

THE OTHER SIDE

May Day. Every day. May day is a worldwide celebration of working class solidarity and, yet it has lost much of its international significance to the toilers of India in recent years. Today labour is caught up in the swirl of rightist onslaught and leftist betrayal. It's a celebration in contrasts. It's both an occasion for struggle and the thought of struggle. And yet nothing crosses the boundary of rhetoric. All cling to ritual only to see ritual gets popularised. They insist on continuing the ritual for workers' rights and ignore the very rights which are being violated in dozens of ways almost everyday. They always say 'there is a better day ahead' while doing nothing to usher in the day. In truth they do just the opposite in practice to defeat the very purpose of their much publicised ritual. No doubt they protest but they do not protest to end the dehumanised life of labour. They ask workers to take neo-liberalism and its disastrous consequences as fait accompli. They—all central labour unions irrespective of their colour and affiliation—have been nursing a sense of hopelessness even among the organised since the 1980s that nobody thinks a better day is coming anytime soon. Labour militancy is a thing of the past. With gradual decline of labour power what gets further strengthened is labour aristocracy.

For the leftists May Day was a bit embarrassing this year as they could hardly champion the 8-hour working day and international working class solidarity. These people—official communists and left-leaning social-democrats with various brand names—are politically and ideologically in trouble to defend the spirit of May Day as they are more interested in creating SEZ where no labour right exists. Investors in SEZ—Special Economic Zones—are allowed to fix arbitrary working hours, back-breaking work-load, low-wage and all that in their own way in violation of laws of the land. For the marxist left, it is simply hypocritical to talk about 8-hour working day because their idea of 'industrialisation' through SEZ means return of medieval industrial culture in which workers are not treated as human beings. SEZ means new colonial bondage and end of May Day but official communists continue to derive comfort from the legacy of Hay market.

The gradual erosion of labour's bargaining power even in the organised sector began even before the advent of the first phase of 'reforms' and restructuring in the 1980s because of labour aristocracy nursed and pursued by all central trade unions. They never fought beyond their sectarian interests while ignoring the possibility of broader toiling class unity and allowing informal sector to flourish mainly depending on unorganised labour whose working calendar does not include May Day.

Casualisation of labour and out-sourcing of job began even before people heard anything about globalisation and neo-liberalism right in the 1970s when the economy was under severe crisis. And organised sector unions who now cannot protect their limited rights and curtailed social security did not really bother about the impending disaster. They thought being the privileged lot among wage-earners, they would enjoy privileges eternally, they were happy with their dearness allowance and bonus. Their safe world, rather segregated world is now crumbling. Their occasional protest agitation otherwise harmless, not affecting production, seem too inadequate to create any impact on the economy. Organised sector labour unions are no less responsible in keeping unorganised sector workers unorganised and un-unionised. And now they are paying the price for sectarianism and labour aristocracy which they love so much.

Tragically, for a vast number of migrant workers May Day makes no sense at all as they are being forced to toil under severe oppressive conditions in agriculture as also in tertiary sector. Officially bonded labour system stands abolished with effect from 25 October, 1975 with the enactment of Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976. But in practice freed labour has not been properly rehabilitated. In other words unofficially bonded labour continues to thrive in the form of migrant labour. They are so vulnerable to alien and hostile environment in which they toil that hopelessness is all that they can think of. Economy in many parts of the country may collapse without migrant labour, even agrarian economy in many capitalistically developed states depends mainly on migrant labour. The massive inflow of foreign capital has not led to disappearance of 'unfree' labour, it has in fact introduced and stabilised bonded labour practice in disguise. □