

India

Despair and Hope

Bharat Dogra

the small farmer by buying his produce at a cheap rate to sell it later at a higher rate.

A farmers' movement that addresses itself to the aspirations of the really needy and deprived sections should be careful not to raise demands of better-off sections to enrich themselves further while leaving their poorer brethren in the lurch.

WORKERS' STRUGGLE IN CHATTISGARH

EFFORTS TO CRUSH A SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR WEAKER SECTIONS

In India while the number of groups struggling against injustice are many there are not many who have been able to sustain their efforts over a considerable period, say 10 to 15 years, winning significant gains for workers and peasants despite numerous efforts of the authorities. Those who have been able to combine struggle against economic exploitation with wider concerns such as solidarity with other suffering people, social and political education, social reform, equality of women, public health programmes and other such efforts are still fewer.

One such group which has won widespread recognition is based in Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. The section of this group which consists of miners is known as Chattisgarh Mines Sharamik Sangathan (CMSS). The other section which consists of a wider mobilization of the surrounding peasantry and other weaker sections is known as Chattisgarh Mukto Morcha (CMM). This group also includes a recently formed union of released bonded labourers. Together this CMSS-CMM combine has become a symbol of struggle against exploitation combined with wider social change. The health programme for workers initiated by this movement, its anti-liquor effort and the equal participation of women have been widely appreciated.

In the course of 14 years of the existence of this group, there have been several efforts to harm them including police firings and other repression by the police, instigated attacks by

anti-social elements, attempts to throw workers out of jobs or deny wages to them for prolonged periods, arrests and torture of several activists - the list is a long one. That the movement could survive all this is a measure of its strength.

Now the movement is in the middle of perhaps its most prolonged and repressive crisis, a crisis that has already continued for well over an year. The success of the repressive steps could mean a serious blow to one of the most important symbols of hope in India. On the other hand, the success of the present phase of struggle will give a lot of additional strength to this group, apart from improving in significant ways the livelihood of thousands of industrial workers.

Bhilai Steel Plant is one of the biggest public - sector steel plants of India located in Durg district, Madhya Pradesh. The workers of this steel plant have reasonably good working and living conditions. However, in course of time a large number of other industrial units have emerged around this big steel plant, many of them having direct or indirect links with the main steel plant. Many of these are concentrated in or around Bhilai town, but others are scattered several kms away to the left and right. We can call this the Rajnandgaon -Bhilai - Raipur industrial belt.

The workers of this industrial belt (leaving aside the main steel plant) have been subjected to the most ruthless exploitation for several years. They are paid very low wages. They are denied most other benefits such as provident fund and the legal rate for overtime. Safety norms are widely neglected, resulting in a high rate of accidents. Overall working conditions are very unhealthy, and even basic facilities are denied.

It is these badly exploited workers who started getting attracted to the CMSS-CMM group of the region in the hope that this group will provide them the leadership for obtaining better working and living conditions, just as the group had done earlier for miners and some other workers. The workers formed several new unions (such as those for engineering workers and for cement workers) which were commonly linked to questions like wage-rate, safety, and security of employment.

However, some of the industrialists and the authorities have reacted to this new mobilization of workers with a determination not to allow it to succeed. Hence they have been following for over an year a policy of throwing out the members of the new unions from their jobs, threatening them, attacking and arresting them. In the process hundreds of workers have been injured and thousands face the prospects of their already precarious livelihood threatened in a serious way. On the plus side, if only to cover the total illegality of their early dealing, some industrialists have raised the wages to the legal minimum. The well-known leader of the CMSS-CMM group, Mr. Shankar Guha Niyogi, was also jailed for several months recently. (Note- after the book went to press, we have received the shocking news that Mr. Niyogi has been killed-he attained martyrdom on September 20).

The miners who are members of CMSS tried to help the struggling industrial workers by sending them some food grains, but to prevent them from doing so some of their cooperatives too have been superceded on flimsy pretexts and their wages have been withheld.

It is most likely that if the authorities succeed in breaking the present struggle of industrial workers, they will follow this by other steps against the other support-bases of CMM - CMSS as indicated already by the steps taken against the cooperatives.

It is in these conditions of the continuing repressive attitude towards the struggle of the industrial workers of Chattisgarh and the indirect threat posed to the CMM - CMSS group - that all those who have been supporting struggles of weaker sections in India should raise their voice against the exploitation and repression.

MINIMUM WAGES - A SIGNIFICANT VICTORY

One of the worst aspects of the violation of minimum wage laws in the country is that the government itself violates this legislation at several places. This violation is specially cruel,