

It's All About Inaction

Anyone concerned about the history of Indian Labour movement knows well why more laws cannot work. It's all about inaction. It sounds ludicrous when the persons in authority talk about labour laws for new employment in an environment in which labour finds it increasingly difficult to protect their hard-earned rights, not withstanding dozens of labour laws framed against the backdrop of World War II economy. While addressing the 41st session of Indian Labour Conference, otherwise described as 'Labour Parliament of India', Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated his pet theme of Chinese model of modernisation. But what he failed to convey to the gathering of labour unions, employers and government representatives that the so-called Chinese miracle came with tears because of brutal suppression of labour rights. Trade unionism is a luxury in Chinese industrial culture and Chinese workers are unlucky in the sense that they do not enjoy even universally recognised standard working rights.

The Singh government's intention to frame a new labour policy involving all dealing with labour, apparently to improve the lot of workers, seems too clever by half. Their dialogue with central trade unions controlled by major political parties who rule the country and run the show of democracy does not mean much in the real world of industrial production and labour relations as central trade unions too, irrespective of their party affiliation are part of the system that continually designs devices under one plea or another to deceive employees while allowing employers to violate labour laws with impunity.

Labour laws other than the Industrial Disputes Act are likely to go into oblivion as 'experts' think they generate 'inspector raj' which is detrimental to industrial production. But the Prime Minister did not utter a word or two why laws failed in the first place to protect workers from being marginalised and vulnerable over the years.

Unlike labour unions in the West Indian trade unions used to depend heavily on state intervention in the early years as a way out to improve its bargaining power because of labour's backward consciousness. Things are no different today despite so many political cross-currents workers pass through. But the state has been withdrawing from conflict-resolution for long allowing employers to indulge in *lessez faire* culture. Despite the existence of so many social security clauses in so many laws, workers do hardly get full statutory benefits after retirement. Framing law is one thing and its implementation is quite another. Under neo-liberal regime employers want to get rid of whatever remains of labour welfarism and Dr Manmohan Singh has no option but to oblige them, Indian labour parliament or no parliament.

Ironically despite more than eight decades of organised trade union movement majority of workers continue to toil under the sway of political right, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the trade union wing of Bharatiya Janata Party having the dubious distinction of being called the largest trade union. Also, any kind of legitimate protest movement is stigmatised as labour militancy. But illegal suspension of work with scant regard for the laws of the land is not regarded as 'employer militancy'. At the national level the left cuts a sorry figure to make their presence felt among wage earners. In practice, there is hardly any difference between left trade unions and right trade unions. As a result workers do find little interest in swelling the ranks of left unions. Also, industrialists in India never tolerate the development of genuine left trade unionism beyond a certain point as it happened in Chattisgarh where Shankar Guha Niyogi was eliminated because of his refusal to betray labour.

Today left unions are equally anti-labour like their rightist counterparts. Communists like their anti-communist ruling chiques have earned notoriety in extending their influence among organised sector workers by bluntly using government office, particularly in states where they are in power. They too pursue opportunism as a strategy and never ask labour to stand in solidarity

with other segments of toilers, particularly rural wage labourers and unorganised millions in informal sector.

As for the communist left the issue of worker-peasant alliance seems more farcical than ever before, particularly after the Nandigram carnage. Solidarity movement developing in the wake of 'Nandigram' is due to forceful intervention by civic society comprising mainly middleclass people. All are busy to spread their influence without challenging the status quo and the existing framework of labour organising that has no future. The net outcome of the 41st session of Indian Labour Conference may be a firm resolve to convene yet another conference not in the distant future. □□□