

The Migrant Question

Naxalism is dead, Long live Naxalism. The issue is not how to change government policy toward naxalites. The issue is how to keep the downtrodden away from the sway of Naxalites. The Indian Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour is likely to advise the Union Ministry of Labour to recognise the right to trade union for the unorganised as its absence 'might give rise to naxalite activities'. At a time when all are out to curb labour rights even for the organised sector workers government's own institution justifies right to union, thanks to 'naxalite menace'.

It is unlikely for the Union Government to grant trade union rights to the unorganised sector otherwise dominated in a major way by migrant workers. Unorganised sector is expanding very fast because of outsourcing and farming out of perennial nature of jobs. Despite repeated racial and communal violence against migrants in different countries, in today's world, no economy, advanced or backward can really flourish without migrant workers. India is not a land of opportunities, rather a land of despair, plagued by caste riots, communal riots and dozens of sub-nationalisms sprouting up every now and then out of frustration and middle class articulation. And yet migrant workers from neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal are making their presence felt in the informal sector of the economy, almost in every state, particularly in North India.

It's a paradoxical situation as despite massive unemployment and rural displacement, certain areas of the economy face labour shortage, desperately needing the help of migrant labour. Labour migration is a global issue though globalisation has not made migration easier. Nor do migrant workers are given any reasonable status to work in their host countries. They are treated as aliens, having no legal rights, not to speak of trade union rights and in most cases toil under naked discrimination. Even the conservatives in the West have to admit the hard fact that most industrialised economies would be significantly compromised, if not crippled, without the involvement of a strong migrant workforce.

That the British economy and its public services would collapse without immigrants who have entered the country illegally, gets wide currency these days. 'New demand for housing generated by immigrants has been decisive in sustaining the construction industry boom in Spain'. Thus observed the *Financial Times*, last year.

There are about 86 million migrant workers working mostly in abusive working conditions, in the world today, with huge amounts they transfer 'back home' and in a way they keep a currency exchange market thriving transacting US\$ 160 billion a year. Only oil revenues do better globally in currency transfer business.

Migrants actually fill vital jobs unwanted by natives and their activities create additional employment without placing any burden on the host country. And yet their contribution to the economy of the host country is underestimated or even denied, both nationally and internationally.

Industrialised North cannot maintain their industrial growth even at the present level without migrant labour. Germany, France, UK and Italy are said to be requiring a total of 700,000 immigrants each year rather than the 230,000 they receive now. Even Russia, otherwise a latecomer in imperial capitalist circuit, is already home to the second largest number of migrants, mostly from East Europe, after the United States.

What is intriguing is the way migrants are treated worldwide—India is no exception—
notwithstanding their permanent importance in the economy. ILO apart, even ICFTU—
the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions—that operates in 137 countries,
notes with growing concern that migrants are vulnerable to violations of union rights
and rights at work. In the absence of communist WFTU—World Federation of Trade
Unions—migrants have no real international platform to air their grievances.

The Indian Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour has raised a vital issue
without really suggesting a solution to the core problem—labour migration within
national boundaries and beyond international borders. □□□