

J U T E S T R I K E

DESPITE SERIOUS CHALLENGES posed by neo-liberalism notoriously manifesting in massive informalisation and casualisation of work and drastic changes in labour relations laws favouring employers, traditional trade unionism continues to have a strong appeal as an instrument and symbol for industrial democracy. The problem is that the so-called representatives of workers themselves look reluctant to face the reality and are highly concerned about their ability to cope with the situation. They had it so far so long that when neo-liberal offensive coupled with West-backed de-industrialisation started to pounce, they had no idea what to do or how to do it. Even the marxist left seems to have decided not to stubbornly bargain for working class. In truth they are now on the opposite side of the bargaining table at it is the case in the left-ruled states.

About 2,50,000 jute workers have been on strike for more than two months to protest against millowners' unfair labour practice and refusal to negotiate on their long-standing just demands of wage-revision, particularly restructuring of dearness allowance, long overdue. The age-old practice of tripartite settlement in this most labour-intensive industry in eastern India has lost its relevance because jute barons are above law. Millowners are PF defaulters. They do not pay gratuity to workers. And yet the government cannot raise its finger against them. The CPM-led left front government looks disinterested in intervening in the dispute for an affirmative action though livelihood of some 10,00,000 people is directly involved in it. Also jute growers suffer enormously as they are being forced to resort to distress sale because of stoppage of production. After all this is basically an agro-industry.

Central Trade Unions affiliated to all major political parties, actually chose an inopportune moment to pressurise the industry. Original managerial structure of jute industry has been totally obliterated over the years through systematic farming out and engaging a host of middlemen to bypass laws and statutory obligations. Sometimes it becomes difficult to locate the original owner of a mill.

The owners are opposed to modernisation as it may curtail their control over the industry. Nor do they themselves take any initiative to revive the industry at a time when green movement has opened the possibility of extensive utilisation of jute products throughout the world. Instead, they siphon money from "ailing" mills and invest it clandestinely in areas other than jute, particularly cement and chemicals.

While the ruling marxists of Bengal are jubilant as their Indonesian darling Salim Group has got the Centre's nod in real estate and SEZ business, they are simply evading the issue of their own constituency—workers. Collective bargaining in this part of the globe is yet to stand on its own feet. In other words state intervention remains the principal form of labour-capital conflict resolution. But the state authorities these days are too busy to woo the industrialists, not the workers.

Unlike tea garden workers, starvation deaths among jute workers, mainly hailing from Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, are not so rampant yet. But the situation seems to be worsening with every passing day. And the political left is no more than a passive on-looker. They have no time to think over the plight of jute workers. ~~del del del~~