workers on European Union (EU) Institutions in Brussels. A general strike crippled the busy schedule in Spain. It was organised to protest against the budget slashing plans, and austerity measures adopted by governments seeking to control debt.

Several governments of EU were pushed to the brink of financial collapse and have resorted to imposing punishing cuts in wages, pensions, employment—cuts that have brought workers out in the streets by tens of thousands during the past few months.

In Spain, extremely unpopular measures were adopted by the ruling elite to save Europe's fourth largest economy from a bailout like the one that Greece needed to avoid bankruptcy. By adopting these anti people measures, Spain was able to reduce its deficits, but it had to pay the price as every two out of five workers lost their jobs. The salary cuts, pension reforms, and new laws gave added teeth to the employers to fire workers, and they also curtailed the traditional negotiations between management and workers that constituted a past practise of Europe's welfare states. Greece has cut civil servants' salaries, trimmed pensions and increased consumer and income taxes. The financial crisis has created an unemployment pool of 23 million in Europe.

Street demonstrations have been held across the France and schools and transport services were disrupted by the major strike since Emmanuel Macron won re- election as President in April. Over 100,000 transport workers, school teachers and medical staff marched across French cities after trade unions called for a mass walkout over pay, presenting president Macron with one of the stiffest challenges since his re-election. Primary school teachers stopped work, so did train and bus drivers and nuclear power industry workers. Workers marched in cities across France as unions pushed for salary increase to address the impact of spiralling

inflation and rising prices.

The striking unions demanded for scrapping of Macron's plan to progressively raise the retirement age from 62 to 65. The president's insistence on pushing through the pension system—one of his main re-election campaign pledges—remains broadly unpopular in polls.

The government argues that Macron has approved wage increases for civil servants and teachers, and has put in place one of Europe's most generous anti-inflation safety nets that has capped energy prices for households and held down inflation. However, unions contended that wages were still being eroded by inflation and more needed to be done. The promised salary increase for teachers are not expected until late next year, with confusion surrounding as to which teachers would benefit and by how much.

While the working people across the globe are fighting for better wages and better life, the

United Nations (UN) has warned of a grave food crisis. The Executive Director of the UN World Food Program told the UN Security Council that the 345 million people are facing acute food insecurity across the 82 countries and noted that the world is facing "a global emergency of unprecedented magnitude" with 345 million people heading towards starvation. According to him, 70 million people are pushed closer to starvation due to the war in Ukraine. He further added, "50 million of those people in 45 countries are suffering from very acute malnutrition and are "knocking on famine's door". He remarked, "What was a wave of hunger is now a tsunami of hunger"!

The entire globe is on the cusp of severe economic crisis. Workers movement, people's movement are gaining momentum in different parts of the world. It is the task of the working people to lead the suffering humanity at this juncture. ■

LETTER OF SOLIDARITY

AICCTU STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE WORKERS OF FRANCE & CONGRATULATES THE WORKING CLASS OF FRANCE FOR THEIR MASSIVE STRIKE STRUGGLE

Dear Comrades,

On behalf of the rank and file of All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), we extend our solidarity with the CGT- led strike struggles culminating into 18th October 2022 general strike of workers of various sectors of France against soaring inflation and wage stagnation.

We strongly condemn and oppose the French government's undemocratic, illegal tactics of requisitioning the struggling and striking workers.

Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, we are witnessing an increasing global trend of deep

nexus between governments and corporations to trample hard earned rights of the working class. Under the false flag of economic loss, governments and corporations are spearheading a campaign of wage stagnation and job retrenchment across the world. At the same time, rising inflation and cost of living have left a devastating imprint on the lives and livelihoods of the working people of the world.

In India also, we are witnessing attempts by the far-right Modi government to destroy the rights of the working class and farmers. New labour codes, privatisation of public sector entities and crackdown on people's

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movement by the government in collusion with big private corporations are increasing every day. The united working class movement in India continues to resist the anti-worker moves of government.

The rich and the powerful have turned the crisis of global Covid pandemic to be an opportunity for themselves to push through the implementation of neo liberal reforms at a break-neck speed and for unleashing anti-people measures.

We congratulate the working class of France and rank and files of CGT for the historic strike against the anti-working class policies of President Emmanuel Macron. The strike in France, like many others we are witnessing across the world, will surely inspire more

working class actions.

Ils ne passeront pas ! Yes, they shall not pass! It is the working class and toiling masses who create this world with their labour! The strikes and direct actions across the world are a warning message to the anti-worker forces that any moves that will adversely impact the lives of workers will not be tolerated and fought against.

Long live the Unity of Workers of World

Long live the Unity of Workers of France and India

In Solidarity

(Rajiv Dimri)

General Secretary ■

REPORTS

10TH BIHAR STATE CONFERENCE OF AICCTU HELD AT HAJIPUR

'Halt Price Rise, Give Fair Wages, Ensure Regular Jobs'- these were the central slogans of the 10th Bihar State Conference of AICCTU held on 16th October, 2022 at Hajipur in Vaishali district. The conference was held at a time when, on the one hand, all existing rights of the working class of the country are being done away with the implementation of the four labour codes and on the other, communal hatred is being spread relentlessly to divide the people of the country.

On this occasion, the conference campus was named after Comrade Hari

Singh, the hall was named after Comrade Ganesh Paswan and the stage was named after Comrade Ramkishan. 186 delegates, including 36 women delegates from 20 affiliated unions of AICCTU participated in the conference. The delegates were welcomed in the historically significant district of Vaishali, Bihar by the district president of AICCTU Comrade Umesh Chandra Patel, Secretary Surendra Prasad Singh and Joint Secretary Sangeeta Devi.

The presidium of the conference was constituted by Shyamlal Prasad, SK Sharma, Saroj Choubey, Shivshankar

Prasad and Maksudan Sharma. The conference was conducted by Ranvijay Kumar, Mukesh Mukht and Manoj Kumar Yadav. Comrade Subhendu Sen, National VP of AICCTU was the observer in the conference.

Comrade Rajiv Dimri, National General Secretary of AICCTU inaugurated the conference. In his inaugural speech, he discussed about the present political scenario in the country at length. He said that the working class in India is going through most difficult times today. To counter this offense, our preparation and organisational strength also

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need to be unprecedented.

He said that under the present regime, the working class of India is facing multi faceted attack. From demonetisation to destruction of rights and silencing- the working class is at the receiving end of it all. Today, the working class is faced with the task of challenging the corporate interest led all round privatisation on the one hand and the divisive communal politics of the Modi regime on the other.

In the delegate session of the conference, Comrade RN Thakur, the General Secretary of Bihar AICCTU presented his report on behalf of the outgoing committee. The delegates presented their views on the report and gave several important suggestions. The report of the conference was passed after accepting relevant proposal of changes.

The conference adopted the following tasks-

1. Ensuring 1 lakh membership and 20 district committees within next year.

2. Formation of unions in five new sectors namely domestic worker, courier, contract sanitation worker and vendors.
3. Regular workshops at state and district level.
4. Ensuring consistency in struggles for working class rights.

At the end session of the conference, a state council of 55 members was elected. The council elected an executive of 33 members and office bearer team of 15 members. Comrade Shyamal Prasad was elected as the State President, Comrade Rambali Prasad, Shashi Yadav, Saroj Choubey, Sangeeta Devi, Chandrashekhar Kumar and Maksudan Sharma were elected as the Vice President. Comrade SK Sharma, Surendra Prasad Singh, Ranvijay Kumar, Mukesh Mukht, Manoj Kumar Yadav and Ashok Singh were elected as Joint Secretary. Comrade Rajkumar was elected as treasurer. Comrade RN Thakur was elected as the general secretary of the committee. ■

COIMBATORE SANITATION WORKERS' STRIKE FOR MINIMUM WAGES AND REGULARISATION

★ VENKATACHALAM

Corporation of Coimbatore in Tamilnadu consists of 100 wards. Some 4,000 workers are employed in sanitary work by the corporation. In spite of their service for more than 13 years, sanitation workers are neither regularised nor paid mandatory minimum wages. They are being paid with Rs. 333 as daily wages for the last four years

without any hike.

Even the Tamilnadu government has not paid the announced incentive for their contribution during COVID-19. The minimum wages announced 5 years ago, i.e., in 2017, by Government of Tamilnadu also has not been implemented since then. In the meantime, the



District Collector of Coimbatore declared Rs. 721 as minimum wages for sanitary workers in July 2022 (now popular as 'Collector Rate of Wages'). There were struggles independently by various trade unions for the implementation of the collector rate of wages, but in vain. So, it was decided to form a Joint Action Committee (JAC) of all trade unions and AICCTU was part of it. In a way, our pamphlet explaining Karnataka sanitation workers' strike for regularisation and its successful experience was also an inspiration for such a move in Coimbatore. Unfortunately, CITU and another organisation of DMK alliance refused to join the strike. They also indulged in actions in support of the government.

The JAC decided to go for an indefinite strike from October 2nd with a 16-point charter, including regularisation, equal pay for equal work, collector rate of minimum wages, etc. It was also decided to rope in sanitation workers of municipalities, town panchayats and gram panchayats.

Two bi-partite meetings convened by the officials of the Corporation could not clinch any issue and strike began as decided by the JAC on October 2nd. Striking workers were threatened by the corporation administration, by the contractors and also by husbands of elected women councillors. Their intention was to break the unprecedented unity of workers. But, workers stood firm and continued the strike.

On the first day of the strike itself, thousands of workers gathered in front of the Collector's office. October 2nd, being the day of Gandhi Jayanti, workers marched to garland the Gandhi statue in the city. To draw attention of the administration and as a form of a symbolic protest, a petition was also given to the statue of Gandhi.

On the second day, i.e., October 3rd, workers gathered before the collectorate en masse for a peaceful protest. But the police swung into action, started arresting all leaders and workers defying Supreme Court directions regarding industrial disputes. The police had to backtrack at some point because of large mobilisation of



workers.

Subsequently, negotiations were held before the District Collector. But, workers refused to participate, demanding release of arrested leaders and workers. As the pressure mounted, arrested leaders and workers were released to facilitate negotiation. Even though there was no amicable settlement during the negotiation with the District Collector, a written statement to pacify striking workers was released by the collector's office.

As a show of solidarity with striking workers, a 7-member AICCTU team from Karnataka, including Comrade Clifton, national secretary AICCTU, and Comrade Nirmala, NEC member, visited Coimbatore and addressed the striking workers. Comrade Clifton elaborated on the experience of 5-day strike by the Karnataka sanitary workers which forced the ruling BJP government to concede their demand for regularisation. He also stressed on the issue of dignity of sanitary workers in the society.

On the 3rd day of strike, workers gathered in thousands and blocked the road successfully, thus ensuring that negotiations took place. During the negotiation convened by the Corporation

Commissioner and the Mayor, AICCTU, represented by Bala Subramaniam, state vice-president and Santhanam, state committee member, effectively articulated the demands of workers.

At the end of the meeting, a written assurance was given by the administration assuring Collector Rate of Wages of Rs. 721 after passing a resolution in the Corporation Council meeting to that effect. The administration also assured that the striking workers would not be harassed or victimised for taking part in the strike. The JAC decided to temporarily withdraw the strike based on such an assurance from the administration.

The Corporation also announced Rs. 3,750 as Deepavali bonus on the eve of strike aiming at luring workers to avoid the strike.

AICCTU protested the move to announce a bonus much less than mandatory minimum bonus and instead, demanded a bonus of twenty per cent. Hence, the Corporation administration withdrew its announcement in the course of negotiations and assured to call for a fresh negotiation on the subject which was accepted by the JAC.

Despite huge political and ideological differences among various unions of the JAC, the workers displayed exemplary spirit of unity that formed the basis for the success in the first phase of a long struggle of workers for regularisation and minimum wages.

Unlike other unions, AICCTU categorically stated that the government is responsible for the continuance of inhuman contract system and corrupt practices. AICCTU was

consistent that the struggle for decent wages and dignity of sanitation workers is to be waged against the government and not only against any individual contractors or so. Unfortunately, the plight of workers continues unchanged under the DMK government which had promised regularisation of contract workers with 10 years of service, but ignored the promise.

AICCTU is determined to continue its struggle until the contract system for sanitation work is put to an end, for regularisation of their services and payment of equal wages for equal work. The historic struggle and the strike by sanitation workers of Coimbatore can very well turn into a state-level movement of sanitation workers and the days are not too far. ■

ASHA WORKERS' AGITATION INTENSIFIES IN UTTAR PRADESH

★ MD AFROZ ALAM

Uttar Pradesh ASHA Workers Union (affiliated to AICCTU) has concluded its 9-month-long strike at the National Health Mission district office by organising the 'Dastak Do' programme.

District level protests and a Mahapadav in the state capital Lucknow were held as per resolutions passed in the state convention held on May 15, 2022. After that a week of resistance was observed by ASHA workers tying black

ribbons while working on their duties. Dhikkar Diwas was observed statewide on September 27 and 28, followed by demonstrations on October 17, 18 and 19 in various district offices with the charter of demands of ASHA workers. The main demands included the construction of a mechanism to end corruption, guaranteeing minimum wages and providing life insurance of at least Rs 10 lakh to 50 lakh. Demand to include provisions like paid leave for mothers and weekly and annual holidays for all ASHA workers were

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also raised. Other major demands included compensation for families of ASHA workers who lost their lives in accidents and recognition of ASHA workers as state government employees.

The consistent movement of ASHA workers have been defying the terror machinery of the Yogi government. It continues with extensive mobilisation and expansion, maintaining its total energy and enthusiasm from start to end. More than 70,000 ASHA workers participated in various stages of the agitation, which began in five districts and spread to more than 40 districts across the state from June 6 to October 19, 2022. Districts like Bareilly, Hathras, Aligarh, Hardoi, Pilibhit, Gorakhpur, Deoria, Kushinagar, Rae Bareilly, Allahabad, Basti, Mau, Varanasi, Barabanki, Kanpur, Hamirpur, Lakhimpur, Badaun and Unnao became the centres of

significant mobilisation.

During this period, the state apparatus, the health department, several NGOs which have thrived under government protection tried to weaken, break up and thwart the movement. The Yogi government attempted to stop the protests by imposing Article 144, arrests, lathi charges, threats of dismissal, etc.

This 6 month long movement of the ASHA workers have raised fundamental questions concerning the working condition of the ASHAs. At the same time, the movement has generated an energy that has resulted in the emergence of a new leadership. This leadership is not only building up and expanding the organisation but also making the ASHA workers conscious about the anti-working class and anti-women policies of the Yogi government. ■





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