

Independent TU Initiative

## Gorakhpur Workers Win

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*[Dismissed workers taken back, factory owners buckle under pressure—Locked out mills to start production from June 3]*

Workers in Gorakhpur achieved a major victory in their struggle when the factory owners agreed to start the two locked out mills from June 3 and take back the dismissed workers. 12 of the 18 workers will join work immediately and the remaining 6 will be taken back after a domestic enquiry. The workers also forced the owners to accept that no one from the management will be in the enquiry committee; it will have two members from the office staff and one workers' nominee. The decision was taken at negotiations held till late night at the district magistrate's residence. The two owners of the VN Dyers and Processors yarn mill and textile mill, the district magistrate and deputy labour commissioner and seven workers' representatives were present at the meeting.

These two mills in the Bargadwa area of Gorakhpur were illegally locked out since April 10. Around 500 workers work in both of these mills owned by the Ajitsaria family having an annual turnover of more than 150 crores. 18 workers of these two mills were dismissed by the owners. The workers were agitating for reinstatement of their colleagues and restarting the factories.

Their movement took a new turn when around 1500 workers from several factories in Bargadwa and GIDA industrial areas went to take part in a May Day rally called by the Workers' Charter Movement in Delhi. Almost all the local industrialists were trying to prevent the workers from joining this rally and even the divisional commissioner threatened the workers' leaders that they will not be spared if they continue to "instigate" the workers.

Eighteen of the leading workers in another yarn mill Ankur Udyog Ltd were dismissed when they returned to join work on the morning of May 3. There are about 900 workers in this mill. When the workers protested against this action, they were shot at by criminals hired by the factory owner Ashok Jalan. 19 workers sustained injuries. One of them got a bullet in his stomach which went through to hit his spine. He is still in a serious condition.

The workers launched a *Workers Satyagraha* and faced severe repression from the police and administration who openly sided with the owners. They were lathi-charged repeatedly and were not allowed to hold even peaceful demonstrations. None of the main accused of the firing was arrested and false cases were slapped against many workers. However, their resolute struggle and widespread support from all over the country and abroad forced the administration on the back-foot and all the 18 sacked workers in Ankur Udyog Ltd were taken back and the mill restarted on May 11.

However, the owners of VN Dyers were adamant on taking back the workers and breaking their agitation at any cost. The workers launched the second phase of their Satyagraha movement from May 16 by starting a 'fast-unto-death' at the gates of the VN Dyers yarn mill. The workers were demanding the reinstatement of dismissed workers, opening of the locked out mills, arrest of accused in the firing case, compensation to the injured workers and a high level enquiry into the firing and repression on workers.

On May 20, on the fifth day of the hunger strike, when the workers were going to meet the district magistrate, they were severely beaten, badly injuring more than 25 workers, and 73 workers were arrested. Most of the workers were released late in the night but 14 of their

leaders including two women activists were sent to jail on trumped up charges. They were finally released on bail after a week. The workers gained another moral victory when the Station House Officer of the Chiluatal police station was transferred for his role in the brutal repression of the workers.

The owners, the labour department and the local administration were trying to tire out the workers or break their unity, but failed. They even held "talks" without the workers and announced the opening of the mills without the 18 workers whom they declared as "retired from service". For several days, the owners tried to start the mills but the workers refused to go back to work unless their dismissed co-workers were taken back. The owners were also threatening to start the mill by taking in new workers.

On May 30, the workers entered the yarn mill and occupied it to prevent the management from doing anything of this sort and to press for their demands. They forced their way into the yarn mill and occupied all its shops. They did not budge from their positions despite threats and intimidation by the police and PAC (provincial armed constabulary). A large number of workers kept constant vigil outside the factory and supplied food to the workers inside.

The administration was forced to call the owners and the workers for talks on Wednesday night and a decision to end the standoff was taken after 3 hours of negotiations. Apart from the DM and DLC, the two owners and four workers from the yarn mill and three from the textile mill were present in the meeting.

The Joint Front for Struggle on Workers' Rights has welcomed the decision and said that this victory is the result of the resolute struggle of all the workers of Bargadwa who stood united against the might of the capitalists and the state. However, it cautioned the workers against complacency as the administration and management have gone back on their word several times in the past. Besides, the struggle for justice in the case of the firing on workers will continue. False cases against workers have yet not been revoked. □

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