

The Day of Shame

[Following is a statement issued by Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of NREGA]

Amidst gheraos, slogan shouting and a flurry of black badges, Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity concluded their NREGA *Lajja Diwas* (Day of Shame) programme on February 2, 2011. The Day of Shame was observed in 37 blocks of 7 districts with participation from over 5000 union members on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of NREGA. The intention was to draw public attention to the utter failure of the scheme in West Bengal.

In Krishnagar 1 block in Nadia district, the BDO, Indrani Sarkar, was gheraoed by PBKMS members. No work has been given in this block for the last 5 months, despite repeated work demands from the people. The police was called in by the BDO, who wanted Samity members arrested. However, the Samity members insisted instead that the BDO should be arrested because she was breaking the law by not giving work under NREGA. After a tense 4 hours, the gherao was lifted when the District Magistrate and District Nodal Officer intervened with the promise of giving work immediately. Members in Nadia were also present in large numbers in deputations at Nakashi-para, Chapra and Shantipur blocks.

Surprisingly, however, there were no other places where strong arguments were presented by officials, defending the State Government's performance of NREGA. Everyone meekly accepted the Samity's contention that NREGA has been a grand failure in West Bengal. Many BDOs (Namkhana in South 24 Parganas, Daton 1, Daton 2 Mohanpur and Medinipur Sadar in Paschim Medinipur, Egra 1 and Kanthi 1 in Purba Medinipur) accepted the black badge of shame that the members (mainly women) of PBKMS asked them to wear. Similarly, many Trinamool and SUCI elected representatives accepted the badges (such as the block presidents of Raidighi and Pathar Partima blocks, the Sahasabhapati of Namkhana and Pathar Pratima block). CPM leaders were significant in their absence from all scenes of protests, so very few of them could be given black badges.

The main demands were for:

- Expansion of entitlements to individual entitlements rather than household entitlements should be made;
- Limit of 100 workdays under NREGA should be raised to 270 days in a year;
- Issues such as delay in payment of wages and delay in allocation of work should be immediately addressed;
- As per the provisions of the law, punitive action should be taken against all officers who are found guilty;
- As per the 15th ILC norms, the minimum wage for NREGA workers at 2010 prices should be Rs 259.50
- Immediate procedures and budgetary allocations to be made for payment of unemployment allowance and compensation of late payment of wages.

In Paschim Medinipur, an average of 27 person days has been allocated in the district. All the BDOs have said that they will try and give another 40 person days in the next two months. The Kulpi BDO in South 24 Parganas promised to complete 100 days of work for all those demanding work within 31st March 2011, before the fiscal year ends. BDOs also agreed to call meetings with recalcitrant Pradhans and to sort out specific issues in the next few days in Pathar Pratima and Namkhana blocks. Programs were held at 8 blocks namely Purulia 1, Purulia 2, Hura, Manbazar-I, Santuri / Barabazar, Balarampur and Pancha in Purulia district. Protest meetings were also held in Santuri, Hura and Pancha. Meetings with

BDOs were held at all blocks barring Purulia 1 and Barabazar. Apart from the common demands (as listed above), workers in Purulia which is reeling under drought demanded that alongwith wages for work being done under NREGA, rice should also be given to the workers. They also demanded immediate payment of other legal entitlements like unemployment allowance and compensation for delayed wages that have not been paid for the past 5 years.

Samity members in Bankura campaigned with black flags in the district headquarters on the 1st and on the 2nd, gave deputations to the District magistrate and BDOs of three blocks (Chatna, Bankura 1 and Saltora). In this district, which is also drought affected, workers who have completed 100 days of work were assured that they would be given additional work if they asked for it within this financial year. In some areas, such as Canning 1 block where Abdul Rezzak Mollah CPM Land Reforms Minister still rules with an iron hand and where people have met with violence on the NREGA issue, union members limited their protest actions to the Gram Panchayat office, fearing attacks if they went to the Block office. In North 24 Parganas, members were pleasantly surprised to have their work appreciated by Government officials. The BDO of Bongaon said that such programmes put pressure on him and made it easier for him to pressurise the district level officials in turn. The Nirman Sahayak in Chandpara GP who is getting an award for his special contribution to women's empowerment in NREGA, said the Samity was responsible for his award as in his Panchayat, women's work had gone from zero to about 40 days in the past 10 months only because of the Samity's movement. Rina Pathak, a Samity activist, replied, "These words are of little use to us. Instead , give us work and our full wages!" □□□