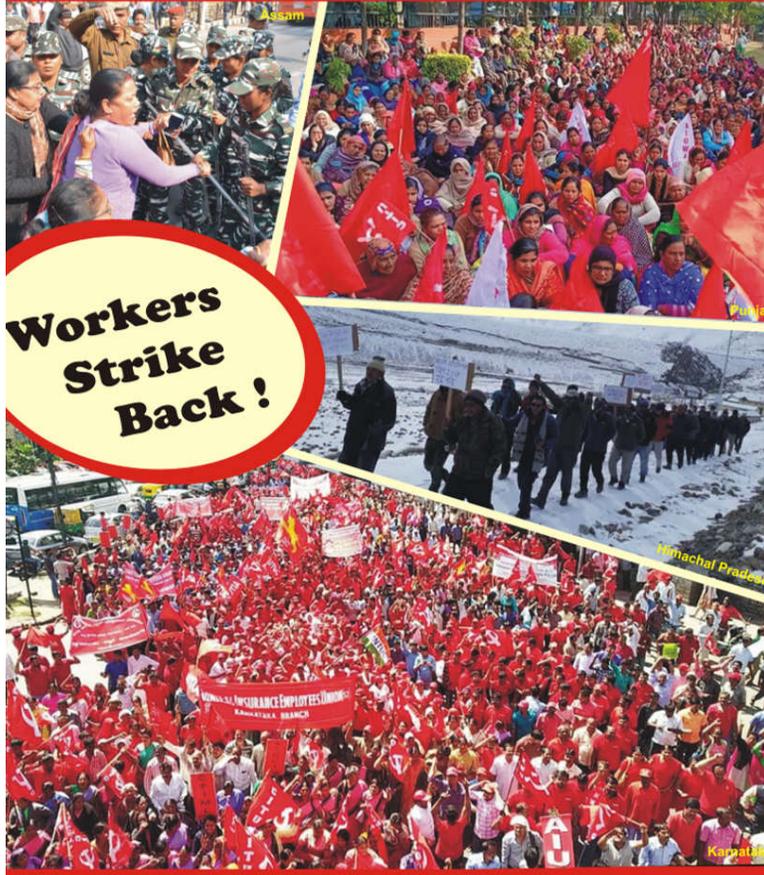
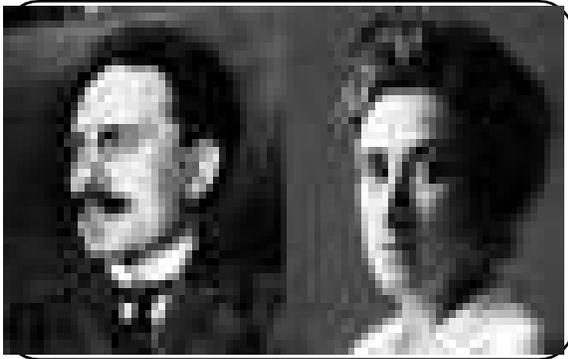


# The Voice of the Working Woman



# Rosa Luxemburg



A hundred years ago, on January 15, 1919 in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg, the great Marxist theoretician and revolutionary was murdered by *Friekorps*, a gang of fascist soldiers, the forerunners of the storm troopers of Hitler, who smashed her head with a rifle butt before shooting her brains out. Her body was thrown into a river in Berlin and found only 5 months later. The same day, another great German revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht was executed with a bullet in the head.

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were killed because they led an uprising under the leadership of the German Communist Party, an uprising through the revolutionary organization “Spartacus League”, the heroic rebellion of the German workers against the traitors of the working class and the German plutocracy. It was the then German Social Democrat Chancellor Friedrich Ebert who gave the order for their murder to the Minister of Defence, and later paved the way for Hitler with his counterrevolutionary actions.

Rosa was intensely opposed to bureaucratic and elitist methods of organization and argued for revolutionary democracy. She fought relentlessly against the reformist and revisionist compromises in the labour movement. She was one of the early organizers of the international working women’s movement.

For the CITU and the class-oriented trade union movement all over the world, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht will live forever.

“Freedom is always the freedom of the dissenter”

“Democracy is indispensable, not because it renders superfluous the conquest of political power by the proletariat, but, on the contrary, because it makes this seizure of power both necessary and possible.”

- Rosa Luxemburg

## *The Voice* of the **Working Woman**

Monthly Journal of the AICCW(CITU)

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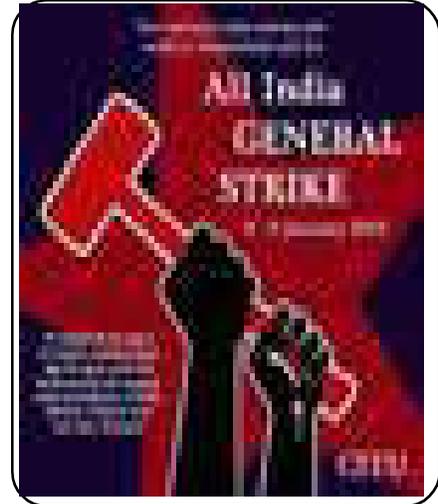
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## Red Salute To The Working Class!

The working class of India started the New Year 2019 with a strong and unambiguous warning to the BJP led Modi government that its disastrous neoliberal policies will no longer be tolerated.

Around 20 crore workers and employees, from all sectors - the organised public and private sectors, the unorganised sector and scheme workers – all over the country participated in this historic and unprecedented strike. The rural masses, peasants, agricultural workers and artisans extended their support and solidarity to the working class in various forms.

The working class totally ignored with due contempt the attempts of some of the trade unions that mortgaged the interests of the working class at the altar of the corporate controlled government and tried to create confusion and disrupt their unity. The huge discontent and anger against the rising unemployment, deteriorating living and working conditions, the attacks on the basic labour rights of the workers were reflected in the active participation of thousands of followers and members of these unions in the strike and the demonstrations. The participation of workers and the solidarity they received were unprecedented not only in our country but in the world.



This 18<sup>th</sup> strike since the advent of the neoliberal policies in the country will be a historic milestone in the annals of the people's struggles of our country. The Voice of the Working Woman salutes the working class of India for making the strike such a magnificent success.

This strike was the culmination of a series of struggles by the working class and the peasants that started around a year ago.

However, given the increasing intensity of the attacks on the toiling masses by the ruling classes, who are desperate to safeguard and increase their profits in the face of the unrelenting global crisis, the working class cannot afford to rest. The next phase of struggle must start at once. And this must be directed at the decisive defeat of the BJP in the Parliament elections due in a few months. This is necessary to protect the unity of the working class and the people, to save democracy and the nation. It is the patriotic duty of all citizens of our country. It is the responsibility of the working class to be in the forefront in this struggle to defeat the anti worker, anti people and anti national BJP. We owe this to our children, to our future generations.

Preparations for the next phase of struggle must start immediately. Efforts to approach each and every worker, at each and every workplace, and in each and every nook and corner of the country have to begin at once. Workers and all sections of toiling people have to be made aware that their day to day issues and their burning problems are linked to the policies being pursued by successive governments which have been working for the big corporates, domestic and foreign; not for the people who voted for them.

The broad unity of the workers and peasants, the seeds for which were sowed a few years ago, built up into joint struggles and took the form of countrywide joint movements by 2018, has to be further strengthened in 2019 to convert the defensive struggles into struggles for the reversal of the discredited neoliberal regime and further still, to end all exploitation.

# 8-9 January 2019

## Historic Countrywide Workers General Strike

An estimated 20 crore workers in all sectors and in all states and union territories in the country joined the 2 day nationwide workers general strike on 8-9 January, 2019 in response to the joint call of 10 central trade unions – CITU, INTUC, AITUC, HMS, AIUTUC, AICCTU, TUCC, UTUC, SEWA and LPF; and of almost all independent national federations of all sectors of employees. The only exception was the RSS-affiliated BMS, which deserted the trade unions' joint platform just on the eve of the first general strike on 2 September 2015 after the BJP assumed power at the Centre. However, their workers in large numbers joined the 8-9 January strike in several sectors in different parts of the country.

The strike was participated in by workers of all sectors including the organised sector, both public and private including multinational, government and quasi government; scheme workers, and unorganised sector workers across the country. All over the country, workers struck work and thousands marched in processions and held rallies and public meetings.

The strike was supported by wide sections of the people. The All India Kisan Sabha and other kisan organisations, independently and jointly, and along with agricultural workers unions, organised solidarity actions and, together with the workers and other toiling sections, resorted to *Rail Roko* and *Rasta Roko* in several parts of the country. They also gave a call of simultaneous *Gram Bandh* (rural strike). Women, youth and students in large numbers, under the banner of their respective organisations, also joined in pre-strike campaigns; and joined rallies and demonstrations on strike days. Striking workers, their families and dependents, and those who were in solidarity actions and supported the strike across the country, constituted almost half of India's total 133.92 crore population.

The 8-9 January 2019 strike was for 10 demands, which are being pursued unitedly by the trade unions since 2009. Two more demands – no change in labour laws; and no FDI in defence, railways and insurance - were added before 2015 strike to resist Modi government's attacks in these areas. This strike was also in support of the demands of peasants for loan waiver, adequate remuneration for and ensured procurement of their crops

Despite the imposition of ESMA in Delhi and threats and intimidation of the employees, large scale arrests and state-sponsored violence in West Bengal, Tripura and some other states, the strike became historic. With people's participation the workers strike created a *Bandh* like situation in several states like in Kerala, Assam and other north eastern states, Odisha and in several districts of Karnataka.

The Brihanmumbai Electric Supply & Transport Undertaking (BEST) resorted to penal action on the striking workers by banning the strike. A day before the strike the Authority went to the Industrial Court which declared the strike as illegal under Maharashtra Essential Services Act. The Senior Personnel Manager (Welfare) ordered the striking workers to evict tenements they have been allotted to stay although the Court order had not directed to such action. CITU has protested to this action in a letter to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

Road transport was paralysed in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, in 22 districts of Madhya Pradesh; interstate bus service in Jammu and Kashmir

was affected. In West Bengal, despite TMC terror, both passenger and goods road transport remained severely affected. Several industries including jute and engineering industries remained closed. In Tripura despite BJP government's attacks the strike was more than 70% in transport and in shops and establishments. In the tribal areas of Tripura there was total bandh.



The strike was highly visible in the industrial areas of NCR Delhi, 24 Paraganas, Hooghly and Howrah districts of West Bengal, in the oil refineries across Assam, in Pune, Nashik and Aurangabad industrial areas in Maharashtra, in the industrial areas in Bengaluru, Mysore etc in Karnataka, in Ludhiana in Punjab, in the Bokaro, Ranchi, Adityapur Gamharia industrial areas in Jharkhand, in the engineering clusters in Baroda, Surat, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Junagarh and Ahmedabad in Gujarat and the industrial clusters in Hyderabad and surrounding districts in Telengana etc. It was total in multinational companies like BOSCH, CEAT, Crompton, Samsonite in Maharashtra and in all the units of Volvo, Toyota and its subsidiaries in Karnataka.

The strike was near total in the coal industry, affecting production and dispatch. It was almost total in Vizag and Salem steel plants and also in all the iron-ore and coal mines under the steel industry, around 50% in Rourkela steel Plant and Bhadravati, while partial in others steel plants. The participation of contract workers in most of the PSUs was total.

Electricity employees in many states joined the strike en masse. Though the railway employees did not join the strike, in several places they extended support to it. The railway contract workers and goods shed workers, safai karmacharis joined the strike in several states.

The tea gardens in Assam, West Bengal and Kerala were totally closed due to the strike. Unorganised workers, including beedi workers, construction workers, loading and unloading workers, shop employees, private hospital employees etc all joined the strike in a big way in many states and organised Road-roko and Rail-roko in many places paralysing the normal traffic.

Scheme workers including anganwadi employees, ASHA workers, midday meal workers and others joined the strike en masse across the country and participated in demonstrations.

The strike was total in insurance and BSNL and near total except in a few banks in the banking sector. Central government employees participated in a massive manner in the strike, which was total among the postal and income tax departments. Atomic energy employees participated in a big way. The strike was total among medical representatives all over the country. In several states state government offices wore a deserted look due to the strike. In Tripura, though teachers were compelled to attend schools, there were no students. In several states including West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand etc, police resorted to arrests.

Thousands of CITU activists and Left party leaders were arrested. In Neemrana industrial area in Alwar district of Rajasthan, the police resorted to lathi charge, fired teargas shells and filed false cases against trade union activists.

# **The Struggle for our Demands will Continue**

## **12 point Charter of Demands of the joint trade union movement**

1. Urgent measures for containing price-rise through universalisation of public distribution system and banning speculative trade in commodity market
2. Containing unemployment through concrete measures for employment generation
3. Strict enforcement of all basic labour laws without any exception or exemption and stringent punitive measures for violation of labour laws.
4. Universal social security cover for all workers
5. Minimum wages of not less than Rs 18,000/- per month with provisions of indexation
6. Assured enhanced pension not less than Rs.6,000/- p.m. for the entire working population
7. Stoppage of disinvestment in Central/State PSUs and strategic sale
8. Stoppage of contractorisation in permanent perennial work and payment of same wage and benefits for contract workers as regular workers for same and similar work
9. Removal of all ceilings on payment and eligibility of bonus, provident fund; increase the quantum of gratuity.
10. Compulsory registration of trade unions within a period of 45 days from the date of submitting application; and immediate ratification of ILO Conventions C 87 and C 98
11. Against Labour Law Amendments
12. Against FDI in Railways, Insurance and Defence

## **Ten Additional Demands in CITU campaign**

1. Workers' status for the Scheme Workers with minimum wages and social security rights
2. No to Privatisation of PSUs and public utility services
3. Remunerative price for the farmers at C2+50 as per Swaminathan Committee recommendations
4. No forcible acquisition of land; effective implementation of the Land Acquisition Act 2013
5. Waving farmers loans, particularly of small and marginal farmers; urgent drought relief; protection and promotion of animal husbandry chain
6. Against removal of kerosene oil and sugar from the public distribution system
7. Effective implementation of MGNREGA; 200 days work in a year for all card holders applying for work; payment of state minimum wage
8. Ensure safety for women at workplace; constitute complaints committees against sexual harassment at all work places and in areas for the unorganised workers; provide separate toilets and rest rooms for working women; six months paid maternity leave for all women workers; crèches in all establishments where women are working; equal wage for women workers doing the same or similar job as men
9. Reservation in private sector
10. Effective measures to stop caste discrimination and social oppression, atrocities against dalits and minorities

## **Post General Strike**

# **THE TASK BEFORE US**

Tapán Sen

**T**he country witnessed a massive two days countrywide general strike on 8-9 January 2019 by the working people against the anti-people, anti-worker and anti-national policies of the BJP-led Government of India. The general strike was called by all in the united platform of 10 central trade unions and almost all independent national federations. The strike by the working class had drawn countrywide support and solidarity, with various forms of protest actions, of the people of other walks of lives, the the peasantry and agricultural workers in particular.

The general strike and the countrywide peoples' massive response to it, demonstrated people's loud disapproval of BJP government's policy regime of loot, plunder and onslaught on the lives and livelihood of the toiling people at large; on the self-reliance and the national economy as a whole. It also reflected their anger against the poisonous, divisive and repressive machinations by the ruling polity on the entire society

### **Culmination of Series of Agitations**

The two days countrywide general strike, by the broadest ever united platform of the trade unions of the country and supported by the organizations of all sections of toiling people in the country, marks the convergence and culmination of last three and half years long consistent and continuous agitations and protest actions by the working class and toiling people at large against the same anti-people and anti-national policies of the Narendra Modi government at the centre. There had been agitations including strikes in various sectors at state and national levels. There were also struggles and strikes on common demands led by the central trade unions, jointly and separately.

This period has witnessed two countrywide general strikes, on 2 September in 2015 and in 2016, joined by over 15 crore workers, from both the organized and unorganized sector. There had also been numerous agitations and strike actions in various sectors viz. banks, insurance, telecom, coal, steel, road transport, engineering, electricity, various PSUs, defence-production, central and state government employees; in number of multinational companies and in private sector industries. During this period, the workers in various central government schemes particularly anganwadi employees, ASHA and mid-day-meal workers etc had been on consistent struggles, both at national and state levels, including indefinite strike action in some states. Construction workers also resorted to number of agitations and also a massive strike at national level. Also notable was the three days long Mahapadav before the Parliament in November 2017 with participation of at least 2.8 lakh workers in three days.

A number of such strikes, mostly in states, were for indefinite periods, compelling the concerned state governments or authority to retreat and concede the demands of the workers. Due to strike actions, the Government could not yet privatise any of the 10 PSUs including steel plants, BEML, Bridge and Roof, CEL and others which it had planned in 2014 itself.

### **Widened United Working Class Battle against Neoliberal Regime**

The working class movement is the only social force which has been on the path of united struggle with continuity right from the initiation of the pro-imperialist neoliberal policy regime from 1991 itself. Through such struggles and interventions against the neoliberal policy regime the united platform of the trade union movement got continuously widened, finally drawing in all the central trade unions in 2009. This all-in-united platform of trade unions led country wide struggles and agitations from 2009 to 2015, including the two days countrywide general strike in 2013. Joint struggles continued thereafter even though BMS deserted the joint trade union movement on the eve of the general strike in 2015. These struggles in the

organised and unorganised sectors tempered and widened the atmosphere of unrest and anger among the people, gradually targeting the pro-corporate pro-landlord neoliberal policy regime and its present operator – the BJP led government at the centre.

### **Change of Governments but No Change of Policies**

The grievous impact of the neoliberal policy regime on the lives and livelihood of the people - evidenced in mass scale informalisation and contractorisation of the workforce, increasing unemployment and job losses, rising prices, deliberate non-implementation and non-enforcement of labour laws, attack on labour rights and desperate move for privatization and disinvestment of PSUs and public utility services - has attracted the toiling people at large to the path of organized struggles and agitation both at sectoral level and at national plane.

But the anger and resentment of the people joining the struggles had been mainly against the sufferings and losses that they were being subjected to. It was not generally directed consciously against the policy regime and the politics behind that policy regime. As a result, despite changes in the government at the centre a number of times since 1991, the direction of the economic policies continued to remain the same, albeit with different intensities. The intervention of the Left forces played a crucial role in containing the intensity of the pursuit of neoliberalism at different spells during this period.

### **Aggressive Neoliberal Regime with Authoritarian, Divisive and Diversionary Agenda**

But the assumption of power by BJP government at the centre brought about a dramatic change in the situation altogether. Not only are the same anti-people and pro-corporate policies being pursued by the BJP government with much more brutal aggressiveness, but these are being supplemented with increasing authoritarian onslaught to stifle opposition to its misrule, trampling underfoot the basic constitutional values and principles. Simultaneously it has been resorting to a poisonous divisive strategy, seeking to sharpen communal and other types of polarisation in society on the basis of caste, creed and various other parochial routes, which is integral to their aim of sustaining the present rule of the exploiting classes that they represent. Through these they seek to divert the attention of the people from the burning issues of their lives and livelihood in the crisis ridden economy and prevent these from becoming the agenda of political discourse. They want to make people fight among themselves on such divisive lines instead of unitedly fighting against the root cause of their miseries and distress.

It is in this background that we should recall the CITU conference call to reach the unreached section of the people to further broaden the platform and coverage of the struggles; for conscious and organized effort to enable the workers to identify their real enemy through linking the issues and problems faced by them with the ongoing policy regime, and the political operators of such retrograde policies which are bringing miseries and destitution in their lives.

### **Surging Workers – Peasants Unity and United Struggle**

During the span of the last three years, along with the united and sustained struggles by the workers, farmers struggles came up in a big way. Their struggle against the land acquisition ordinance, for loan waiver and remunerative prices etc exposed the total fraud of the BJP regime before the people. Upsurge of farmers' struggles in Maharashtra and the long march from Nasik to Mumbai at the initiative of All India Kisan Sabha, farmers struggle in MP and Rajasthan and some other states are some of the notable farmers struggles which added momentum to the peoples' movement against Modi-regime.

Concerted and coordinated joint agitations by workers and peasants also marked a beginning during this phase of struggle which, in sequence, include countrywide 9 August, 2018 'Jail Bharo' on farmers demands by AIKS joined by CITU and AIAWU in around 600 locations in 394 districts and participated in by more than five lakh peasants and workers; Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Rally before Parliament on 5 September 2018 with above two lakh participation; Kisan Mukti March on 29-30 November 2018 in New Delhi joined by thousands of farmers and others; 30 November workers staging demonstration in most of the state capitals in solidarity with farmers and in support of their demands; and preparatory countrywide

campaigns for all these programmes starting in April focusing on reaching the unreached section of the people exposing the anti-people neoliberal regime.

This momentum was seen in the change in qualitative component of the peoples' movement bringing the two main productive forces in the society – the workers and peasants – into joint struggles highlighting the bread and butter issues of the people as a counter to the divisive non-issues by the RSS-BJP bandwagon. It is precisely in this background that the two days countrywide strike action has drawn the active support of the peasants' organizations through their rural bandh and rail-roko and rasta roko agitation on the strike days.

### **Positive Indicator in the Defeat**

Although at the initial stage, the BJP government's diversionary, divisive and authoritarian strategy met with some success as reflected in the BJP's victories in several assembly elections and BJP gaining power in majority state governments, the situation gradually changed. In the recent assembly elections, BJP's defeat in the Hindi heartland - Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, its failure to capture power in Karnataka, despite all its dubious efforts, and its defeat in ten Lok Sabha seats that it won in 2014 including in states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh etc where it had state governments; indicates the beginning of such change. Its diversionary and divisive strategy could not fulfill their expectations. Ram Mandir construction or cow-vigilantism etc could not be made major issues influencing the people in their favour. Instead, severe farmers' distress, unemployment and loss of livelihood, price-rise etc have shaped the opinion of the people facing the elections and that resulted in the rejection of BJP in these states. No doubt, to some extent this is a positive development. And massive struggles by the toiling people – the workers, farmers, agricultural workers and other sections of the people in sequence and with continuity - have made some contribution in this positive development. Of course there were other factors also.

### **The Main Tasks before Us**

The main task is to maintain the continuity and direction of this positive development and mass struggles and mobilizations. Conscious efforts must be made to orient the peoples' consciousness in the right direction in the days to come. Nothing is automatic.

This is the path before us. Mass actions and mobilizations on issues of lives and livelihood of the people is the only way for us to sensitise the people and make them identify their real enemy. That alone can make us advance towards a reversal of the policy regime. We have to attack at the root and must not get diverted to the fringes. This is the way to counter and defeat the philistine ploy of the capitalist-landlord class and their political agents in governance who try to divert peoples' attention from the main issues and divide them through non-class polarization.

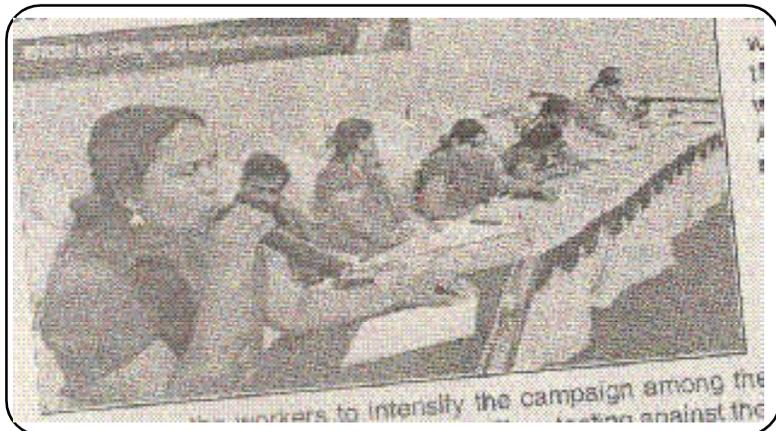
The post strike period must ensure the continuity of the organized intervention by the working class in coordination of the peasants, agricultural workers and other sections of the people. Workers-peasants joint initiative in action has to be carried forward vigorously and with continuity. The ensuing *19<sup>th</sup> January Worker Peasant Solidarity Day* must be observed with effective planning, campaign and mobilisation. The major responsibility lies with the working class. Such an initiative must percolate down to the lowest tier of the organisation to enable a different correlation as well as combination of struggling forces asserting at the grass root level of the entire society.

This period must be conceived as the beginning of another major political battle - the forthcoming Parliament elections. We must expose BOTH the neoliberal order and its present operator in the governance; not one OR the other. We must work and make people respond to the task of ousting this communal-authoritarian combine from the seat of governance in order to save the people and save the country. The principal task of the class movement must be to orient its intervention to bring forth forcefully the class issues of life and livelihood and unity of the people as the agenda of the political discourse in the forthcoming political battle. That is the only way to counter effectively the ploy of the ruling class and their political agents to divert and divide the people.

We must and we shall overcome!

## Conference of Mid Day Meal Workers' Union in Karnataka

The third state conference of Karnataka Rajya Akshara Dasoha Noukarara Santha ( Karnataka State Mid Day Meal Workers' Union) was held in Gangavathi, Koppal District on 22-24 December 2018.



The conference started with a rally on 22<sup>nd</sup> December which was attended by around four thousand mid day meal workers from Koppal district. After the colourful rally, a public meeting was held which was inaugurated by A R Sindhu, Vice President MDMWFI and Secretary, CITU. Explaining the policies of the BJP led central government which are dismantling the MDMS, she

called upon the workers to intensify the campaign among the people. She spoke about the recent march to Parliament by MDMWFI protesting against the neglect of MDM workers in the recent increase of remuneration of some of the scheme workers and called upon them to intensify the struggles and join en masse in the General Strike on 8-9 January 2019.

S Varalakshmi, President, Malini Meshta General Secretary of the union, Sunanda, General Secretary Anganwadi union, and Yamuna Gaonkar, Secretary state CITU also addressed the gathering.

The delegate session started at 5pm with Malini Meshta presenting the General Secretary's report. The report detailed the struggles and achievements of the union which could not only get an additional increase of Rs 1800 per month in the wages from the state government through militant struggles but also the building of the organization step by step by which it could increase the membership from 11,398 in 2011 to 26,659 in 2017. The union could get from the state government the expenses of workplace accident treatment.

28 delegates spoke on the report and accounts. Local issues included the issue of caste discrimination. After the discussion the report was adopted unanimously. The first day in the evening there were cultural programmes by delegates including songs, dances and local cultural forms.

## ASHA Facilitators in Madhya Pradesh

When PM Modi announced an increase in the incentives for ASHA and anganwadi workers on 11 September 2018, the All India Coordination Committee of ASHA Workers (CITU) approached the Prime Minister and Health Minister through Tapan Sen, General Secretary of CITU, pointing out that no increase had been made in the remuneration of the ASHA facilitators. As a result of the workers struggles and this intervention the government subsequently announced an increase in remuneration for ASHA Facilitators.

However, this increase was not implemented in Madhya Pradesh, and the workers continued their struggle. Once again the AICCAW and the CITU General Secretary intervened in the matter which resulted in an immediate government notification being issued on 15 January 2019 to ensure payment of the enhanced remuneration for ASHA Facilitators in Madhya Pradesh.

## Bihar

### **ASHA Workers Strike Work for 38 days: Get an Increase in Wages**

On 10<sup>th</sup> January 2019, the day after the nationwide general strike and the 38<sup>th</sup> day of the indefinite strike which started on 1 December 2018 by ASHA workers, the Minister for Health, Government of Bihar announced an increase of Rs.1000 in the basic monthly remuneration in addition to the recent increase by the central government, after a discussion with the striking unions. This was a great victory by the united struggle of ASHA workers in the state under the joint platform of ASHA workers unions consisting of CITU, AICCTU and other state level unions.

The government, which had brutally crushed many struggles by workers in the recent past, had to succumb to the united strength of the ASHA workers who not only struck work but were on the streets each day.

Seven ASHA workers passed away during the strike. Three were killed in an accident while returning from struggle and four died of cold during the strike.

As the government was reluctant even to talk to the striking unions, the unions mobilized the entire workforce on 8-9 January, the dates of General Strike. The ASHA workers, along with the anganwadi workers who were also on strike, blocked the rail and roads in many places in the state. Ultimately, the government had to concede the main demand of the strike. The government also issued orders for paid maternity benefit for ASHA workers.

### **Anganwadi Workers get Increase in Wages after 40 day strike**

Bihar, which has high levels of child malnutrition, is the state that pays the lowest remuneration to the anganwadi workers and helpers in the country i.e, Rs.750 and Rs.375 respectively. The Anganwadi Samyukta Sangharsh Samity consisting of CITU, AITUC and one independent union had been on joint struggles since last year. Earlier, the government was taking advantage of the fact that the unions were divided and conducting struggles separately. CITU took the initiative to bring the unions together and in the third phase of the continuous struggles, started an indefinite strike from 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

The government was not even ready to talk to the unions. Only the officials were holding meetings with the unions and repeatedly asking them to withdraw the strike. The government stand was that since the central government had recently increased the remuneration and the state had to bear 40% of that cost, they



cannot increase the remuneration any further. AIFAWH and all the state anganwadi unions had written to the Bihar government and demanded its intervention to end the strike

The striking workers were issued show cause notices and were threatened with dismissal, but this could not break the strike. The total anganwadi workers and helpers in the state came onto the streets and joined the 8-9 January general strike. On 15<sup>th</sup> January, the Minister for Social Justice held a discussion with the unions and agreed to an increase of remuneration after which the unions agreed to withdraw the strike.



We pay our homage to Com Shanta Chakrasali from Mundgod Taluk, Uttar Kanada, Karnataka.

She was an anganwadi helper who collapsed in strike procession on 8 January 2019, during the General Strike.

## Anganwadi Union Regional Trade Union School in Jharkhand

In the chilling cold on 29-30 December 2018 just after Christmas and before the New Year, there were doubts that hardly anyone would turn up for the two days' regional trade union school organized in Jamtara in Jharkhand. The TU school for the activists of the anganwadi union was organized for organizational consolidation and cadre development just before the General Strike. But by noon on 29<sup>th</sup> December more than fifty anganwadi workers and helpers from Godda and Jamtara districts had come to attend the class, which was held in the community centre.

The class started after lunch. A R Sindhu, General Secretary, AIFAWH explained the current political situation and government policies on ICDS.

The second session was held on different aspects of organization – membership, democratic functioning, cadre development, local issues and financial discipline, and was enthusiastically received by the participants.

Apart from preparing for active participation in the General Strike, it was decided to take up struggles on local issues, mainly the non payment for the supplementary nutrition.

The sessions were presided over by Susheela Hazda, Shilpi Goswami and Lakhanlal Mandal.

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# Workers Strike Back

DELHI



WEST BENGAL

IN PARLIAMENT



PUNJAB

KERALA



# Workers Strike Back



HIMACHAL PRADESH



BIHAR



UTTAR PRADESH



ASSAM



ANDHRA PRADESH



GUJARAT



# Workers Strike Back



HARYANA



JAMMU & KASHMIR



MAHARASHTRA



JHARKHAND



TAMILNADU



MADHYA PRADESH

# Workers Strike Back



BANK



POWER PLANT



TRANSPORT



INSURANCE



BCCL



TEA PLANTATION

# PMFBY: Profiting from Farmers' Distress

Subodh Varma

Among the series of schemes launched (or repackaged) by the Modi led NDA govt. one of the most toxic is the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY). Its purpose is to provide crop insurance to farmers, that is, if the crop fails due to some non-preventable reason like weather calamity etc. then the farmers will be compensated for this loss. The principle is sound – the government should take care of such losses which are very common in India since cultivation is largely dependent on monsoon rains.

What the Modi government did was to turn loss and distress of farmers into a profit-making enterprise. This happened through a well-established mechanism of insurance, a favoured model of the Modi government. In this model, which is being imposed on the healthcare system also through Ayushman Bharat, the government abdicates its own responsibility of providing a service and hands it over to companies. What could have been a straight forward service of compensating farmers for losses turns into govt. money being handed over to such companies who dole out compensation and make enormous profits from it.

## How PMFBY Works – Governments Paid Rs.34,859 crore to Companies!

Farmers pay an amount to the insurance companies as premium. This is usually between 1.5% to 5% of the total premium expected. The rest is paid equally by the Central government and the various state governments. The total (or gross) premium thus collected goes into the coffers of the insurance companies. After the harvest, if a farmer suffers loss of crops due to natural calamities then he or she is given compensation by the company from the gross premium that it had collected.

The scheme was inaugurated in 2016. Since then, three kharif seasons and two rabi seasons have been completed and we are now in the third rabi season. Information about how much premium was collected and how much compensation given out is available only till kharif 2017. As can be seen from Table 1 below, for kharif 2016, rabi 2016-17 and kharif 2017, the total premium collected by the 18 insurance companies was a staggering Rs.42,114 crore. This was made up of farmers contribution (amounting to Rs. 7,255 crore or just over 17%) and government's share (Rs. 34,859 crore or nearly 83%). The governments' share is made up of Central government and state governments equal contributions.

The insurance companies paid out Rs.32,912 crore as compensation. That means they were left with about Rs.8,713 crore as surplus.

How Insurance Companies Are Milking the Farmers (Rs. Crore)						
Season	Premium Collected by Ins. Cos.			Claims approved	Claim Paid	Surplus
	From Farmers	From Govt.	Total			
Kharif 2016	2,919	13,399	16,318	10,494	10,483	5,824
Rabi 2016-17	1,297	4,731	6,028	5,811	5,657	217
Kharif 2017	3,039	16,729	19,768	17,096	16,772	2,672
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,255</b>	<b>34,859</b>	<b>42,114</b>	<b>33,401</b>	<b>32,912</b>	<b>8,713</b>
<b>Source: RS Starred Q.No.121; 21.12.2018</b>						

As you can see, it is a scam of monumental proportions. What the government could have done directly (paying farmers for crop losses) is now being handed over to insurance companies and they are – expectedly – taking a huge commission or cut out of it. These companies have kept nearly 21% of the money in their pockets. It is the same money that suffering farmers had paid out as premium or the government's money which is ultimately derived from the people.

The Central government itself has spent about Rs.33,489 crore in the three years since this scheme was started (Table 2). This is not going towards premium subsidy alone. The premium subsidy share of the central government is about Rs.21,000 crore because it has to bear 50% share only with the other half coming from state governments. So, why this additional amount of about Rs.12,000 crore? Part of it is liabilities clearance from before 2016 and part is the administration cost.

Year	Funds Allocated
2016-17	11,054.6
2017-18	9,419.8
2018-19	13,014.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>33,488.6</b>
Source: RS Unstarred Q.No.1935; 3.8.2018	

### Average Compensation Per Farmer – Just Rs.11,805

Compensation to farmers is determined by a complicated process that is largely run by the state government. – not by the insurance companies. So, the cost of this is borne by state government even though insurance companies are getting all the profits. To find out how much compensation is to be paid, Crop Cutting Experiments (CCEs) are carried out across the country. In each season, some 15-20 lakh such CCEs are conducted. In each such CCE, a sample plot is selected and in the presence of various local officials and company representatives, the crop is cut and measured. This is compared to the average of the past seven years to determine the loss. Surveys have found a huge number of lacunae in CCEs with primitive methods of assessment. This leads to less compensation for farmers.

According to IIM-Ahmedabad survey for evaluation of PMFBY, on an average, each farmer got just Rs.11,805 as compensation in 2016-17 (kharif and rabi combined, across all states).

### Delays in Compensation Payment

Widespread complaints of delays in claim settlement and receipt of payment have been reported right from the first season when PMFBY was implemented. Delays of as long as 3-4 months were common. This is catastrophic for the farmers who have suffered losses because they need the money to start their next season's preparation immediately. Any delay in this forces them into the clutching arms of money lenders who charge exorbitant rates. This was precisely the reason that there was need for speedy compensation after crop losses, and it was touted as a big advantage of the PMFBY. Yet two years of implementing experience shows that this problem has not been resolved.

Why are there delays? Later investigation has revealed that there were several factors behind delays, including absence of company representatives at the CCEs leading to the company filing objections to the claimed amount (including court cases!), delay in transfer of subsidy amount by state governments and delays at the bank level. All of this arises from the involvement of companies in the process. The myth that it is only government bureaucracy that delays payments has been blown apart by PMFBY experience. Insurance companies themselves cause as much delay. This is not really surprising because they are in the game only for making profit, not for farmers' welfare. So, they try to create as many obstacles as possible in the process of making payments of claims. This is a characteristic that all insurance companies all over the world share.

## Farmers Disillusioned With PMFBY

In view of all these problems – low compensation, delayed payment, rejection of claims, increasing premium costs – farmers have voted with their feet. Starting with over 4 crore insured farmers in its first season (kharif 2016), the coverage dipped to 3.47 crore in kharif 2017 and is provisionally estimated at 3.33 crore in this years' kharif season. That's a drop of 70 lakh farmers or 17% of the starting point, in two years, just for the kharif season. (See Table 3)

<b>Kharif 2016</b>	<b>402.6</b>		<b>Rabi 2016-17</b>	<b>170.6</b>
<b>Kharif 2017</b>	<b>347.8</b>		<b>Rabi 2017-18</b>	<b>170.5</b>
<b>Kharif 2018 (Prov.)</b>	<b>332.7</b>			
<b>Source: LS Starred Q. No. 17; 11.12.2018</b>				

In the rabi seasons, the drop is much less at about 10,000 farmers less in 2017-18 compared to 2016-17.

One aspect that needs mention here is the nature of enrolment in the

scheme. All the farmers who take loans from banks have to compulsorily enrol and get insurance coverage. Field studies have shown that banks get the loan taking farmer to sign a consent form at the time of loan disbursement itself. This is what has artificially propped up the numbers in PMFBY. With passing time, this forced enrolment is cracking up. There are reports that farmers sign up – they have no option – when taking a loan but shy away from paying the insurance premium. Also, with the banking system itself in crisis and credit flow to farmers slowing down, the number of loanees has not increased so much and hence the dip in insured farmers numbers.

### What Should Be Done

PMFBY has turned out to be a massive conspiracy to suck out farmers' hard-earned money and also government funds (which are also public money) and hand these over to insurance companies for nothing. This has left farmers without adequate compensation for crop losses due to weather hazards, failure of monsoon, pest attacks etc. It is the duty of the society as a whole to compensate farmers for such losses and the elected government should undertake this important responsibility directly itself.

Making profits running into hundreds of crores of rupees out of farmers' distress may be Modi's idea of how to run the country but it flies against all morality and principles of justice. PMFBY should be scrapped forthwith and a robust government run compensation system established.

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# Why is France Burning?

R Arun Kumar



**F**RANCE, for the last four weeks, has been witnessing one of the major political demonstrations since 1968, ie, after almost fifty years. While the 1968 demonstrations were hailed as the 'student demonstrations' that initiated a popular movement against the then governments in many of the capitalist States, there is a substantial difference with what is now taking place in France. The present protests are mainly led by the toiling classes in the country, chiefly those from the rural regions, with students also joining them at a later stage. These protests, that continue to rock France, are taking place not only in Paris, but all across the country. Hundreds of thousands of protesters came out onto the streets wearing 'yellow vests' (*'gilets jaunes'*), initially expressing their anger against the fuel tax imposed by the Macron government. The protesters are now talking against inequality, injustice and are demanding wage rise.

The true character of the participants in the 'yellow vest' protests was best described by a famous French novelist as those with '*suffering bodies ravaged by work, by fatigue, by hunger, by the permanent humiliation of the dominated by the dominant, by social and geographical exclusion and are tired bodies and tired hands, broken backs and exhausted faces*'. It is these '*tired bodies and tired hands*' that are today tirelessly leading the protests. These are the 'little people', the '*class populaire*', or the working class – to whom Macron promised social advancement and who now feel cheated.

Since Emmanuel Macron took over the French presidency, he has hastened the implementation of 'austerity' measures and launched severe attack on the working class. Macron is a committed neoliberal ideologue, who was swept to power due to the popular frustration of the French with both the Socialist and Conservative parties in France. He won over the people with his sweet talk, promising to ease their hardships, which were caused by the very neoliberal policies that he adheres to. The contradiction between his promises and his commitment to neoliberalism were immediately visible once he assumed office.

Days into his presidency, Macron slashed taxes on the wealthy, in the name of 'easing the way for business investments' and 'spurring growth'. On the other hand, he increased taxes on pensions, reduced housing allowances and further cut the welfare measures in the name of 'economic prudence'. He followed these measures by launching an attack on the working class

and its rights. He weakened business regulations, curbed the right to form unions, organise and protest and introduced educational ‘reforms’ – increase in fees and initiating the process of dismantling the public education system – that made it more difficult for young people to attend colleges and universities.

All these measures by Macron meant a massive transfer of wealth to the country’s wealthy. The reforms he had introduced in the taxation policy have left the bottom 20 per cent much poorer, while the top 1 per cent made enormous gains. The cost of living increased due to the rise in prices of the essential commodities, making life harder for the working people. The unemployment rate hovers around 9 per cent and with no new jobs in the offing, youth are extremely unhappy. In this background, the fuel tax was the proverbial last straw that broke the camel’s back. The rise in fuel taxes severely affected the rural people in France. The present demonstrations in France are a reflection of popular anger against all these measures, and hence, have swelled into broader protests against the whole neoliberal agenda. Moreover, it should be remembered here that the present wave of protests follows the militant working class demonstrations against the labour law reforms introduced by the Macron government. It remained adamant and refused to roll back labour law reforms and accept other demands raised by the working class when they had organised massive demonstrations earlier in the year 2018.

Initially, Macron employed similar tactics and thought of quelling these ‘yellow vest’ protests too through using police force. Nearly 90,000 police were used to brutally suppress these demonstrations. As a result, four people died, more than a thousand were injured and around a thousand people were arrested. The police brutality on school students was universally condemned and brought more people onto the streets against the government. Latest surveys point that more than 80 per cent of the French support these protests and express their indignation at the government.

The general feeling among the people is that Macron is an ‘arrogant president of the rich’. Marine, a participant in the protest, states that they could no longer put up with what is happening. Taking a dig at the rich who are benefiting from Macron’s policies, she stated: *“Our anger is legitimate. We want to eat organic vegetables sometimes too, not just noodles”*.

A reflection of this popular anger is evident in the demands of the protesters. They demand a ‘reinstatement of the nation’s wealth tax, increase in the minimum wage and the minimum pension to 1300 Euros a month, government jobs programmes, higher taxes on big companies, rent ceilings, expanded mental health services, and a general rollback of austerity policies’.

Another important demand that is now finding an echo everywhere in France is the demand for real democracy. The ‘yellow vests’ have called for a popular referendum whereby citizens could force the French parliament to debate and vote on a law within one year for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution meant to create a new French government based on popular sovereignty and majority rule. They do not want the present type of government, which acts upon commands of the corporates and finance capital. Some commentators noting this demand, are drawing parallels to the demands made during the great French Revolution of 1789. This demand is very significant, as it represents the popular anger not against ‘this’ particular government in France, but it reflects popular anger against ‘this particular type of government’ – a product of the present stage of capitalist development. The people are now saying: *“I am suffering because of those who rule. I am suffering because of the class system, not only because of Emmanuel Macron and prime minister Édouard Philippe”*. This once again testifies to the popular search for alternatives in this crisis period.

The ruling classes from the beginning are trying to demean these protests by calling the protesters ‘barbarians’ and ‘idiots’. They are trying to paint the protests as being against ‘efforts to control climate change’ and to reduce the dependence on ‘fossil fuels’. This is nothing but an extreme falsehood. The ‘yellow vests’ accept that climate change is a major concern, which should be addressed immediately. However, these protests should be understood, as coming from peoples *‘anxiety about putting food on the table at the end of the month’*. They want the government to tax the giant oil corporates, that are responsible for pollution and not the common people.

Another lie that is being spread about the ‘yellow vest’ protests is that they are similar to the ‘right-wing’ protests, which are against immigrants. The protesters have made it amply clear that they are not against immigration and do not support racist policies. They stated that they are for *‘improved integration policies to help foreigners settle in France, for all foreign citizens working in France to have the same labour rights as French citizens, and for policies that address the causes of forced migrations’*. This clearly separates them from the far right movements in France and other parts of Europe.

It is because of this clarity about what they are against and what they are for, that these protests are attracting hundreds and thousands of participants. Bowing to the popular pressure, the French government agreed to withdraw the fuel tax. It had also offered a 100 Euro rise in the minimum monthly wage, abolition of a tax on pensioners earning less than 2,000 Euros a month and non-taxation of overtime pay. But in the same breath, Macron also stated: *“We will respond to the economic and social urgency with strong measures, by cutting taxes more rapidly, by keeping our spending under control, but not with U-turns”*. It is for this reason that the people are sceptical of the government promises and have decided to continue with the protests.



The protests in France are a positive development and are a challenge to the dominant neoliberal rhetoric and ideology. They have not only, once again, brought to the forefront many class issues, but succeeded in gaining popular support. How far these protests will last and whether they will succeed or not, cannot be predicted now. But for sure, they reflect popular anger against neoliberalism – its economic policies and authoritarian streak.

The legend of French politics goes: **‘The street always prevails in the end’**. Let us hope that the legend turns true.

# Peoples' March to Save Education on 19 February 2019

The Joint Forum for Movement on Education (JFME), a platform of 25 students', teachers' and some parents' organizations held a one day convention in New Delhi on October 29, 2018 in Mavlankar Hall, Constitution Club in Delhi against the commercialization and communalization of education. The convention was attended by activists from across India working on the issue of education along with representatives of various political parties. The slogan of the convention was 'Save Education, Save Nation'. The JFME resolved to steer a mass movement on Education and Educational Rights. **The JFME Convention decided to organise a massive Peoples March on 19 February 2019 in Delhi with its slogan: "SAVE EDUCATION, SAVE NATION!"**

The main demands include

1. **Extend the Right to Education to cover Higher Education up to the PG level.**
2. Strengthen Government Schools, Immediately stop Closure/Merger/Amalgamation of government schools.
3. Full and Assured Public-funding of Higher Education at a minimum 10% of GDP.
4. Stop coercion of Central Universities to sign Tripartite MoU
5. Implement Reservation Policy scrupulously
6. Make Permanent appointments against all substantive teaching and non-teaching posts.
7. Absorb/Regularise all contractual, part-time, consolidated, block-grant appointed teachers and staff.
8. Withdraw the 'Offer' of India's Higher Education as a 'tradable service' to WTO-GATTS.
9. Promote Scientific, Rational and Constitutional values at all levels of Education, from KG to PG.
10. Reverse 'Communalisation' in Education by promoting Secular Values at all levels, from KG to PG.
11. Maintain healthy Pupil-Teacher Ratios across institutions and levels of Education.
12. Give preference to Government School students in Public funded institutions of Higher Education and Public Sector jobs.
13. Make cogent policy to enable Persons with Disabilities and ensure equal opportunities for them at every level from KG to PG, as well as teaching jobs.
14. Extend UGC Pay-scales and Service Conditions to all teachers and employees of grant-in-aid institutions of the State.

## Over Four Thousand Teachers in a Long March in Delhi

The overwhelming response by thousands of teachers of Delhi University in observing a complete strike on 17 January 2019 is a manifestation of their strong disapproval of the Government policy towards higher education.

In a press release the DUTA has saluted the several thousand teachers who participated in the Long March from Ramlila Maidan to Parliament Street.

The DUTA has been consistently highlighting and bringing to the attention of the Government of India the plight of 4000 ad-hoc and temporary teachers who have worked for years under exploitative and insecure conditions of service.

The DUTA condemns the Ministry of Human Resource Development not only for its absolute indifference to the plight of these teachers but also for the despicable attempt to prevent teachers from marching by putting up barricades along the way and at Jantar Mantar. Teachers broke through the barricades and continued with the March and finally courted arrest at Parliament

Street in protest against the callous approach of the Government to issues affecting teachers and higher education.



The DUTA condemns the insensitivity and the indifference of the MHRD towards resolving this burning issue. Instead, the policy thrust adopted by the MHRD is an assault on public funded education by using every possible method to withdraw funding.

The latest step is the attempts to bring in contractual jobs in Delhi University. The DUTA also condemns the MHRD for refusing to meet the representatives of

teachers to start a dialogue for resolution of the issues.

The DUTA has been demanding from the Government a One-time Regulation for the absorption of ad-hoc and temporary teachers and the immediate restoration of the 200 point reservation roster keeping the University/ College as a unit through an Ordinance/ Bill. The DUTA condemns the MHRD for failing in its promise to bring in an Ordinance, a promise made by the Minister several times in the Press. The DUTA has submitted a Memorandum to the MHRD on these issues. .

The teachers responded in large numbers to the DUTA call to join the Strike on 18 January 2019 and they turned up in large numbers for the Dharna at the University to highlight the issues related to the promotion of large numbers of teachers who have been denied their due for long years, filling up of vacancies through appointment of teachers in regular posts and regarding pension.

# Women's Wall in Kerala

## A Declaration for Equal Rights

A R Sindhu

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019, at 4pm, history was made in the state of Kerala. 55 lakh women came together to form a wall, rather a fort, along 620 kilometers of the national highway along the length of Kerala. This wall made its way to the Guinness book of world records by its sheer size and participation. At the same time it made its place in the history of social advance by the assertion for their constitutional right to equality of nearly one third of the total women's population of the state.

### Background

On 28 September 2018 the Supreme Court gave a verdict allowing all women to enter the Sabarimala temple in Pathanamthitta district, Kerala.

The Supreme Court verdict was delivered on a writ petition filed in 2006 by, an organisation called Young Lawyers Association asking for its intervention to allow women of all ages to enter Sabarimala temple and to worship there. The petitioners are persons unconnected with any movement in Kerala and are residents of North India. Many of them are related to the RSS and the BJP. This writ was to challenge the verdict by the High Court of Kerala in 1991 barring the entry of women who are between 10-50 years of age, into the Sabarimala temple.

The Supreme Court asked for the opinion of the Kerala government on this issue. In 2007, the then LDF government led by VS Achuthanandan filed an affidavit before the Supreme Court explaining the position of the state government. The affidavit stated that the Kerala government was against any form of discrimination against women or other sections in the society to enter Sabarimala temple and worship there. The affidavit also brought to the notice of the Supreme Court that, in the past, women used to enter Sabarimala temple and referred to the visit there by the then Raja of the Princely State of Travancore and the Queen. The affidavit also mentioned that the Supreme Court should consider the sentiments of the people while taking a decision.

In February 2016, just two months before the assembly elections, the then UDF government in Kerala led by Congress leader Oommen Chandy filed a different affidavit stating that the Kerala government was not in favour of women belonging to the age group of 10 to 50 years entering the Sabarimala temple. After the formation of the LDF government in 2016, when the case came up before the Supreme Court for arguments, the state government filed an affidavit reiterating the stand taken in the earlier affidavit filed in 2007. The Nair Service Society, Ayyappa Seva Sangham, Devaswom Board, Pandalam Raja, priest of Sabarimala temple and others appeared in the case and presented their arguments opposing the entry of women.

After a 12 year-long litigation, in 2018 the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court passed the judgement by a majority of 4 to 1. The Supreme Court judgement stated that the exclusionary practice of "entry of women of the age group of 10 to 50 years is a clear violation of the right of Hindu women to practice their religious beliefs which, in consequence, makes their fundamental right of religion under Article 25(1) a dead letter".

The judgement states: "Yet, the right to the freedom of religion is not absolute. For the Constitution has expressly made it subject to public order, morality and health on one hand and to the other provisions of Part III, on the other. The subjection of the individual right to the freedom of religion to the other provisions of the Part is a nuanced departure from the position occupied by the other rights to freedom recognized in Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21. While guaranteeing equality and the equal protection of laws in Article 14 and its emanation, in Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, the Constitution does not condition these basic norms of equality to the other provisions of Part III. Similar is the case with the freedoms guaranteed by Article 19(1) or the right to life under Article 21. The subjection of the individual right to the freedom of religion under Article 25(1) to the other provisions of Part III was not a matter without substantive content. Evidently,

*in the constitutional order of priorities, the individual right to the freedom of religion was not intended to prevail over but was subject to the overriding constitutional postulates of equality, liberty and personal freedoms recognized in the other provisions of Part III.”*

### **Rightwing forces on the streets**

All the political parties including BJP and Congress (I) welcomed the Supreme Court decision. The RSS also welcomed it. The AICC spokesman, Randeep Surjewala, in the wake of the judgement had stated: *“We wholeheartedly welcome this progressive and far-reaching decision in case of entry into Sabarimala temple”.*

The LDF government in Kerala led by CPI (M) and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the government will implement the court order.

Two years of LDF rule gave no opportunity to the Congress led UDF nor BJP led NDA any room for building any agitation on peoples' issues. The way in which the LDF government handled the devastating floods had created a situation where the people of the state and the government were working together in the rebuilding of Kerala and there was no scope for any conservative sections to pursue their vested interests.

Both the NDA and the UDF are also trying to make use of the unhappiness of the conservative sections who resent the appointment of dalits as poojaris in temples and the reservation for backward communities, dalits and adivasis in appointments to the Devaswom Board. Seeing it as an opportunity for communal consolidation by creating confusion among the believers by propagating that it is the 'atheist Leftist government' attacking 'Hindu beliefs' and 'destroying the temples', the RSS and BJP took a U turn and came out opposing the entry of women of 10-50 years of age in Sabarimala. The irony is that they were not critical of the Supreme Court which gave the verdict, but of the LDF government which said it will implement the order.

But what was not anticipated was the hypocritical and opportunist stance adopted by the Congress party in Kerala. The opposition leader, Ramesh Chennithala, went on a day-long fast *“to save the custom and traditions of the Sabarimala temple”.* Other leaders of the Congress like its working president, K Sudhakaran, made outrageous statements about menstruating women being impure.

The RSS organised '*namajapa yatra*' (devotional chanting) throughout the state and created an atmosphere of terror near the temple, checking every woman who was coming for worship, asking for age proof and attacking those who opposed their intervention etc. A leaked audio of BJP leaders exposed their aim of creating violence and force the police for a firing, so that they can ask for the central government to intervene.

Realising the intention of RSS led forces, almost all the women's rights groups extended support to the LDF government and declared they will not create any violent situation in Sabarimala.

### **Movement to protect Renaissance values**

Kerala has a rich tradition of struggles against all discriminatory religious, caste practices against the lower castes and women. The Vaikom Satyagraha and Guruvayoor satyagraha were great movements for the rights of dalits to enter the temples and also to walk through the roads near to the temple. There were numerous struggles for right to entry to school for dalit and girl children. Organisations of Nairs, Ezhavas, pulyas, dalit Christians were formed to fight the brahminical dominance and also against the heinous practices in their own castes. Dalit women were not allowed to wear a blouse till 1928. Lower caste women were not allowed to wear gold but they must wear stone ornaments. There were struggles for wearing a blouse, wearing gold ornaments etc. Great leaders like Ayyankali, Sreenarayana Guru, Poykayil Yohannan were the products of Kerala's renaissance movement which was integrated into the anti colonial struggle and the struggle for land to the tillers.

The Kerala women's movement has inherited the rich tradition of Nangeli who refused to pay the tax on breast imposed by the British and the King, but instead cut off her breast and died.

The RSS could bring many women to say that they are impure and are '*ready to wait*' to see lord Ayyappa. The right wing campaign glorifying the practices considering menstruating women impure and bringing in the age old retrograde practices were opposed by all progressive sections of the society.

The government called a meeting of all the Hindu organizations which had the tradition of renaissance in Kerala to discuss the developments related to Sabarimala. In the meeting the suggestion by Shri Punnala Sreekumar, leader of KPMS, suggested that a huge wall of resistance of only women be organised. This was welcomed by all and a meeting to form an organizing committee involving all sections with the leadership of women was called to materialize the idea.

### Wide Campaign

The widest possible campaign was taken up in the state to explain the purpose of the wall and also the importance of protecting the progressive values earned through the militant struggles and martyrdom of many.

More than 1500 'Renaissance meetings' were held throughout the state. Cultural forms were used for the campaign. Many songs, plays, short films, videos etc were produced to counter the RSS propaganda and to campaign for the Women Wall.

The Kerala Coordination Committee of Working Women (CITU) decided to mobilize all the women members of CITU in the wall. A joint meeting of the trade unions was also held and it was decided to mobilize all the women workers in the state for the wall. Leaflets were distributed and meetings were held at the sectoral level and local/district levels.

### The Women Wall

An estimated 55 lakh women participated in the wall which was 620 kilometers in length. In many places it had three to four layers. A parallel wall of men was created in many places by the supporting men. K K Shylaja, Minister for Health and WCD, Government of Kerala was the first woman at one end of the wall and Brinda Karat, member of the Polit Bureau of the CPI(M) was the last at the other end. Mercykutty Amma, Minister for Fisheries, Government of Kerala and Vice President CITU participated in Kollam and A R Sindhu, Secretary, CITU participated in Alappuzha. The pledge was taken throughout the state at exactly 4pm and the movement made history.

### Entry to Sabarimala

On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2019 morning, at 3.30 am, two women, Kanakadurga and Bindu, entered the Sabarimala temple with police protection.

The priest in Sabarimala an RSS man, had performed purification rituals in Sabarimala following this. The RSS and BJP called for a Bandh the next day and unleashed violent attacks against the left parties and organizations to create an atmosphere of terror.

The very next day another woman entered Sabarimala and the BJP-RSS and the priest were silent.

The trade unions, women's organizations and all progressive forces have decided to take forward the struggle for equality and to end discrimination.

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## Women's Wall for Equality



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