

Ending Hibernation

Political balance is swinging back. And for all practical reasons Congress Party is once again getting popularity as an enemy in the left perception. So the August 20 nationwide industrial strike sponsored by left unions produced a flurry of propaganda materials against the Centre's new economic policies. Better late than never. No matter what they say, or what happens in the real world, the public seems to have realised that the so-called left parties and communist parties have been a dismal failure. Why they still enjoy the label of left is a mystery. They are no less responsible for the neo-liberal crimes the poor and downtrodden encounter day in and day out. They too like their Gandhian counterparts hailed foreign direct investment as a panacea and did little to stop the Bush fire of de-controlled market regime. Also, they have not proposed any realistic solutions to the current food crisis. A day's token strike is fine because it keeps industrialists and big business in good humour. They called the strike to keep sway over their traditional constituency. But at the same time they did not forget to make it amply clear that it won't send any wrong signal to investors, domestic and foreign. They have no plan to attack the root problem—free trade. But free trade is not really free for all. For the most third world economies it means 'goodbye to food sovereignty'. Food prices are skyrocketing defying all market niceties. And the left's ideologues and the parties they represent cannot do anything other than dubbing it as a global phenomenon.

But it all started in the 1980s, even before the birth of WTO. In the early 1980s the USA, International Monetary Fund and World Bank used the debt stranglehold that they had over many third world countries to force them to adopt neo-liberal economic policies through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). This period also witnessed most third world governments, irrespective of their colour, being forced to sell off their public assets to multinational and domestic corporations, allow foreign investors move money in and out of their borders without any hindrance, end food and agricultural subsidies, create export processing zones, wipe out labour rights, dismantle environmental safe-guards, reduce workforce drastically and implement wage freeze. Then came World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995. And almost all countries became WTO members overnight. In truth the creation of WTO was the logical culmination of structural adjustment. And WTO lost no time to help a small number of multinational companies gain a virtual monopoly over global food business, fuelling price hike and destabilising social equilibrium in third world societies. Right now only six corporations control 85 percent of the world trade in grain.

Millions of small-scale farmers involved in producing staples in the South have gone bankrupt because of WTO. And the architects of WTO want further liberalisation. 'What the spike in food prices has made clear to developing countries is that their food security depends fundamentally not on cheap imports, but on enhancing their capacity to feed themselves. The Doha rules would have further undermined this capacity'. So the cheerleaders for corporate globalisation are bemoaning the collapse of Doha Round. The Indian Left is making some noises about inflation, price-rise and fall in real income because they are no

longer part of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance dispensation at the centre. They are equally responsible for a kind of industrialisation that kills small-scale farming.

Way back in the 1970s, most third world governments, India included, assisted small scale farmers within their borders providing them with various forms of subsidies and, food security for the poor was not threatened. India and most third world countries can ensure food security and food sovereignty as well, only by going back to the era of sustainable small-scale agriculture that was not under severe attack in the 1970s. Industrial farming is the problem and the left looks least interested in organising protests against industrial farming.

Not that left parties are seriously concerned about inflation, price-rise and current food crisis. They did not protest much when the Centre systematically dismantled public distribution system. Nor do they see any danger in progressive shrinkage in cereal acreage and expansion of cash crop acres for bio-fuel. Spontaneous protests that have erupted across the world are a sign that people have started to take action to have access to foods. Only the leftists of India are in the dark because they refuse to face the reality. The days are not far when small traders all have to commit suicide, even in the left-ruled states, ironically to escape starvation. They are inviting Wal-Mart, Ambanis, Goenkas and their likes to champion neo-liberal policies, not to confront them for which they organised the strike in the first place.

It is unlikely for left unions to do much beyond tokenism. The situation will worsen further when they summon energy to call another industrial strike, hopefully a year or two later. As election is round the corner an exercise in escapism is all that is required. One of the biggest fears that many people have is that a calculated move—token strike—to what's happening now will be more calculated. The left has changed fundamentally but not so dramatically.□

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