

LABOUR ORGANISING

Wage Struggles in Delhi Industrial Belt

GWN

WITHOUT ARTIFICIAL optimism or propagandistic attitude one can say that the development of both 'industrial climate' and working class experience in the Delhi industrial belt have created the general condition for a larger wave of wage struggles. Obviously there is no 'historic inevitability', but there are many historic indicators asking: "When, if not now?"

During the last half year the combination of general inflation leading to real wage decline and continuation of 'full capacity' production in most local companies has created a palpable tension within a spatially concentrated and industrially integrated workforce. The long working-hours and overtime, which meant to compensate low wages, have reached human physical limits. A large majority of workers remains outside of the institutionalised wage regime of trade union mediation, in most cases the legal frame-work of state defined minimum wages does not apply. On a local level there have been sporadic, but partly successful 'autonomous' workers' struggles, still limited to the company level. On a similar wider background the wave of wage strikes in China last year have set a reference point.

The emergence of independent wage struggles have the potential to bring forward a 'general wage demand', which can become a reference point beyond a single company. Under given conditions, struggles around this 'wage demand' have the potential to express not mere 'economic needs', but a general social discontent, a balance of forces between a new generation of workers and a hated urban factory system. There is a correspondence between their 'equal condition' within modern industry, the necessity of 'direct forms of self-organisation and coordination of struggle' and an 'egalitarian and generalising' demand.

The national trade union demonstration against price increase which took place on 23rd of February in Delhi was a symbolic event, but it revealed the fundamental division of labour between state and trade unions to economically and politically integrate the wage question. All major trade unions mobilised nationally for a 'March on Parliament', only around 40,000 to 60,000 people followed the call. Factories in the Delhi industrial belt ran smoothly that day. The demonstration consisted of mainly white collar workers (banking sector, public sector employees) over 50 years of age and the occasional construction workers who had been mobilised as foot soldiers. The following day after this tame and rather minoritarian 'protest', the Delhi state government announced a 15 percent increase in the NCR (Delhi state region) minimum wage. A clear sign to the wider class: if you stick to democratically contained forms of protest you might gain something. Without drawing too much of parallels this move has to be seen on the background of the 'inflationary' unrest in North Africa. It has also to be seen on the background of the historical function of trade union apparatus as transmission belts of not only

'economic function', but also political integration. With declining legitimacy of the state, 'organically' the main 'democratic sphere' remains the working class terrain. Again and again the union apparatus brings forth the 'institutionalised representation' necessary to 're-make state power' (from times of 'democratic transition' in Spain, Poland etc. to currently in countries like Tunisia, where because of lack of 'political opposition' the old trade union apparatus initially fulfils this function).

The decision to increase the Delhi minimum wage has resulted in a wide official wage gap between Delhi region and bordering industrial areas in Haryana (Faridabad, Gurgaon, Manesar etc.). Minimum wages for unskilled industrial labour in Delhi is 6,084 Rs / 234 Rs (monthly wage based on 8 hours and one weekly holiday / daily wage), while Haryana wage is 4,503 Rs /173 Rs. Any worker knows that in the majority of cases minimum wages are not paid, neither in Delhi nor in Haryana, nevertheless the gap will increase general wage pressure from below, while at the same time already setting an official boundary. In that sense the decision of Delhi government is not a merely populist measure, it is political, material containment and part of regional industrial policy of structuring wage zones. In Haryana the wages for the 'employment scheme' MNREGA (labour intensive 'welfare' scheme for the rural poor, digging canals etc.) are higher than the minimum wage for industrial workers (179 Rs for MNREGA /173 Rs minimum wage). This is actually mainly due to electoral policies, an official way to buy votes from rural poor, less an attempt to attract industrial workers for village work - most industrial workers are registered in other states anyway.

While the state sets the frame-work of the wider legal wage regime and adjusts it to general economic plan and crisis policies, the trade unions mediate the wage question on the level of individual enterprises. Just to give the example of the union at Honda HMSI in Gurgaon. No one will deny the 'genuine character' of the union, it has been fought for with blood, it has not been established as a company union, no one will approach them with betrayal. Since it has been recognised in 2005, wages of the permanent workers - the union members - have quadrupled: before May 2005 permanent workers used to get around 6,900 Rs, current wages are around 30,000 Rs plus, including incentives and bonuses. At the same time permanent workers have become a minority in the plant. In 2005 there were 1,200 permanent, 1,600 trainees, 1,000 workers hired through contractors and 400 apprentices. Today there are 1,800 permanent workers and 6,500 workers hired through contractors in production departments, plus around 1,500 workers hired through contractors for cleaning, canteen, driving etc.. The temporary workers in production get around 6,800 Rs per month, less than a quarter of their permanent work-mates. The permanent workers have retained mainly supervisory positions. As part of the union-management wage agreements the permanent workers' wages contain a large share of productivity bonus. The company wants to make them 'benefit' from the increased work load which has been imposed on the shoulders of the temporary work-force.

The actual material power of the union has decreased, they compensate the decline by making themselves important managers of the wage hierarchy —not as 'one act of sell out', but

as a result of trade union's essential character within the wider process of re-structuring of class relations. On this background it may not be out of place to reflect on the 'glorious defeats' of recent struggles for union recognition, e.g. at Rico or Denso.

EXPERIENCES OF WORKERS' STRUGGLES

The temporary work-force is not represented by unions. They have no major interest in company based long-term wage agreements, they shift jobs frequently between companies and between sectors. They have an objective interest in the wider wage conditions. Unlike their parent generation they also show little interest in 'saving money'. Buying a plot of land and building a house in the area is out of reach, their interests are more immediate: mobile phones, some leisure, as far as wages allow it. These factors have forced temporary workers to struggle outside of the trade union framework.

This is a general background for very specific conditions of struggle, differing according to economic cycles of various sectors and specific industrial organisation of work-force both on the basis of sector and individual companies the differences between three main sectors in Gurgaon area—meaning call centre, garments and automobile industry—are self explanatory.

In the call centre sector, workers were able to increase wages on an individual level by changing jobs frequently. This possibility was limited to the international English-speaking call centres and only as long as there was a significant demand. Since end of 2008, with the US and European crisis, wages decline. Call centre wage levels in the US have come down to an extent which passes on wage pressure to the regions of outsourcing like Gurgaon. What remains is a big wage gap between domestic and international call centres. Workers in domestic call centres hardly earn more than industrial workers— around 7,000 Rs—while in international call centres wages are still double to three times as high. In March 2009 workers at Sparsh call centre in Gurgaon stopped work for three days, asking for higher wages. They earned 4,800 Rs at the time. This is one of the few collective steps.

In the garments industry workers are subjected to harshly fluctuating cycles—enormous work loads during times of orders, followed by temporary lay offs. The work-force is mainly segmented along the line of individual qualification, which is also expressed in the division between piece-rate for mainly skilled tailors and monthly wages for helpers. This section has witnessed many short and temporarily successful strikes by skilled tailors to enforce better piece rates when new orders come in. But there has not been any collective steps about the question of subsequent 16 hours shifts followed by temporary lay-offs which result in lower average monthly wages. The bargaining power based on individual skill is increasingly undermined. The potential for generalisation of struggle in an industry which is as little intertwined as the garment industry is low—apart from the occasional insurrection. The fact that in Gurgaon, and particularly in Manesar, garments industry and automobile industry are spatially concentrated in the same areas will be of importance.

Wage levels and working times in garments and automobile industry vary little, whereas the industrial structure does significantly: more or less continuous production flow within assembly plants and within network of hundreds of supplying companies, sensitive to any interruption—see decline of Honda HMSI output during trouble at various suppliers during 2010 (AG Industries etc.). Within the companies a more or less equalised mode of production of assembling or machine operating work. A product which is presented as the highest form of individual consumption in a modern society, but which remains outside of reach of local producers. The local struggles within the metal and automobile industry in recent years have expressed the material potential for generalisation, despite the fact that most of them remained confined to company grounds.

On one hand the 'political ideological critique' is applied externally: workers' struggles are judged according to their superficial form as 'economic'. Little effort is undertaken to analyse the wider 'political context' of these struggles or the 'political forms and questions' which emerge during any struggle. This approach leaves one in the coldness of ideological separation, the gap between 'revolutionary class consciousness' and day-to-day struggles become an unbearable task of enlightenment. When trying to bridge the gap to these 'day-to-day struggles', in many cases local initiatives become the utmost 'economistic'/'legalistic' themselves: focusing on labour laws and written agreements rather than direct workers' power, relating mainly to trade union apparatuses and representatives rather than workers' experiences, believing in the 'generalising' effects of general or transitional demands. This is only a logical consequence. □