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THE GREAT CONCERN

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THE 'OTHER' PEASANT RALLY

The peasant rally organised by the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha in Raipur on October 2 1980, while it did not attract as much media attention as the Tikait-Joshi rally in Delhi on the same day, was nevertheless a major event of worker-peasant mobilisation.

October 2 witnessed two major peasant rallies. The one in Delhi mobilised tens of thousands of middle peasants but actually represented the interest of rich peasants and capitalist farmers - sections whose attitudes, values and behaviour often resemble that of their semi-feudal counterparts. It is this rural oligarchy that exploits agricultural labourers in production to the core but poses as a victim of 'unequal exchange' in the sphere of circulation. The other peasant rally the one in Raipur (MP) was a 'red-green' alliance, organised by the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM). Though it did not attract attention of the national media and was smaller in some respects, it can be viewed as a major event. The 40,000-60,000 strong rally was one of the largest workers mobilisations in the five districts of Chattisgarh in recent times. The rally in Delhi did not have the support of the working class while the Raipur mobilisation was 'red-green' one. The leadership of the Delhi peasant rally, no doubt charismatic but also egotistical (the unfortunate feud between Tikait and Joshi) does have conflicting interests vis-a-vis the industrial capitalists but is ready to make adjustments in order to affect most policies to their mutual benefit. And these policies hurt the poor - the urban working class and the rural proletariat as also the poor peasants who are net buyers of foodgrains in the market.

The CMM has the red-green flag of the 7,000 iron ore miners of Dalli-Rajhara represented by the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS). Besides this, CMM also includes textile and other factory workers of Rajnandgaon and 20 other unions all over Chattisgarh. These workers funded, organised and participated in the rally along with their rural brothers and sisters. They arranged for transport (most of the rallyists came from distant villages) rice kitchens (for 40,000 persons), etc. The Raipur administration did not agree to provide drinking water, so the iron ore miners brought in two tankers from their mines, paying for them from their own pockets.

The CMSS workers have been engaged in the latest round, a month-long struggle, against mechanisation that has left them quite exhausted. Despite this they have rallied with the Chattisgarhi people in villages and forests. Perhaps it is realised that their struggle against mechanisation has to be fought by forging wider alliances.

The social movement of the CMM differs from movements of oppressed nationalities/tribals from Nagaland to Jharkhand. The Jharkhand movement did have a strong worker linkage in the 1970s but this has since been tenuous. The red-green alliance of the CMM is more resistant to co-option and more open to socialist ideas

The main speakers at the Raipur rally were Janak Lal Thakur (MLA) and Shankar Guha Neogi. Their major thrust was a scathing critique of self-seeking power politics, destructive development and marginalisation. The charter of demands perhaps reveals the nature and character of the movement. This was finalised at a one-day conference of the CMM at Raipur on September 15. The 15-point charter is as follows :-

- (1) declare Chattisgarh a drought prone area;
- (2) construct the Bhainsagar dam system in Bilaspur as stop dams;
- (3) this year the waters of Tandula, Kharkhara and Gondli rivers which go to Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) should be diverted to the peasants;
- (4) the price of paddy sold by the peasants should be Rs 250 a quintal while it should be subsidised and supplied to consumers at Rs 2 a kg;
- (5) stop the mechanisation of the iron ore mines of BSP; Raigarh jute mills and Rajnandgaon cotton mills;
- (6) nationalise the Rajaram Maje factory of Rajnandgaon;
- (7) in view of the drought situation, construct 1,000 small dams and repair 14,500 ponds;
- (8) abolish the bonded labour system on a war footing and rehabilitate those freed by providing them jobs in enterprises like BSP, railways and Korba aluminum plant;
- (9) Gondi, Halwi and Chattisgarhi be made the medium of instruction in primary schools;
- (10) return all wood confiscated by the forest department from the tribal people; commercial saw mills should

- not be allowed to operate in the vicinity of forests;
- (12) set up a sponge iron plant in Chattisgarh and lohars (ironsmiths) be given preferential employment in BSP; cottage and handicraft industries be expanded; bidi workers be paid a minimum piece rate of Rs 35 per 1000 bidis;
 - (13) open a 30-bed hospital in every block;
 - (14) rail services be started from Dalli-Rajhara to Jagdalpur and Ballarshah and from Raipur to Mandla and Jabalpur; and
 - (14) One ITI be opened in each kasbah.

One finds that the CMM programme views struggle and constructive activities going hand in hand. The speeches touched on a number of local issues as well as the nature of the polity and the feasible alternatives. The nature of the polity came in for a scathing critique. As one of the speakers put it, "At this moment all the Congress and opposition leaders are busy in Bhopal or Delhi, lobbying or canvassing for tickets in the election. They have no concern for the serious problems facing the people. The SAIL and BSP managements are recipients of kickbacks similar to those involved in the Bofors deal... The Government contractor combine has ravaged the people, polluted the water, made the land fallow and denuded the forests. The opposition is silent because it has the same motives of maintaining the status quo". On CMM's policy towards electoral politics, one of the speakers told this correspondent: "Jhumuk Lal Bheria, the sitting Congress MLA, represents the alliance of exploiters, oppressors and vested interests. CMM has an alternative. It will support candidates of the toiling people. Janak Lal Thakur is one of them, a contract labourer who loads trucks. His mother works in the mines while his wife works in government relief projects".

The speakers dwelt in some detail on the nature of 'development'. They have grabbed our forests, looted and ravaged our land, water and minerals and exploited our people. In return, they don't even give us clean drinking water. Thousands of Chattisgarhis die of blood dysentery because of this. One participant said: This land was once a rice bowl. It is barren now. All we think today is will get a job or will we get rice tomorrow?! The lush forests and fertile fields have been destroyed. We have been pushed out of our villages and have become cheap, migrant labourers. What has development meant to us? BSP is a national 'show piece'. It has grabbed all the water from the peasants". Another participant said: "We are the victims of so-called development. Yet the forest department-contractor combine blames and harasses us. The forest department recently ransacked the house of a local villager, and seized the wood collected for household use". Imperialism also came in for attack. One of the speakers said: "Eucalyptus,

big dams, 'new' agricultural policies, socially destructive mechanisation- all this is the result of an unholy alliance of our exploiters with foreign capital. We have struggled against this combine for the last 10 years".

The CMSS/CMM has a small area of influence. Here too there are the host of problems and limitations and the existence of conservative social traditions within the movement. Vested interests will no doubt try to co-opt and corrupt it. But right now, it is a promising initiative.

(From the E P W, December 2, 1989).

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