

The Next Step?

It all came out the way it was supposed to. The Left showed the Manmohan singh Government it could organize one more general strike, rather industrial strike shorn of rocking the leaky boat called United Progressive Alliance (UPA). One more nationwide ritualistic strike and one more demonstration of hypocrisy by the official communists of India. With the Centre pursuing neo-liberal policies vigorously much is at stake for the so-called communist outfits as the steady erosion of their traditional constituency–labour–seems irreversible, despite periodic hue and cry about threat to economic sovereignty. The revolution these days means “communists in government”. They talk about capital, global capital as unfolding in globalised economic culture without feeling any urgency to return to Marx’s Capital. What they practise in the name of marxism invariably turns out to be the violation of the Marxism of Marx.

No doubt labour organising as permitted by the existing laws of the country has become increasingly difficult because of minimal state intervention. But the lack of projection of an alternative to global offensive by multinational capital and global institutions that support the offensive is taking a terrible toll on the left movement as a whole. A general strike a year is no answer to the ensuing crisis. The organisers of the strike comprising some 56 state and national level left-oriented mass organisations representing toilers’ interests are in reality tailending or responding to spontaneity. In truth they are opposing neo-liberal policies of the Congress-led UPA Government for the sake of opposition. If they cannot implement the common minimum programme guaranteeing some safeguards for the wage earners, they can always implement the common minimum programme of opposition, to keep the aggrieved and affected in good humour.

The 16-point charter of demands that produced the December 14 general strike, has been in the air for long. They protested against outsourcing and increasing foreign direct investment in banking and insurance in the yester years and it is quite likely next year they would again resort to tokenism only to tell the people that the situation has worsened further. Their ritualistic strike without affecting the strategic partnership with the political right has become a symbol of their identity rather than an essential tool to reach the goal. One of the demands emphasised the importance of framing a law for the unorganised sector workers. But they have themselves exempted the IT sector–the most unorganised sector in the country–from any kind of trade union organising, not to speak of strike, in the left-ruled states. This double standard won’t sell for long. In terms of labour rights ‘cyber coolies’ as they are popularly called these days, are no better than railway coolies. Even in the 21st century they cannot think of eight-hour working day.

Casualisation of labour even in the most unorganised sector started long before the emergence of WTO and, yet the parties on the left failed to fight rampant contractual practice. Farming out–or what is now euphemistically called outsourcing–has been a regular feature in the Indian manufacturing sector since the 1970s and 1980s. In recent years it has assumed gigantic proportions as corporations, domestic and foreign, face less organised opposition than ever before and have no obligation to government.

The rapid expansion of informal sector coupled with steady shrinkage of rural employment—the shock-absorber for the vast army of rural unemployed—demands sustained campaign against the new economic order scripted by the IMF-World Bank combine. These days no industrial strike can reveal the depth of crisis without organising simultaneous boycott-protest against IMF and World Bank.

Strike or no strike, the Centre is determined to enact a comprehensive labour law curtailing labour's bargaining power beyond recognition, to please the corporate world. Their opposition to this proposed law which has been in the making for at least a decade, is so half-hearted that nothing tangible will emerge from this exercise in escapism. Strictly speaking the proposed Act has been reportedly modelled after Japanese labour-management practices and it will certainly legalise illegal activities of corporations, big and small.

Labour aristocracy nursed by a section of the left, particularly in banking and insurance business is no less responsible for the impotence shown by the organised sector workers today.

Partial approaches cannot give hope of access to work and decent income and job security for men and women in a shrinking labour market. To combat the prevailing situation, a multi-pronged strategy is required which again demands a high degree of political determination and commitment. But the official left lacks it and the far left looks too confused to overcome ideological wilderness. ~~///~~