

India: Nation-wide Strike on 20-21 February 2013

by Sharit Bhowmik

All trade union centres in India have decided to organise a two-day strike on 20-21 February 2013. The trade unions have 10 demands that constitute the major problems facing the working class. What is significant is that all trade unions have come together to fight for the rights of labour. This itself is a significant advance for the working class in the country that is badly divided. Let us examine the situation as it exists.

Trade unions are the main organisations that could counter the government's anti-worker, anti-employment policies. Unfortunately the labour movement is fractured as workers are divided into a huge number of trade unions. Apart from the 11 trade union centres there are hundreds of thousands of trade unions, most of whom are fighting each other rather than tackling problems with employers or the state.

Issues before the labour movement

The problem with the labour movement is not merely that of the multiple trade unions but it is also that most of the unions are appendages of political parties. This seriously affects their independence. Unions aligned to the ruling party become less assertive in putting forth the demands of their members. For example, there have been attempts in the past to unify the diverse trade unions for united action against certain policies of the ruling Congress government but the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress Party never joined in the protests. In fact INTUC was the largest trade union at the time when structural adjustment policies were introduced but it remained silent. Similarly when the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government was in power the Bharatiya Mazdur Sangh (BMS), which became the largest trade union at that time, refused to question the policies of the government. There have been noticeable changes during the last few years as INTUC and BMS have decided to form a common front. Other trade unions such as those of regional parties, some of whom were averse to joining hands with left trade unions, have also agreed to join the front.

Over the years there has been a rapid increase in informal employment the pace of which increased after 1991. At present informal employment comprises 93% of the total employment of 470 million in the country while formal employment comprises a mere 7%. The trade unions operate mainly among formal sector workers. The informal workers are largely unorganised. There are very few unions that want to union-

ise these workers. A major exception is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) which is the largest union of informal workers. By the strength of its membership and its presence in different states of the country it has been recognised as a trade union centre and is also a member of ITUC (along with Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and INTUC). Other trade unions have realised the importance of organising informal labour.

Main demands

Of the ten demands put up at least six of them relate to problems of informal workers. These are: a national floor wage of Rs. 10,000 per month, the removal of contract labour and in the meantime contract workers should receive the same wages and facilities as permanent workers, the compulsory recognition of trade unions by management within 45 days of application, retirement benefits for all workers, pension for all workers and social security cover for informal workers.

The existence of casual and contract labour in large companies has reached wide-ranging proportions. Contract workers are not directly employed by the companies to which they provide labour. They are employees of labour contractors who are appointed by these companies. These workers work alongside the permanent workers doing exactly the same type of work, but they are paid one-third (or less) of the wages paid to permanent workers. Hence it is quite common to find that permanent workers constitute only 30% of the workforce in companies while the rest is contract labour. Most of the automobile manufacturing companies function in this manner. Offices too have contractors employing security guards and even white collar employees.

Wages in the informal sector are not regulated and are very low. By insisting on wage floor the unions hope to uplift the conditions of these workers. However the minimum wage demanded is actually quite low for urban areas. A needs-based minimum wage that would fulfil the minimum needs of a family would have to be at least 50% higher. Unionisation is difficult as these workers do not have the security of employment nor do they have any post-retirement benefits. Compulsory recognition of unions would imply that the employers have to accept

the existence of trade unions as negotiating bodies.

The other demands include curbing rising costs, growing unemployment, the implementation of labour laws and stopping the privatisation of the public sector.

Will the strike solve the main problems of labour?

Given the fact that the trade unions are divided on most issues, uniting for this strike could be seen as a progressive step. However there are several issues involved. The most important is, can such a movement be sustainable? Do trade unions of different hues come together to protest on a given day/s and then return to their sectarian practices? If one looks at the strike from this perspective it will appear as a ritual, in fact an annual ritual. Such representations of unity are not new as they have happened in the past but with little effect on the labour movement.

The first such instance took place in 2011 when around 500,000 workers representing all the centres (including INTUC and BMS, the former is close to the ruling Congress Party and the latter to the main opposition party, Bharatiya Janata Party) had a demonstration in Delhi to press for similar demands. The leaders submitted their demands to the Prime Minister who assured them that he would discuss the issues in detail with them shortly. This whole episode went unnoticed. The press in India did not report this (although the BBC and CNN gave it wide coverage). Two years have passed and the Prime Minister has yet to invite labour leaders for talks on the demands put up.

The next year, the united front of trade unions decided to change their tactics. They announced that there would be a nation-wide strike on 28 February 2012. This strike did invite press coverage because the unions of bank employees joined the strike and the financial sector in the country was at a stand-still. However besides this achievement the strike achieved nothing else. In this case too the government was not willing to discuss the issues raised or it gave vague assurances for some of them. Hence it seems unlikely that this two-day strike will have the desired effect on the government because while the strike can be used to showcase working class unity, will this last beyond these two days? Had this been a sustainable and continuous struggle it could bear fruits, but tokenism cannot achieve anything positive.

Learning from the past

The trade union movement in India started as a united movement with the founding of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) on 31 October 1920. This union comprised all shades of politics including the communists, the Congress and other independent trade unionists. AITUC faced a crisis in 1929 when the colonial government appointed the

Royal Commission on Labour in India. In its conference in Calcutta in that year, a majority supported the line that trade unions should boycott the commission. A section felt that trade unions must cooperate with the commission as labour may benefit by its recommendations. The majority view prevailed, but the minority broke away to form another trade union centre called Indian Labour Federation. In the following year (1930) the communists broke away on a political issue and formed the Red Flag Trade Union Federation. However the crisis caused by the Great Depression and the subsequent rise in prices affected the working class the most. The splinter unions decided that to confront these problems labour must be united and they rejoined AITUC in 1935. The trade union movement was united till the eve of independence in 1947.

A few months before independence from British rule the Congress Party decided to form its own union because AITUC had come under the control of the communists. The INTUC was formed in May 1947 and subsequently this led to further splits. In 1948 the socialists/ social democrats broke away from INTUC to form a 'non Congress, non-Communist union' named HMS (Indian Workers' Union) and similarly other political bodies decided to either break away from the existing unions or form their own unions. This not only led to the proliferation of unions but also to linking unions to political parties. While it is true that most trade unions in the world have links with political parties, the difference with India is that political parties run trade unions and the latter can rarely take an independent stand without the backing of its parent political party.

The reason for drawing on the past was to show that the trade union movement had its share of splits but it united at a time of a major economic crisis on order to protect the interests of labour. This has not happened now. The irony is that all 11 national centres have increased their membership by three to five times since 2002, but this has not increased the effectiveness of the movement. Invisibility of labour today is mainly because of the infighting among trade unionists. The government and the employers know that such a movement is incapable of challenging its policies on a sustained basis.

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