

Wandering In Wilderness

INDIAN LABOUR CONFERENCE [ILC], BEING ONE OF THE PREMIER institutions of this biggest showpiece of democracy has lost much of its relevance because its recommendations otherwise aimed at empowering labour, were never considered seriously, even before the advent of 'reforms' regime in the sixties and seventies. It is more like a ritual to be convened periodically to focus on labour management without any goal to reach. While inaugurating the 44th session of ILC in New Delhi on February 14, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh praised state governments for their 'flexible approach' to labour restructuring and rehabilitation without waiting for a comprehensive central labour law. In other words he was actually appreciating labour-bashing by different state governments, irrespective of their colour, in meeting the unjust demands of corporate world, all in the name of industrialisation and development. Way back in 1956, it was the 15th ILC that made a major breakthrough in formulating calorie-based minimum wages and requirement of a family unit in a situation of 'no uniform' minimum wages structure prevailing in different regions. Indian labour scenario has changed a lot since then but the basic question of need-based minimum wages remains. In certain respects the atmosphere has worsened further because of ever expanding casualisation of work even in perennial nature of job.

Mr Singh was at pains to inform the ILC gathering that the re-amendment of the Factories Act, 1948 was under their active consideration. It was partially amended in 1987 without substantially improving the working conditions of employees for which the said Act was enacted in the first place. But he was conspicuously silent about the systematic erosion in Trade Union Act—the real bone of contention—as workers even in the organised sector, not to speak of unorganised sector, find it increasingly difficult to voice their legitimate grievances through unionisation. It is de-unionisation, not unionisation, that dominates the labour movement. Ironically enough, he emphasised on the urgency of safe-guarding workers' interests in the event of an industrial disaster as it happened in the Bhopal Gas tragedy. In reality the victims of Bhopal Gas catastrophe continue to suffer without being properly compensated and rehabilitated. They were not interested in applying the existing laws to punish the guilty and help the gas-affected people. What is more Mr Singh's government is simply mocking at industrial disaster management by diluting Nuclear Liability Bill in favour of overseas Nuclear suppliers.

Mr Singh's observation on women's participation in employment in recent years speaks volumes about the sorry state female job-seekers have been in. The percentage of women employees have been static for decades despite slight upward movement of their social and educational status. They continue to toil in most hazardous and low-paid jobs while losing their space in traditional labour-intensive industries as industry is becoming more and more capital-intensive, thanks to globalisation and technological advancement. And Mr Singh's prescription to provide part-time work with characteristics of full-time employment sounds ludicrous. Part-

time job is part-time job ; it cannot be equivalent to full-time employment with statutory benefits. The idea of doing something for migrant labour is laudable, no doubt, but ground reality for migrant labour looks too complex to be tackled by pious wishes and more Acts.

The phenomenon of labour migration in the country has reached alarming proportions, albeit the authorities are not in a position to provide the extent of migrant labour, propelling their engine of growth. Unless an all encompassing welfare mechanism, including cultural and linguistic peculiarities, in its totality gets priority, tall talk to evolve a significant device in 'ensuring the portability of their rights' will remain on paper. That almost all state-level labour welfare boards are in a shambles is a fact of life. As for the Centre it simply bypasses the crucial issue of funding because labour being principally the domain of state. No government, state or union, is willing to put more money into labour welfare.

True, most of the labour laws enacted by the colonial British government against the backdrop of war economy have long outlived their utility. And it is more so in the era of massive computerisation of workplace. Also, there is no denying the fact that too many laws, some operating with duplication and cross-purposes, stand in the way of effective labour management. Mr Singh's high hope for labour reforms finds itself stranded by time. For all practical purposes the ever swelling migrant labour force has been drawn into the vortex of dehumanisation almost bordering on Dickensonian reality. They are less respected and more indignant. Labour Conference or no Conference, their work day looks more miserable, not more convenient.

The replacement of human labour by machines coupled with ruthless management of the shop-floor and work-place has been the order of the day. If the Singhs manage to finally kill whatever limited role the state still has in empowering labour by way of third party intervention in labour-management dispute, in the name of 'reforms' and industrial peace, the brave new world of toilers as conceived in the *Communist Manifesto*, will remain elusive, at least in this part of the globe. All this exercise in Labour Conference will be more and more meaningless. The Singhs who run this country would hardly recognise the truth if they have a head-on-collision with it. □□□