# Forward To Countrywide General Strike

## On 20-21 February 2013


**A CITU Publication**

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The united trade union movement in the country has entered a new phase. The mammoth National Convention of Workers organised by all the 11 central trade unions on 4th September 2012 gave the call for two days' countrywide general strike on 20-21 February 2013. This call was endorsed by almost all the independent all India federations and unions of workers and employees including those in the state and central government departments, banks, insurance, defence, telecom, and public sector enterprises etc. This unity of the entire trade union movement will certainly make the two days' countrywide general strike on 20-21 February 2013 historic and unprecedented in the annals of the working class struggles of our country.

**The call for a two days' countrywide general strike by the trade unions is unique in many aspects.** It is for the first time that the call for a two days' general strike has been given jointly by all the central trade unions after independence. Secondly, this follows the one day countrywide general strike on '28th February 2012 at the call of the same united platform of Central Trade Unions to press for the same ten point charter of demands that include the demands of not only the workers but also of the common people. This call for two day countrywide general strike reflects the united resolve of the working class to continue the fight for the cause of the toiling people. It also indicates the determination of the trade union movement to give a befitting reply, by heightening the pitch of the struggle, to the arrogance displayed by the government which has recently increased the burdens on the working people, completely ignoring their repeated appeals through the mass movements. Through its recent decision to increase the diesel prices, limiting the number of subsidised cooking gas cylinders, allowing FDI in retail and disinvestment, the

government has displayed its insensitivity and contempt to sufferings of the people and their demands, the very people who keep the wheels of the country's economy moving, create wealth and provide revenue for the exchequer, profit for the employers and GDP for the nation.

Thirdly, the platform of struggle has united all the eleven central trade unions, having different view points and political inclinations, in countrywide action programmes on common demands and has also drawn in its fold almost all the independent national federations of employees and workers in state and central govt sector, telecom, defence production, banks, insurance and various other service sector establishments. During the last three years, the unity of the trade union movement is being gradually widened through the process of joint struggles.

**It has become imperative for the trade union movement to heighten the pitch of struggle in view of the utter neglect of the government of India of the burning issues of life and livelihood of the common people.** While imposing a humongous burden on the already overburdened people, through drastic hike in prices of diesel and cooking gas, the Prime Minister audaciously justified the move by telling the nation that 'money does not grow on the trees'. Does this not indicate sheer arrogance and utter disregard to the sufferings of the common people?

**When it comes to providing some relief to ensure basic necessities to the crores of common people - 'money does not grow on trees'. But, Mr Prime Minister, can you tell us in whose kitchen garden, did the money, the Rs 5.28 crore revenue foregone in one year for subsidising handful of corporate/business magnets, grow? Will the Prime Minister please tell us which money plant and whose kitchen garden produce the money allowed to be liberally usurped by a few chosen big corporates in the coal gate scam, the 2G scam, the CWG and the KG Basin scam? Replies to these questions, asked by the entire nation, do not come automatically. They can be extracted**

**only by a stronger, wider and more united countrywide action. The 20-21 February 2013 country wide General Strike is meant for that.**

The arrogance of the government was also reflected in its announcement allowing FDI in multi brand retail trade despite the entire country raising its voice against the said disastrous move. This measure was opposed not merely by the entire opposition in Parliament but also by most of the alliance partners of the UPA-II. In the wake of such opposition, the government was earlier compelled to shelve its initial moves to allow FDI in multi brand retail and commit in both the houses of Parliament that this would be considered only after consulting all the stake holders and political parties. But, in its anxiety to satisfy the big foreign corporations and the US business giants in particular, the government conveniently forgot its commitment to the Parliament and betrayed the people by issuing the executive order allowing FDI in multi brand retail trade. Thus it has paved the way for destroying the livelihood of around 4 crore people employed in retail trade and around 20 crore people dependent on them, besides endangering the country's agriculture, already troubled and crisis ridden.

The claim of the government about the high employment potential of foreign companies' participation in multi brand retail trade is totally baseless and is nothing but a deliberately undertaken misinformation campaign. The size of India's retail trade employing around 4 crore people is around USD 40 billions. In comparison, world's biggest retail trade company, Wal Mart of USA, having a worldwide business of USD 42 billions, employs less than one fourth of the total Indian retail trade employment/self employment. The government's intention is clear. It is hell bent to oblige the US and other foreign retail giants facing a recessionary squeeze in their respective countries to reign over and exploit the Indian retail market, no matter if the Indian retailers and retail workers are doomed. Can such heinous betrayal go unchallenged? NO; Never. The

people must and will respond in an appropriate manner and the working class movement has to pioneer the struggle to make the government understand that the people of the country cannot be taken for granted.

**The all in united action of the working class –the two days' countrywide General Strike on 20-21 February 2013 is meant for sending this clear message to the government and the ruling classes – 'Your contempt and disregard for the sufferings of the toiling people of this country and your over enthusiasm to guarantee super profits to the national and multinational corporates will not be tolerated'.** This message must reverberate from every nook and corner of the country. It is our responsibility to ensure that it does.

Such all in unity of trade unions has not come into being all of a sudden. It is the result of sustained efforts by various trade unions including CITU, for building a broad platform to strengthen united struggles of the working class against the neoliberal policies of globalisation. It also reflects the growing urge among the common workers at the grass root level for united actions against the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation that were playing havoc with their lives and livelihoods. The decades long process of united trade union struggles by many central trade unions and independent workers' and employees' federations in sectors like banking, insurance, defence, telecom, coal and other public sector units have immensely contributed to the development of this all in unity of the trade union movement in the country. The country has witnessed 12 countrywide general strikes led by the Sponsoring Committee of Trade Unions since the onset of the neoliberal policy regime in 1991; the united platform was widened with INTUC joining the joint trade union movement to lead the 13th all India General Strike on 7th September 2010; it was further with the joining of BMS and LPF and giving the call for the 14th General Strike on 28th February 2012. **The two days 15th General Strike on 20 – 21 February 2013, from**

**a much higher pedestal of total and widened unity will take the struggle to newer heights.**

The working class must celebrate this historic unity of central trade unions and federations at the national level by further strengthening and deepening it at the grass root level. This can be achieved through joint actions at the workplaces across the sectors and throughout the country. A common understanding must be developed among the mass of the workers - of all affiliations and at each workplace – about the demands raised by the joint platform, about the issues pertaining to them, about the problems faced by the workers and the solutions and about the path forward. Unification of understanding among the common workers at the grass root level- that the reversal of the present neoliberal policy regime is the only way out - will pave the way for unification of the entire toiling class on a higher consciousness. That is the way before us to strengthen and sustain the platform of all-in-unity in the working class movement and to carry the struggle forward.

The General Strike on 20-21 February 2013 is meant to bring pressure on the government to concede to the 10 demands pertaining to the burning problems faced, not only by the crores of workers, but also by all the other sections of toiling people. They relate to their survival with dignity as human beings, which is in jeopardy due to the disastrous economic policies pursued by the governments.

The demands, which were unanimously adopted in a joint national convention of workers on 14th September 2009, were, based on the experience of two years of united campaigns and struggles, updated in the National Convention of Workers held on 7th September 2011. During these two years, the trade unions made all out efforts through various ways, through numerous agitations and mobilisations, to draw the attention of the government towards the burning problems before the workers and employees and their genuine demands. But the government remained unresponsive. It continued to gloat over the growth

rate of GDP even while the living standards of the toiling masses deteriorated sharply and more and more people were being pushed into deeper poverty and distress.

This countrywide general strike is meant, therefore, to make the voices of the toiling people heard; to force the government to respond; and to warn of even bigger battles in the days to come if these voices are neglected. This strike will pave the way for the working class to brace itself for struggles on yet larger scale to achieve its just demands.

***The first and foremost demand is concrete action by the government to contain the incessant price-rise of essential commodities***. The trade unions have placed before the government, in concrete terms, the measures to be taken to arrest the spiralling rise in prices. They have demanded universalisation of public distribution system and a complete ban on speculation and futures trading in the commodity market which alone can contain the rising prices; they have unambiguously stated that there cannot be a third way to control the ever rising prices.

But the government is refusing to implement these concrete measures. Instead, the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister et al have been going on making statements that prices would come down or get moderated soon, which never happened. During the last four years they have been making such ridiculous statements, mocking at the hungry millions. This has gone to such an extent that while replying to debate or responding to questions raised on price rise in Parliament, the ministers did not hesitate to claim that prices of food articles have already come down. How do these Ministers justify their claim on prices coming down, when the official estimates (Price Monitoring Cell, Department of Consumer Affairs, GoI) show that by the end of October 2012, the price of gram dal increased by 100%, tur/arahar dal by 18%, masoor dal by 20%, sugar by 33%, milk by 25%, mustard oil by 50%, vanaspati by 30%, tea by 35% and even salt by 33% within a span of one year since October 2011? These are all official estimates; the real price

scenario has become much more precarious for the common people.

All such ministerial claims on prices coming down ridicule the claimants when Prime Minister himself had to go on record recently and many a times the Finance Minister had to repeat that 'the present level of inflation is unacceptable' if the economy was to remain on sustained growth-path. While some ministers are making claims on the floor of the Parliament or before TV-cameras that prices were coming down, the Prime Minister or some other ministers are arguing that prices were going up owing to increase in the Minimum Support Prices to farmers. They also make statements that prices were going up because people are having more money with them to consume more. In fact instead of taking concrete actions for containing rising prices of essential commodities, the contradictory statements on the issue of price rise by the ministers and spokespersons of the government is nothing but mockery.

The government's claim that prices were going up owing to increase in the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for the farmers is nothing but another satanic ploy to befool the people! In 2011, the MSP for rice was Rs 1080 per quintal, i.e. Rs 10.8 per kg. However a consumer could not buy rice in the open market for less than Rs 24. The MSP for wheat was Rs 1120 per quintal working out to be Rs 11.20 per kg. But the consumer had to pay no less than Rs 20 per kg. Some of the regularly used pulses like tur and urad dal cost hardly Rs 30 per kg as per the MSP but in the open market they cost anything between Rs 60 to Rs 100. Even in the public distribution system the price of rice and wheat for the APL category is much above the MSP level, even if procurement, storage and transportation costs are taken into account. Talking of MSP to justify price rise is nothing but a shabby act of deception and fraud on the people to create a rift between the peasants and the consumers, both of whom are being fleeced by the neoliberal regime.

Another plea being put forward by the government, by no less a person than the Prime Minister himself, is that prices were going up because people have more money in their pockets now owing to the rise in their incomes as a result of economic growth. Vast sections of workers know the utter falsity of such a claim, that nothing can be farther from truth. Increase in GDP is no doubt a contribution entirely of the toiling class but the fruits of this growth are looted away by the employers' class -the corporates and the big-business, both domestic and foreign, under the government's active patronage. GDP growth is accompanied by growing number of contract workers with low wages and a sharp decline in the number of regular workers in almost all the workplaces. The gains of growth are being looted every day at such a fast pace that the share of wages in the net value added has come down while the share of profit has gone up during this period. The situation in the services and informal sectors is even more precarious. The dominant trend is one of depressing the growth in wages; in real terms, the trend is of declining wages if inflation is taken into account.

In fact the Prime Minister's claim that prices were rising because of higher consumption by the people owing to rise in their incomes is exactly the opposite of what is actually happening as revealed in his own government's report. As per the latest Economic Survey, the growth of private final consumption expenditure has fallen from 8.6% in 2005-06 to 7.3% in 2010-11. During the last five year period, despite the increase in population, the growth in private final consumption expenditure has fallen. Can this be ever possible unless the mass of the consumers, i.e., common working people are repressed by the twin attacks of depressed income and rising inflation? It is not that our learned Prime Minister, an acknowledged eminent economist, does not know this economics. This statement reflects his government's utter disregard towards the people and his cruel insensitivity towards their miseries.

**Then what is the real reason behind the relentless rise in the prices of the essential commodities? Prices are being made to rise to benefit the big business. The real culprit is the nexus between the government and the big business.** Prices of food grains are rising, but those who produce food grains are in severe crisis. The rise in prices for the consumers is not translated into better price for the actual producers despite all the noise on the so called MSP to farmers. Farmers are committing suicides; in many places they are burning their crops in protest; and in many parts of the country farmers are deciding not to produce or to go for a so called 'crop-holiday' because they are not getting the price to make up for their cost of production. Then who are gaining owing to the rising prices? Where does all this money go?

The behaviour of prices and the role of the government during last three/four years make the picture clear. The rise in prices is being promoted and nourished by the government through their deliberate policy intervention by way of weakening and debilitating the public distribution system on the one hand and patronising corporate consolidation in commodity trade, particularly in food and related commodities on the other. When price of rice and wheat have been soaring in the market, the government, most shamelessly, kept a huge stock of 600 lakh tones of food-grains (much above the buffer stock norm) locked in the FCI go-downs, in stead of distributing them at cheap rates. This was deliberately done to prevent the prices to come down and thereby please their trader bosses. And when a part of the stock was released, the public distribution system route was bypassed. In a most unscrupulous manner, the government released the food grains in the open market to facilitate private corporate traders to lift the stock for hoarding. **In fact price rise has become a joint venture of the government and the corporate traders to promote windfall profit for the latter through hoarding and speculation in the commodity market so that public hunger can be encashed for speculative profiteering.**

Added to this are the drastic curtailment of subsidies on fuel and fertilisers, deregulation of electricity tariff and various other public utility services creating cascading effect on already rising prices. The drastic rise in diesel prices and LPG prices (through restricting the supply of cylinders at subsidised prices) in September 2012, increase in electricity tariff etc are examples of such supplementary activities of the government to keep the price level of essential commodities high and the speculative market booming.

The public distribution system has been virtually dismantled throughout the country except in a few states. A large number of people have been pushed out of its purview on the basis of ridiculous poverty line. The poor are being made sacrificial lambs to increase the profits of the traders' lobby, both domestic and foreign. To add fuel to flame, petrol price has already been deregulated and petrol prices have been hiked umpteen times in the last one year. Energy prices are being pushed up and urea prices are being doubled. The government is determined to deregulate the prices of diesel and cooking gas. These measures are bound to have cascading effect on the prices pushing prices up further.

The government has decided to allow FDI in multi-brand retail trade on the deceptive pretext of bringing down prices and providing better returns to the farmers, even as the experience worldwide proves the fallacy of these arguments. The government has issued the executive order allowing FDI in multi-brand retail trade in October 2012 ignoring the public opinion against such retrograde measure. The Food Security bill introduced in the Parliament is meant to legalise targeting by changing the nomenclature to divide the poor into priority and general categories instead of providing universal coverage. The provisions of cash transfers, linking up with Aadhar etc are nothing but ploys to dismantle the public distribution system altogether.

This is the real face of the neoliberal policies being pursued by the corporate captive government of the day. These

policies also reflect the perversion in economic governance due to the dominance of finance capital. Institutionalised corruption is one side of such perversion. Promoting speculation, which is the major reason for price rise, as the driving force of the economy, and to legitimise corporate loot on the people is nothing short of criminality.

***The second major demand raised by the trade unions pertains to job protection***. The government granted liberal concessions and bail out packages worth lakhs of crores of rupees to the private business and industrial houses to tide over the impact of the global economic crisis. The trade unions demanded that these must be made conditional to employment protection.

This means that the industries availing these concessions and packages from government exchequer should not be allowed to retrench workers or reduce employment in the concerned establishments. These concessions and bail-out packages are given out of public funds and not out of the ministers' personal accounts. But the industries availing of such huge concessions in the name of crisis are retrenching workers in large numbers in the name of the same crisis. Why should such establishments be provided concessions out of peoples' money? In 2009-10, the government spent Rs 1,86,000 crore for bail-out packages to industries and business in the background of financial crisis over and above the Rs 4 lakh crore tax concessions as reflected in the section 'Revenue Forgone' in the Annual Budget Statements. Despite that, more than 50 lakh workers lost their livelihood during the same year in the export oriented units alone. During the period 2008-09 to 2009-10 i.e. the period of outbreak of global crisis, the profit of the corporates increased by more than 30% but 50 lakh workers lost their livelihood!

Besides, despite such huge concessions to corporate and big-business, what is their contribution to employment generation in the economy? The entire picture is paradoxical. The concessions to business and corporate

lobby are increasing every year but the rate of employment generation is declining. This exposes the jobless growth scenario where the gains of growth are expropriated by the employers' class. According to the latest National Sample Survey data (66th round) the annual rate of employment growth decelerated from 2.7% in 2000—2005 to just 0.8% in 2005-2010. Growth of non-agricultural employment declined from 4.65% during 2000-2005 to 2.53% during 2005-2010 although during 2005-2010 GDP growth was above 8% on the average.

The public exchequer is contributed to by the people at large. The amount extracted by the corporates and business houses from the exchequer in the form of tax concessions/ exemptions etc is more than what they contribute to the exchequer in the form of taxes. In addition, they resort to tax evasion by utilising various loopholes in the tax laws and in the administration. Till last year, the unpaid tax arrears by the corporate-business lobby was more than Rs two lakh crore over above the around Rs two lakh crore they got as direct-tax concessions (as per Revenue Foregone Statement). More than 60% of the unpaid tax amount is undisputed tax-claim by the government. What is shocking is that the government of the day did nothing to recover such huge tax arrears, exposing its connivance with the tax evaders. Thus the actual amount of concessions that the employers' class got from the government is at least six times more than the officially announced bail-out package of Rs 1,86,000 crore. Despite utilising such huge amounts of public money, they retrench workers in lakhs, do not pay minimum wages and social security benefits and resort to exploitation of the workers and suppression of their basic rights in various ways. The trade unions demand a halt to this loot and plunder on the working people and the country's economy by the government corporate combine.

***Strict enforcement of all basic labour laws without any exception or exemption and stringent punishment for violation of labour laws is another important demand of the joint trade union movement.***

Violation of labour laws by the employers with the active connivance of the law enforcement machinery has become a major instrument for increasing profit. Workers and workers alone are targeted for cost-minimisation whether it is in production or services in all the workplaces. The various legislations to protect the rights of the workers like the Payment of Wages Act, Minimum Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Maternity Benefit Act, and several such others are not at all implemented for vast majority of the workers. These legal benefits were not given as charity by the employers but have been earned by the working class through decades of struggles, and at the cost of sacrificing their best cadres. The eight hour working day, the struggle to earn which is still remembered by the working class worldwide by observing May Day is again sought to be undermined; 10 – 12 hours' day is sought to be made the norm.

Any ordinary citizen violating the laws of the land is generally taken to task by the law enforcement authorities. But not so in case of labour laws! Strangely in this case, it is the workers who are being punished, victimised and implicated in false cases for demanding implementation of the laws while no employer anywhere in the country is ever punished for non implementation of any labour law. In the recent instance of the struggle in Maruti Suzuki, even when the Labour Minister was forced to admit on the floor of the Parliament that the management resorted to unfair labour practices by demanding a 'good conduct bond' from the workers for entering into the factory, no punishment was imposed on the management. It was the workers who were punished through loss of wages and other disciplinary actions.

In fact, 90% of the disputes and conflicts arising in different workplaces in the country relate to just non-implementation of the existing labour laws including the right to form unions of their choice and nothing more. The employers' class in overt or covert collusion with the government, particularly the labour department, subject the mass of the working people to the worst forms of exploitation

and loot through just non-implementation of the basic labour laws pertaining to minimum wages, working hours, safety in workplace, social security benefits etc. Hence the demand for strict enforcement of all basic labour laws without any exception or exemption and stringent punishment for violation of labour laws has been jointly raised by the trade union movement.

***Universal social security for the unorganised sector workers is the fourth demand.***

More than 93% of the country's workforce is in the unorganised sector that has been practically kept outside the purview of most of the labour laws. Unorganised sector workers do not have any protection either in respect of working hours, minimum wages, and social security benefits or of any kind of job security, despite contributing more than 60% to the country's GDP. Since the onset of the neoliberal policy regime, the unorganised sector workforce is expanding fast along with a simultaneous decline in the number of regular or permanent workers in all sectors of the economy.

Due to the pressure from the trade union movement for a comprehensive legislation for the unorganised sector workers both for regulating the employment conditions including job security, minimum wages and working hours etc and also for a social security net for them, the government ultimately enacted the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act in 2008. But that legislation has turned out to be nothing but a fraud on the unorganised sector workers.

The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act was meant for providing a social security cover for the unorganised workers simply lists ten social security/ welfare schemes in its schedule, making them applicable to the unorganised workers. However, almost all of them are meant only for persons below poverty line. The official 'poverty line' is set at such a ridiculously low level that an overwhelming

majority of unorganised sector workers will not be eligible to be covered by these schemes. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) constituted by the erstwhile UPA I government recommended universal coverage and constitution of a National Social Security Fund. The National Social Security Board constituted under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act has also unanimously recommended universal coverage, floor level social security benefits that include pension, life and accident insurance, health including maternity benefits etc and constitution of National Social Security Fund for unorganised workers with adequate allocation in the Union budget. But till now nothing concrete has been done by the government to provide meaningful social security to the unorganised workers. A paltry amount of Rs 1000 crore was allocated in the Union budget in 2010 – 11 but nobody knows how much or how that money was spent.

However, the hollowness of government's claims of providing social security to unorganised workers is evident from the pathetic allocation of funds for its much flaunted Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), which has been extended to some segments of unorganised workers including those who are not 'BPL'. According to the Labour Ministry more than 2 crores smart cards have been issued under the RSBY, though how many of them have been issued to the unorganised workers is not clear. The government envisages covering the entire BPL population of 6.52 crore families (according to Planning Commission estimates) in 5 years. For this, the government of India needs to spend around Rs 4875 crores annually to pay the 75% of the annual premium. However, the fund allocated by the government in successive Union budgets cannot cover even 1% of BPL families the number of which has been swelling every day owing to relentless price rise and increasing joblessness. In addition, the government is promoting the Swavalamban scheme in the name of providing pension to the unorganised workers. It is a contributory pension scheme where there is no assured government contribution nor any assured

returns. This is nothing but a crude attempt by the government to lure the poor unorganised workers to contribute their hard earned money which can be invested to boost up the share market with no assured returns to the workers.

The above exposes the fraud being perpetrated by the government on the vast multitude of unorganised sector workers in the name of providing social security. This is an integral part of the ongoing process of loot being engineered by the neoliberal policy regime with the government seeking to befool the people chanting aam admi slogan on every occasion. To cry halt to such cruel approach towards the overwhelming majority of country's working people, the central trade unions have, in one voice, demanded concrete measures for universal social security cover for the unorganised sector workers and creation of a National Social Security Fund with adequate resources as per the unanimous recommendations of the National Social Security Board for Unorganised Workers.

***Another important demand of the central trade unions is that disinvestment of shares in the public sector units, both central and state, must be stopped completely.***

The government's initiatives to disinvest shares of PSUs have already taken an alarming dimension. After the first phase of disinvestment of shares in Navaratna companies like ONGC, NTPC, PFC, Coal India etc thereby garnering Rs 20000 crores, the government has now taken up an ambitious target of earning Rs 40000 crore in the current financial year. It has started aggressively processing for disinvestment in another set of Navaratna companies like BHEL, HAL, SAIL, and NALCO etc. The entire trade union movement perceives this exercise of disinvestment of shares in profit making PSUs as a game plan for phased privatisation of all the blue-chip PSUs in the country in favour of the private corporates, both domestic and foreign. It is nothing but an attempt to hand over the control of huge public assets and natural resources to private hands. This

anti-people and anti-national measure must be resisted in the interest of the nation and its people.

The government is putting forward a deceptive argument that disinvestment is meant for expanding peoples' ownership including employees' ownership of public sector companies, for garnering resources for social sector welfare expenditures and also to meet the modernisation expenditures of the public sector companies. The government is also making misleading assurances to befool the workers and the people that only minority shares will be disinvested and hence there is no fear for privatisation.

It is utterly obnoxious to talk about expanding people's ownership through disinvestment. Peoples' ownership of PSUs is exercised through hundred percent government ownership and accountability to Parliament elected by the people. It can no way be ensured through ownership of PSU shares by private individuals. Any dilution of this status through disinvestment dilutes public ownership in favour of private corporates. The profile and character of private shareholdings in the PSUs disinvested so far clearly exposes this reality. Hardly 1 to 1.5% of disinvested shares has gone to private individuals and the majority of them have been cornered by private corporate entities including MNCs and private mutual funds, both domestic and foreign.

Secondly PSUs do not need to sell their equity for funding their modernisation because they have huge reserves and surpluses at their command amounting to more than Rs five lakh crores. PSUs listed for disinvestment in the current phase are all carrying on their modernisation projects with their own resources without any budgetary support from the government. The PSUs have more than enough resources to get loans from banks if they require funding for their modernisation or fresh investment. They need not mobilise resources by selling their shares through disinvestment. However, the government is forcing the PSUs to resort to such bad and imprudent financial management just to favour the private corporate lobby.

Thirdly, it is untenable to talk about collecting resources for social sector expenditure by selling shares of PSUs. Social welfare expenditure for the people is a responsibility of the government elected by the people and is of recurring and continuous in nature. Any idea of funding such continuous and recurring expenditure through disinvestment of shares of PSUs makes the disinvestment process also a continuing exercise finally and inevitably culminating in privatisation of the PSUs themselves. This clearly exposes the real game plan of privatisation behind disinvestment exercise besides unveiling the utter falsehood resorted by the government.

The public sector trade union movement has already raised its voice of protest against the sinister game plan of disinvestment. The coal workers all over the country staged militant strike action last year against the move of disinvestment. Despite all out efforts and campaign by the Coal India management and also the Coal Ministry to allure the coal workers to purchase shares of Coal India at discounted price, workers en masse rejected this nefarious attempt by the touts of disinvestment; not even one per cent of the entire workforce in the coal industry came forward to purchase the shares. The workers of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd (Visakhapatnam Steel Plant) and all the trade unions there staged militant strike action in July 2012 where the entire workforce including contract workers joined en masse. The unions again decided for a two days strike action on 12-13 October 2012 in the steel plant and a total bandh was supposed to be observed by the people of the entire city in support of the striking workers. That programme was deferred in view of government deferring its programme of disinvestment in the Steel Plant for the time being. The National Aluminium Company Ltd (NALCO) in Odisha witnessed 100 per cent strike by the workers and officers on 20th October 2012 against the move of disinvestment there and in the next phase, the trade unions of the entire state have planned for a state wide bandh for which preparations have already started. All these actions against disinvestment have drawn widespread solidarity support from other public sector unions in the country.

Policy of privatisation is being pursued and exercised by the neoliberal regime through various routes and disinvestment is one of them. The policy of deregulation of financial sector of the economy which is now being attempted through Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill and Insurance Laws (Amendment) Bill pending in Parliament are aimed at finally privatising the entire banking and insurance sector in favour of foreign corporates with domestic players as junior partner. The exposure of nefarious coal-gate scam is now being sought to be used by the beneficiaries of the scam – the government-operators and the private corporates to open the process of denationalisation of the entire coal sector through making noise on competitive bidding. In the name of Public Private Partnership (PPP), precious natural resources, public utility services, vital infrastructure sector including public properties like roads, railway stations, airports etc are being handed over for exploitation and windfall gain by private lobby, both foreign and domestic, imposing greater burden on the mass of people. Even welfare, education and sectors have become a profit hunting ground by business barons through the same PPP route, courtesy the Manmohan Singh Govt at the centre. The battle against privatisation and disinvestment has to be fought comprehensively against all above nefarious designs of neoliberal order.

Based on the above five demands on policy issues jointly formulated in 2009, the central trade unions have jointly adopted another five concrete demands for immediate action by the government in the joint national convention in 2011. The need for more heightened countrywide action to press for these immediate demands was also emphasised. These pertain to contract workers, minimum wages, bonus, provident fund, gratuity, pension and registration of trade unions.

***No Contractorisation of work of permanent/perennial nature; equal wages and benefits to the contract workers as the regular workers of the industry/establishment***

The widespread contractorisation and casualisation of work in most of the workplaces have created an alarming situation. As per official estimates, of the total workforce in the country, 51% are self employed, 33.5% are casual and hardly 15.6% are in salaried employment. Of the salaried employees, majority are on contract. In the public sector units, the share of contract employment is around 50% of the total workforce on an average while more than 70% workers in the private sector are contract workers. These vast sections of contract workers, barring rare exceptions, are mostly deprived of almost all the statutory benefits including minimum wages, social security etc. Their employment is always under threat by the respective contractor and the principal employer. This has given rise to a dangerous dichotomy in most of the workplaces where, under the same roof two sets of workers doing the same job but with vastly different conditions of employment are employed. The contract workers in most of the establishments get hardly one sixth or even less as wages than their counterparts among regular workers.

Continued existence of such a grossly discriminatory situation would not only aggravate the exploitation of contract workers but also lead to downward pressure on the wages and service conditions of the regular workers. That is precisely what is taking place in most of the workplaces particularly in the private sector - large, medium or small scale alike. Despite consistent increase in GDP growth as well as profits for the employers, the average level of wages has been going down owing to the sharp reduction in the number of permanent workers and widespread contractorisation of work.

The trade union movement in the country has long been struggling against such exploitation of the workers through contractorisation. In various sectors contract workers are being organised in trade unions braving severe repression and retrenchment; many militant struggles are being organised through which the contractor workers' issues could be brought to national focus. It is in this process that the demand for same wages for contract workers as the

regular workers has also been adopted by the united platform of all central trade unions. The contract workers' issue could be made the main agenda for deliberation of the 43rd Indian Labour Conference held in November 2010, which inter alia recommended appropriate amendment to the Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act 1970 to ensure same wages and benefits to the contract workers for doing the same and similar nature of jobs as the regular workers. While the government representatives (both centre and states) and the trade union representatives approved this recommendation, the employers' organisations opposed the same for obvious reasons. Because of the consistent persuasion and pressure by the trade union movement, the Union Labour Ministry formulated a concrete proposal for amendment of Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act 1970 to incorporate the section 25(2)(v)(a) of the Rules framed under the Act in the main body of the Act to give the provision for same wage and benefit as regular workers for contract workers a statutory force.

The Union Labour Ministry's proposal was sent for the approval of the Cabinet in March 2010. But the Union Cabinet and its main drivers have demonstrated their unflinching dedication to the employers' interests by sitting over the proposal for the last two years. The total financial implication of this pro-worker amendment is just Rs 13000 crore to be borne not by the government alone but by all those engaging labour on contract. Despite such minimal financial implication to give justice to more than seventy percent of the productive workforce of the country who are the real contributors to country's growing GDP rates, the government has just been blockading the process. It will continue to do so unless it is compelled to change its approach.

In the run up to the preparatory campaign for forthcoming two days strike action on 20-21 February 2013, trade unions have to campaign on all these developments among the grass root level workers in all the workplaces, expose the nasty role of the PMO in deliberately blocking the delivery

of minimum justice to the contract workers despite concrete proposal in this regard from the Union Labour Ministry. Such pressure from below alone can compel the government, dedicated for the service of the handful of employers, to clear the passage of the amendment to Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition ) Act 1970 to ensure same wage and benefits for same work for the contract workers.

***Amendment of Minimum Wages Act to ensure universal coverage irrespective of the schedules; fix statutory minimum wage at not less than Rs 10000***

As per the data published by Annual Survey of Industries, the share of wages in net value added has sharply declined from 30% in late eighties to 9.5% in 2009 while share of profit has jumped from around 15% to 55% during the same period. This clearly demonstrates that fruits of hard labour of the workers in the form of higher production and services are totally looted away by the employers' class. Such inhuman condition can no way be tolerated by the working class movement lying down, particularly when the prices of all the essential commodities are continuously going up. In many states, large numbers of sectors/ establishments are not included under the Minimum Wages Act. Minimum wages are not revised regularly and the minimum wages fixed for many sectors are ridiculously low. Even in the cases where minimum wages have been notified, many notifications are being challenged in High Courts and kept pending for years together, making it worthless for the workers. The government of India and almost all the state governments are resorting to the dubious method of employing lakhs of workers, a large number of them women, calling them 'social workers', 'activists', 'volunteers' 'friends', etc, like the anganwadi employees, ASHAs/ USHAs, 'education volunteers', 'siksha mitras' etc. Many of them are paid a measly 'honorarium' or 'incentive' and not any wages. The demand raised by the central trade unions that the Minimum Wages Act should be amended to ensure universal coverage to all workers irrespective of

schedules and that statutory minimum wages should be fixed at not less than Rs 10000 for any worker has to be highlighted in the campaign for the strike.

The 44th Indian Labour Conference held on 14-15 February 2012 unanimously recommended amendment to the Minimum Wages Act to ensure formulation of Minimum Wages as under:

'1. There was consensus that the Government may fix minimum wages as per the norms /criteria recommended by 15th ILC (1957)and the directions of the Hon'ble Supreme Court (Raptakos Brett Vs Workers' Union) 1992. The Government may take necessary steps accordingly.

2. There was a broad consensus that the Minimum Wages Act should cover all employments and the existing restriction for its applicability on the scheduled employments only should be deleted. This will also help India ratify ILO Convention no 131.'

The criteria unanimously evolved by 15th Indian Labour Conference (1957) stipulated fixation of minimum wages based on -

1) Per capita food intake of at least 2700 calories for a worker's family comprising three members

2) Per capita cloth of at least 18 yards per annum

3) Provision of housing as per minimum rent charged by government industrial housing scheme for low-income category

4) Fuel, lighting, miscellaneous expenditures to constitute 20 per cent of the total minimum wage.

The Supreme Court Judgment (1992) stipulated additional 25 per cent of the minimum wage for education, medical expense, recreation and provision of old age and marriage to be taken into account while fixing minimum wage.

As per recommendation of both 15th ILC and 44th ILC, minimum wage works out to be more than Rs 13000 per month at the present prices. The trade unions are demanding only Rs 10000 to be declared as the minimum wage in the country. Are the trade unions asking too much?

Moreover, the Indian Labour Conference is a tripartite body representing all the trade unions, all the employers' organisations and all the governments – the Union Government and those in the states. In the background of the united struggles by the trade unions and the atmosphere created by such struggles, it was possible to evolve a consensus among all the constituents in the 44th Indian Labour Conference. In fact, the minimum wage demanded by the trade unions is less than the level stipulated in the consensus recommendation of the 44th ILC. Then where is the problem for fixing the minimum wage at Rs 10000 and make the appropriate amendment to the Minimum Wages Act?

Given the attitude of the government, which has become corporate captive, serving the interests of capital at the cost of the working people, this amendment will not materialise despite the consensus recommendation by the Indian Labour Conference. History shows that each and every pro people and pro worker legislation could come into being only when the government was compelled through united struggles by the trade unions, the working class and the people.

The consensus recommendation of 44th Indian Labour Conference on Minimum Wages, which in itself was an outcome of the united struggles of the workers, must be utilised as a weapon in the campaign for the forthcoming two days country wide general strike on 20-21 February 2013. Workers in each factory and establishment, in each office and shop, at all work places, organised and unorganised, should be made aware of this to build up pressure from below on both the central government and the state governments to create a compelling situation.

***Remove all ceilings on payment and eligibility of Bonus, Provident Fund; Increase the quantum of gratuity.***

The Bonus Act remains an outdated legislation with almost all the workers in the organised sector being pushed out of eligibility because of the income ceiling at Rs 6500 per month. Even for those who are eligible to get bonus, it is calculated on the basis of the wages of Rs 3500 per month. Despite the long pending demand, the government of India has refused to remove these ceilings, which deprive the right to bonus to the workers even as there is no ceiling on profits for the employers. Hence the demand for the removal of all restricting ceiling on provident fund, payment of bonus, gratuity etc has been raised by the joint trade union movement.

***Assured pension for all***

The present economic policy regime has been working overtime to curtail whatever meagre social security benefits were available to the workers. A grave conspiracy is afoot to drastically dilute the existing pensionary rights of the workers and employees.

The Employees' Pension Scheme launched with much fanfare in 1995, despite the staunch opposition by CITU has finally proved to be a farce for the crores of retired workers who are getting a measly amount as pension compared to their last drawn wages. Given the attitude of the government in administering the present Employees' Pension scheme, maintenance of the existing levels of pension too is going to be difficult. A number of benefits promised under the Employees Pension Scheme at the time of its introduction have already been curtailed. The existing pensionary benefits for the government employees are being sought to be dismantled and replaced by a so called New Pension System. Despite the contribution every month of 10% of their wages to the pension fund, there is no guarantee on the amount of pension for the retired government employees. The Pension Fund Development &

Regulatory Authority Bill that has already been introduced in the Parliament is meant to legitimise such retrograde and anti-worker measures of the government.

Experience worldwide has proved beyond doubt that the market can never ensure an assured pension for the workers. In case of the New Pension System, workers would be made to pay for their pension corpus, which in turn will be used in the stock market for speculation through various fund managers. Not only that. The government is also trying to trap and allure vast sections of the unorganised sector workers to subscribe to the New Pension System titled 'Swavalamban', from their hard earned meagre incomes although they will not have any guaranteed amount of pension even after contributing towards the scheme for long thirty years. As already mentioned, this scheme is not to provide assured pension to the unorganised workers but to harness their contribution to the pension corpus for speculation in the stock market through mutual funds and fund managers, both domestic and foreign. The situation has become more critical with the recent decision of the government to allow FDI in the pension sector. It is nothing but a satanic ploy to favour foreign financial companies, who are already in crisis following the global financial meltdown in 2008, owing to their reckless speculative activities with public funds. These foreign financial companies had destroyed their capital base once. By allowing these foreign players to handle the pension and other social security savings of the Indian people, Manmohan Singh government is working overtime to supply capital and business to these very same discredited foreign financial institutions, while pretending that FDI in pension sector will help Indian workers get a better pension. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The foreign financial institutions will be allowed to handle the pension funds of the Indian people as fund managers; they are not going to bring any additional funds in the name of 'foreign direct investment'. This is the fact. It is a shame that the government and its hired intellectuals go on spreading falsehoods and open lies

through the media and official forums in respect of FDI in the pension sector.

Just like the illusory returns to ordinary people (not the brokers or big traders) trying to make fortune through gambling in the stock market, the government is trying to lure the workers to the share market utilising their desire to have economic security in their old age. Such heinous conspiracy against the only means of old age security for the working people cannot be allowed to pass. The united voice of the trade unions demanding 'Pension for all' must be echoed all over the country during the campaign for the two-day countrywide General Strike on 20-21 February 2013.

***Compulsory registration of trade unions within a period of 45 days; immediate ratification of the ILO Conventions Nos 87 and 98***

This demand relates to the irrefutable rights of the workers - their trade union rights related to the right to organisation and collective bargaining. Under the neoliberal regime, the basic trade union rights of the workers are also being sought to be curtailed. The rising opposition of the workers to the injustices meted out to them and the machinations to deny their due is being sought to be trampled underfoot. In a nefarious bid to prevent workers from organising to resist such barbarous exploitation, employers do not allow the basic right of the workers to form trade unions of their choice and involve in trade union activities. The governments always fling into action in support of the employers.
Trade unions are not being allowed to be formed in various workplaces particularly in the newly emerging private sector establishments and more particularly in the MNC led companies. Trade unions are not being registered.

Applications for registration of trade unions are being rejected or kept gathering dust in the offices of the Registrars of Trade Unions for months together without any reason whatsoever in most of the states in the country In most of

the private sector workplaces and even in some public sector units, the workers taking such initiative to form trade unions are thrown out of employment on some fabricated charges; in most of such cases the labour department and the state administration side with the employers. Implicating workers in false criminal cases for taking part in trade union activities has become a regular practice in many of the states. The experiences of workers of Maruti Suzuki and Honda in Haryana, of Hyundai and Foxconn in Tamilnadu, of Toyota Kirloskar and Volvo in Karnataka are some of the glaring examples of such state patronised trade union busting by the government employer nexus. This has now become the pattern of blockading trade union formation. Never before were the basic rights to freedom of association and to collective bargaining sought to be denied so blatantly as under the present neoliberal regime under UPA-II government.

This is nothing but an attack on the Right to Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining considered to be essential components of labour rights in any civilised and democratic society and codified as 'Core Labour Standards' by the ILO which adopted specific conventions (No 87 and 98) on these rights. The government of India has not yet ratified these conventions on flimsy grounds. The central trade unions have therefore put forth the specific demand that there must be compulsory registration of trade unions within a period of 45 days of application and ratification of the core ILO Conventions Nos 87 and 98 relating to rights to freedom of association and rights to collective bargaining' without any further delay.
These demands and issues that have been raised from the joint platform of all central trade unions which has given the call for the two days all India General Strike on 20 - 21 February 2013, must be carried to each and every worker; they must be taken to the mass of the toiling people at their workplaces and to their dwelling places. An intensive campaign to ensure that each and every worker is approached and made aware of these demands has to be unleashed. The preparatory campaign for the strike must

reinforce the initiatives for a widespread joint campaign at the workplace level all over the country. This alone can ensure that the unity of the trade unions that has been achieved at the national level percolates to the grass-root level uniting the entire working class. And such unity of the working class alone will pave the way for higher forms of united actions and sustained struggles against the mounting offensive of the exploiting classes and the governments acting at their behest.

**The global economic crisis, reminiscent of the crisis of 1930s has once again exposed the failure of the capitalist system to solve the problems of unemployment, poverty and inequality confronted by the working class and mass of the people today. The crisis is deepening everyday and so also the miseries of the people. Worldwide, more and more people - workers, students, and youth – including in the advanced capitalist countries, are coming out in angry protest actions raising the most pertinent questions- why ninety nine per cent *aam admis* will continue to be looted for the benefit of one per cent *khas admis* , why should mass of the working people who produce profit for handful of the corporates and big-business continue to languish in poverty, hunger, and destitution. Situation demands the struggles to be carried to an offensive height. Strengthening working class unity at the grass roots and intensifying the struggles is the way before us. It is with this objective that we must embark upon the preparatory campaign for the strike. We must leave no stone unturned to make the two-days' General Strike on 20-21 February 2013 a resounding success throughout the country.**

**MARCH TOWARDS TWO DAYS' COUNTRYWIDE GENERAL STRIKE ON 20-21 FEBRUARY 2013.**

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