

ANTI-POSCO AGITATION

Back from Dhinkia

[Following is a slightly abridged version of a press release issued by PUCL, demanding immediate release of Abhay Sahoo, the leader of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti]

THE PEOPLE'S UNION FOR CIVIL Liberties, represented by its National Secretary Kavita Srivastava and Odisha Convenor, Pramodini Pradhan visited the area in and around Dhinkia Panchayat in Jagatsinghpur district on 1st December, 2011, where the struggle against the proposed POSCO steel plant is taking place for the last *seven years*. They also went to Choudwar Jail in Cuttack District on 2nd December, 2011 to meet Mr Abhay Sahoo, the leader of the *POSCO Pratirodh Sangharsh Samiti*, who has been arrested against FIRs motivated by the administration under sections causing sexual assault, wrongfully confining somebody and causing atrocities under the SC & ST Act.

The PUCL team met several of the anti-displacement activists whose spirits were high despite the arrest of Abhay Sahoo, their leader. They were very clear that no way would they leave their homeland and their livelihoods in exchange of some money or the promise of jobs. The repression of the people by the Odisha Administration and police machinery was apparent and was paramount in the dialogue with them. It was shocking to learn that almost everybody the team member had met feared being arrested by the police as there were more than 40 to 50 cases that had been lodged against them. They alleged that most of the FIRs had no names mentioned and therefore anybody could be picked up by the police. Due to this fear, the people were not even going to the hospital close by, when there were several women and children who needed immediate medical attention.

With the arrest of their leader Abhay Sahoo they feared greater repression and efforts by the Administration to break their struggle along with attacks by the goons of POSCO as happened in the past. Their fears pertained to the possibility of renewed efforts by the Government to acquire their land forcibly, this time round it could become a bloody battle. People's faith in non-violent democratic ways of struggle is evident as more than five hundred villagers continue holding a dharna on a daily basis peacefully resisting the project. Despite this on the 2nd December there was a flag march of a large number of policemen who came on motorbikes and unleashed a lot of aggression which had unsettled the people.

It was shocking to learn that Abhay Sahoo had been booked under 50 cases by the Odisha police in various police stations including Kujanga in Jagatsinghpur District in the last few years of the struggle. He had spent fourteen months in jail in 2008-2009. His lawyer Mr Bichtrananda Sena informed the PUCL team that he had managed to get anticipatory and post-arrest bail in more than 46 of the cases. However, the desperation and bankruptcy of the Odisha State Government was shown in the way they had filed cases against Abhay Sahoo in 2011.

Of the four cases filed in Kujanga police station against him, two consisted of committing atrocities against Dalits, against which he has been arrested and sent to judicial remand since the 25th of November, 2011, one relating to dowry murder and destruction of evidence and one relating to destruction of a JCB machine. *It is very clear that when the intention is to put a person in jail, even a petty case is enough under the Indian Law.* The description below is testimony to the fact that the police actions are vindictive, motivated and an attempt to victimize Sri Sahoo and the people's movement.

In the FIR number 301/2011 filed on 9th November, 2011 u/s 147, 148, 452, 294, 323, 354, 506, 109, 149 IPC and Sec 3 SC & ST filed by Bansidhar Dalai of Gobindpur, Abhay Sahoo has been charged of having intimidated and insulted and humiliated them as dalits in public view, had committed acts of sexual assault and obscenity against Dalit women, directed the co-accused to commit robbery of Rs 33,000 in one case, apart from beating them up causing trespass and wrongfully restraining them. Abhay Sahoo and all the villagers also vouched that he was not there that day in the village, still the police dragged his name in this case. Abhay Sahoo's bail application in this case is pending in front of the Additional District Judge, since the last two hearings the police has not brought the case diary to court and now the case is slated for the 8th of December, 2011. This delay by the police is a form of frustrating legal remedies that Mr Sahoo has access too.

In the 2nd case filed against him by one Ranjan Mallick of Dinkia FIR no.: 309/2011; u/s 147, 148, 341, 294, 323, 364, 506, 397 and 149 IPC, SC & ST act, 1/11/2011. It has been alleged that they were attacked by Abhay Sahoo and his gang of men because they refused to go to an Anti-POSCO meeting, so they were abducted and intimidated and Abhay Sahoo caused rioting with deadly arms and insulted them because of their caste.

In the cases where arrest is awaited, the third case on him, they have tried to show Abhay Sahoo's involvement in the case of a dowry murder for which FIR number: 2641/2011; has been lodged in Kujango Police station on the 13th September, 201; u/s 498(A), 302, 304(B) and 342, 201, 34-IPC; sec-4 Dowry Prohibition Act was lodged. It has been alleged that Malay Bardhan had allegedly murdered his wife and under the direction of Mr Abhay Sahoo the husband had destroyed the evidence of murder, by cremating the girl. Abhay Sahoo's role was central in furthering the intention of murder.

Lastly the fourth case against him was filed on 3rd November, by the Sub-Inspector of Police K Murmu of Kujanga police station, FIR 312/ 2011, GR 742/ 2011; u/s 147, 148, 309, 427, 149 IPC and Sec 3 of Explosive Substance Act. It is alleged that he and others blasted a JCB machine of the company which was making the coastal road.

Abhay Sahoo has not yet been arrested in the above two cases.

When the PUCL representatives met Mr Abhay Sahoo in Choudwar Jail, he said that POSCO was a case study of how you can repress a democratic movement and the expression of the democratic rights of the people. He added that the way the Odisha police was booking

him in cases, very soon they would run out of sections of the IPC. Any common person could also see how the cases had been fabricated.

He said that in jail there was no problem in jail custody and that his diabetes was under control and that he was well looked after, however, he was worried about the future onslaught of the police on the people. He strongly feared that the administration with the help of the police would try making the coastal road, which the people were clear they did not want as it would then pave the way for POSCO.

The PUCL demands the release of Abhay Sahoo, stopping all repression in that area and the withdrawal of all criminal cases against Abhay Sahoo and other struggling people. It also urges the Government to restore normalcy so that people could get on with their daily life.

The PUCL calls upon all organisations at the State and National level, to come together and carry out a sustained campaign for the release of Abhay Sahoo, dropping of all fabricated cases and stopping all repression by the Odisha Government on the people of DHINKIA-CHARIDESH. □□□