

The Future is Blank

NOWHERE ARE POLITICAL PARALYSIS AND IDEOLOGICAL wilderness combining to produce tragic crisis in left movement more than in today's India. Traditional left is an apologist of neo-liberalism. As for the non-traditional left the less said the better because they have so far succeeded in isolating themselves from broad masses through their acts of non-flexibility and dogmatism. What is left of leftism seems to be becoming increasingly obscure in a situation where electoral permutations and combinations continue to dominate their agendas. All agitations and counter-agitations are fine-tuned to re-arrange vote-banks. Six, months after being buried by a landslide defeat in the last assembly polls in Bengal and Kerala the official left is desperately trying to regain what they seem to have lost permanently—credibility to the people. They are now pinning too much hope on the February 28, 2012 industrial strike throughout the country to prove to the oppressed millions that they are really sensitive to workers' problems. But this all-India industrial strike is more like a yearly ritual of Central Trade Unions affiliated to different political parties, national or regional. All are there—left, right and not so-right. True, there is no harm in united industrial action if it attacks the right target but this tokenism against the Centre's industrial policy is so naive and half-hearted that workers no longer take it seriously. They know well how trade union bosses fail to rise to the occasion. Nor are they eager to confront the authorities when it is so required. Of late most successful wage-rise movements by industrial workers, particularly in high-value automobile sector, were conducted by independent plant-based trade union initiatives outside the ambit of central trade unions. Maybe the trend is universal as it is happening in China where the industry has defied the global financial crisis with another record year of growth.

In China where collective bargaining was unheard of even a decade ago disgruntled workers, mainly a new generation of rural migrant workers, challenged the government controlled unions and government set minimum wages to strike enhanced wage deals with their employers who under the Beijing government's *lessaiz faire* attitude refused to start negotiations a year ago. Over the past few decades, China has banked on its low labour costs to achieve rapid economic growth, mostly at the expense of workers' interests. And union officials just managed to implement the government's policy of industrial peace at any price and pacify workers by openly betraying labour's cause. But collective bargaining by plant-level workers at a Honda factory in Foshan last year set a precedent with potential ramifications for the emerging labour scenario in China. The 19-day strike was "the most influential one in China since 1949". A surge in strikes and labour disputes in recent years in China suggests among other things that workers can do it even in an authoritarian regime like China.

But communist left in this country has its own way of following the strategy of inaction. They simply ignore spontaneous movements that have succeeded in recent months in a number of factories to clinch higher wage agreements defeating the very neo-liberal logic of "less union". Workers will have to wait for another one year or so to see the next all India industrial strike action by central trade unions. Meanwhile many things will change and political parties and their union affiliates might resort to a *bandh* or two after the central budget—yet another ritual.

Everybody knows this kind of adhoc-ism is no answer to the systematic fall of real wages. Everywhere workers strive for a better quality of life by asking employers to keep their salaries on par with inflation, profit levels and industrial benchmarks.

If anything the left has lost no love for nursing the utopia that toilers are still with them, massive electoral reversals notwithstanding. The CPI in its post-mortem report states that poll debacle was due to political line and not due to organisational weakness as it is widely touted by their big brother-CPM. And at the same time they advocated a broader left front by bringing smaller and left-minded parties under one umbrella. In other words organisationally they are still too weak to offer an enviable alternative in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary business as well.

The lack of united front strategy is a major hindrance in the path of development of viable leftism. The so-called left front of official left parties is not a united front, in terms of oppressed classes though their party programmes envisage a four-class alliance in furthering radical change in India. And the far left, the maoists to be precise, are so obsessed with their 'ideological superiority' that they think they could spread their political influence by talking more of the same—violence, without taking much trouble of hazardous and tortuous paths of labour organising. They too have failed to chalk out a correct united front strategy without which they will remain isolated for years to come. They are not realistic and they are not aimed at isolating neo-liberal culture in its entirety. Like the official left they too are busy to promote sectoral interests and in the end find it difficult to cope with the situation. □□□