

Battling for Labour

Organised or unorganized, nothing is moving. Labour is the least talked about subject in political discourse these days. Then there are orthodox marxists who never get tired to cling to old tradition while refusing to reconcile themselves with the fast changing reality. Maybe they are pinning too much hope on the “sleeping giant of organised labour”, albeit no such giant exists anywhere around. As things are India’s demographic pattern doesn’t match its current industrial structure which in turn makes labour organising no less difficult. This is the cyber era and in cyber shops white collar toilers who are at worst ‘cyber slaves’ do not know whether there is really a world of eight-hour working day. And the idea of unionism is almost alien to the young generation of job seekers, they have erroneous understanding about ‘class against class politics’.

The policy of hire and fire at sweet will seems to have destroyed the basic principles of trade unionism that the labour movement succeeded at least partially in establishing even at the grassroots level through arduous struggle over the decades. An injury to one is an injury to all, equality for all and solidarity against management onslaught—workers and their trade unions no longer think in terms of these basic principles.

Right now labour scenario, rather a universal scenario, looks more paradoxical than ever before. While young migrants do not find gainful employment in any corner of the country, labour shortage, particularly in the skilled category, hits most manufacturing and service sector industries. Unlike China, India invests very little in improving the education resources and creating a pool of skilled hands in the countryside from where most migrant workers hail. Despite reasonable growth whatever it means and selective industrialisation, formal employment has staggered and even paid employment in general has fallen as a share of total employment. Informal sector including what is called self-employment is the main shock-absorber for the growing army of job hunters, rather migrants, whether the pattern of high aggregate growth with inadequate or poor employment generation can sustain itself, is open to question.

Formal or informal, the most disturbing trend in job market is the systematic decline of real wages. The meagre rise in wages and that too after hard bargaining, even in the labour-intensive organised sector becomes irrelevant even within a year because of continuing inflationary pressure that affects ordinary wage earners most. Only the other day a premier tea company boasted of clinching a wage agreement with its workers represented by all central trade unions by stating in no uncertain terms that they were generous enough to increase daily wage by Rs 23 to Rs 90 for pluckers. All this in a situation of chronic food inflation that troubles crisis managers at all levels.

As for working women in India’s informal sector the less said the better. Women working as domestic hands numbered more than three million in 2004-05—the latest data is not available—and accounted for more than 12 percent of all women workers in urban India. If everything goes on schedule International Labour Organisation might convene a meeting this year to adopt a comprehensive standard for domestic workers all over the world as per resolutions made by the standard-setting committee on domestic workers, after 21 sittings during the 99th session of the International Labour Conference in June 2010. Whatever be the form of the new instrument—ILO convention or ILO Recommendation—international recognition of domestic work is now a fact of life. But governments, particularly third world governments, including Indian government, that generally ratify ILO conventions, do hardly implement them, thus denying legitimate benefits to labour.

One area that has remained grossly unaddressed by the labour movement is migrant labour. Today labour migration is an international phenomenon. Migration takes place nationally and internationally and yet international labour federations—that in most cases serve as the safety valves for multinational employers, simply evade the issue, as if it doesn't exist. In recent years most of 240 million Chinese farmers have become migrant workers in factories and processing units in industrially advanced eastern and western regions. China's engine of growth will stop if migrants withdraw labour. Faced with the prospects of acute labour shortage the government controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions, had no option but to fight for reasonable wages for workers and then succeeded in getting a 10 percent hike in wages. It is not really the case in India as migrant workers in different states find it difficult to have subsistence wages, not to speak of decent wages. With an unprecedented surge in inter-state labour migration, particularly to emerging new industrial hubs, a process of land alienation has started in some eastern states, particularly in Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand. Paucity of agricultural land as many small peasants would like to abandon agriculture in favour of small fisheries, to cope with shortage of traditional farm hands and rising costs of inputs, seems to be swelling the ranks of migrants in leaps and bounds.

Unless the message of May reaches the multitudes of migrant workforce that is now propelling India's growth syndrome, stagnated labour movement, otherwise dominated by labour aristocrats with loyalty to different political outfits, is likely to get further marginalised. Marking a ritual may have some historical value but battling for ritual won't deliver if it is not backed by a definite goal to reach. □□□