



# WORKERS RESISTANCE

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## A Study On The Impact Of The 2nd Wave Of The Covid-19 Pandemic On Workers In Bengaluru

**AICCTU-KARNATAKA**

As of May 15, 2021, Karnataka had 6,05,494 active COVID-19 cases and had 21,434 COVID-19 deaths. Of these, more than 60% of the active COVID-19 cases i.e. 3,66,791 were in Bengaluru alone. There were 9340 COVID-19 deaths in Bengaluru. Despite having been warned about the second wave, the Central and the State Governments failed to take any steps to contain the same. Instead, the Prime Minister was making declarations in every available occasions and platforms that the Corona has been defeated in India.

From 27th April, 2020, Karnataka imposed a Lockdown which was subsequently extended. Despite enforcing the Lockdown, the Yeddy - BJP led state government did not provide any assistance whatsoever for the working class to protect their food and economic needs.

In this context, AICCTU - Karnataka, in collaboration with the Garment And Textile Workers Union (GATWU) and Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU), conducted a study on the impact of the 2nd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on the working class and economically weaker sections to put forth the enormity of the tragedy that has befallen us. We have demanded that the government make necessary policy interventions.

The study by AICCTU documented that the present Lockdown has caused great hardships of the similar kind that confronted the working class last time. Workers are not being paid for full



month. Self-employed and daily-wage earners have no income at all to name a few. But what is to be noted is that neither did the government do anything to anticipate this nor did they do anything to address it once the issues cropped up. The loss of wages has created food and nutritional insecurity of alarming proportions. No proactive steps have been taken by the government to secure the rights and welfare of the workers.

Since workers stay in congested areas, whether in accommodation provided by the employer or places they rent on their own, they are far more vulnerable to contracting COVID. The one weapon they have against the virus is mass vaccination. However, no efforts towards the same was made by the government. Further, neither has there been targeted testing in working class colonies and slums nor is any fumigation done, let alone any awareness

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campaign or distribution of masks/sanitizers, etc.

- Our study showed that workers faced several obstacles in dealing with COVID-19. In the past year, there has neither been a ramping up of public health facilities nor any preventive measures. In fact our study shows that public health facilities like testing were much lesser than last year. There seems to be no lessons learnt in managing the pandemic.

- While many patients in the city, even from middle and upper class backgrounds, struggled to find ambulances, ICU and oxygenated beds, ventilators, medicines and slots in crematoriums, etc. The poor workers stand at another level of disadvantage in such a situation. Limited knowledge and access to helplines and facilities provided by the government or voluntary organisations has affected the prognosis and outcome of the illness. Migrant workers face a double whammy since language barrier and biased attitude restrict percolation of information to these communities.

As a result of the callous and unconcerned attitude of the government, workers today are left with grappling with the illness on the one hand and surviving daily life on the other.

AICCTU demands that immediate steps be taken to ensure health, food security, life and livelihood

needs of the workers.

## DEMANDS OF LIVELIHOOD ISSUES OF WORKERS DURING PANDEMIC

### 1. Livelihood

#### i. Compensation

a) COVID-19 compensation packages: Government must declare a COVID-19 Financial Compensation package benefiting all Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, residents of slums (identified, declared or otherwise), contract and casual workers receiving wages below Rs. 15,000/-, domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers, waste-pickers, manual scavengers, Powrakarmikas, garment workers, plantation workers and other sections of the unorganised sector. The package is a must for ensuring dignified life during the lockdown period.

#### ii. Protection of Livelihood

a) Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme: Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme in line with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) should be initiated to ensure employment for those in urban areas

b) Ensure Job Security: Introducing legislation to make job security a right and abolishing all forms of contract and casual labour is of utmost importance under present circumstances.

c) Protection of livelihood: Government of Karnataka must take all necessary steps to ensure that no worker is terminated and full payment of wages is made. In line with the Circulars dated May 10, 2021 issued by the Government of Karnataka directing employers not to terminate construction workers, to pay their wages and sanitize their residences, directives should be issued to other industries to ensure the protection of livelihood of workers.

d) Transportation for workers and Protection against Police Harassment: Although the Government has permitted certain works to continue, workers are in fact unable to go to workplace due to lack of transportation. There is also no safeguard against police harassment in case they are travelling in private vehicles. Immediate steps need to be taken to ensure provision of transportation and prevent police harassment.

e) Payment of wages: It is seen that in a large number of establishments, wages have not been paid for the periods prior to the lockdown and it is unsure if wages will be paid during the lockdown. This has led to complete desperation amongst workers. Necessary orders must be issued directing payment of full wages for the lockdown period irrespective of whether work has been undertaken.

f) State as model employer: Where the State is the employer, it must act as a model employer and ensure the fullest protection of rights of its workers including workers in BMRCL and Bengaluru Smart City. The state must ensure payment of wages, healthcare, provision of proper living conditions and non-termination of employment.

g) Arrears of wages: Workers in various sectors suffered in the last lockdown as many companies refused to pay salaries. The Labour department must ensure that companies pay the salary or ensure government relief is provided.

h) Wages helpline: Labour Department must set up a helpline for workers who are not paid wages and who have complaints in regard to termination. Immediate redressal of the complaints must also be ensured.

i) Strengthening of Labour Department: Government must take all necessary steps to strengthen the Labour Department so that it can guarantee immediate remedial action in case of deductions in wages or non-payment of wages.

j) Social security: In regard to workers in the unorganized sector, the Karnataka State Unorganised Worker Social Security Board must step up and take responsibility to provide social security. This must not be limited to those registered under the Act.

### iii. Rent, loan and utility waivers

a) Rent Waiver: The Government must issue

necessary orders directing house-owners not to insist on payment of rent for the lockdown period and a period of two months after the lockdown ends. It must also issue orders to ensure no evictions of any tenant is conducted in this period.

b) Loan moratoriums: The Government must issue necessary order directing loan repayment moratorium across the state of Karnataka for the months of April and May. It must be clarified that the said order is applicable to private and public lenders, individuals and institutions.

c) Loan waivers: The Government must declare waiving of loans owed by workers to Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs), banks and private lenders.

d) Interest free loans: At this time of social and economic crisis, the State Government must provide interest-free loans to those in need based on a transparent policy. Loans must be provided with prolonged recovery period, without any requirement of securities, and with minimal documentation required.

e) Waivers on utilities: The Government must waive electricity and water bills to provide financial security to its citizens who are suffering at the hands of a pandemic and lockdown.

### iv. Food Security

a) Ration kits: The State Government, in coordination with local municipal corporations, must ensure food security by free distribution of ration kits consisting of rice, wheat, ragi, masala, cooking oil, salt, sugar, etc. to suffice for a period of one month. The Government must also implement the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) to all persons in PDS shops without insistence on ration cards.

b) Indira canteens: At par with the BBMP's decision to provide food packets at Indira Canteens, steps must be taken to ensure that when households are located far away from the Indira Canteens, they are provided food at their doorstep.

c) Community kitchens: Community kitchens should be set up to ensure decentralization of food assistance. Support can be taken from street vendors to run such community kitchens. An example may be drawn from the Kerala model of community kitchens.

Food Help-line: The Government must set up a help-line that caters to food security specifically, and must ensure provision of food in a time-bound manner on receiving any such requests. Publicity must be given to these helplines.

**[Here, we have shared only the recommendations on the livelihood issues of workers to mitigate their suffering during the period of pandemic. Please access full report in [aicctu.org](http://aicctu.org) ■■■]**

# As Forgotten As The Dead: The Invisible Work Of Crematorium And Cemetery Workers

LEKHA ADAVI AND SWATHI SESHADRI



With an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths during the 2nd wave of the pandemic, the country is facing an inordinate stress on crematoriums and cemeteries for disposal of the dead. We continue to hear the news of how local authorities are identifying mass cremation centers to deal with the situation or how electric crematoriums are breaking down due to the load and cities are running out of burial space. In Karnataka, the Arch Bishop of Bengaluru wrote to the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) asking for more space to be allocated so that the Christian community can bury their dead with dignity. What we have also been privy to, is the inhuman amount of work being done by the crematorium and cemetery workers in conducting the cremations and burial of COVID-19 victims.

These workers who predominantly belong to the Dalit community, have been doing this work inter-generationally, as it is a caste-imposed occupation. Cremating and burying the dead being a 'traditional' occupation (a term used to gentrify what is basically a stigmatised occupation), tends to attract informal employment, whether the facilities are owned and run by the government or private trusts. The crematorium and cemetery workers are denied basic

dignity and rights of a citizen. Based on our visits to about 20 crematoriums / cemeteries in Bengaluru, we found that these workers are not being paid minimum wages, nor any statutory or constitutional benefits are being extended to them. Neither are their services regularized nor are they being given mandatory social security benefits including ESI, PF, pension, etc. They are not considered as workers with rights, but as traditional caretakers of burial grounds.

The workers work 365 days a year, without any weekly off or national and festival holidays or any casual, sick, and emergency leave. With the exponential increase in the number of bodies being lined up for cremations and burials, the workers are working for over 12 hours a day, without any break. Each government or private crematorium / cemetery has some full-time workers who are never paid timely salary every month. None of the workers we spoke to reported receiving full wage during the course of their work even before the pandemic. Workers in the government facilities received meagre lump sum payments every few months without any accounting of work hours. The workers, therefore, do not even know why and how their wage is being deducted.

Due to the increase in work, the crematoriums and burial grounds are employing more workers above their existing capacity. These additional workers do not even know how much they will be paid. In some other instances, the existing full-time workers are taking help from their friends so that they can cope with the increased work load and are paying them from their own meagre wages. The workers, under the banner of Ambedkar Dalit Sangharsh Samiti Rudrabhoomi Sangha, staged a protest outside the office of the Chief Minister in Bangalore in April 2021, seeking their dues. While the Chief Minister only ensured their dues and some small amounts as arrears, he failed to address the fundamental problems of suffering, pain, insult and economic injustice being meted out to these workers. There is no guarantee of fixed salary for the workers. Their wages can vary from Rs. 1,000 to 10,50 per month. The earning of the workers mostly depend on the largesse of the families conducting the last rites of their loved ones.

The workers are provided with Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits since they handle dead bodies. However, those workers performing cremation on fire wood do not wear the PPE as they are at risk of catching fire. One worker in such a crematorium reported injury on his hands due to fire while using the PPE. None of the workers have been tested for COVID-19. They have not received vaccination from their employers. Few of them

who have received the vaccine, have done so out of their own initiative. It is amply clear that the government does not recognise these workers as frontline workers despite their greater exposure to Covid infections.

Workers in burial grounds and firewood crematoriums live on the premises with their families. However, due to the present circumstances, the workers in electric crematoriums too are living on the premises with no facilities for resting or washing nor have they been provided with any basic infrastructure such as water supply or sanitation facilities. Many of the workers stated that they face discrimination in the neighbourhood. For example, the women folk living on crematoriums and cemeteries work as domestic workers in the nearby houses to earn bread for the family but their services are terminated when the employers find out about their dwelling place.

These workers must be accorded the status of frontline workers and all due diligence in protecting their lives and that of their families must be prioritized. Not only must the workers be paid minimum wages, their services should also be regularized forthwith. They must be provided with wages on time. The workers must be compensated for their additional labour along with their statutory rights and benefits. ■■■

## #SOSDelhi

# AICCTU-CPIML Help Desk In The Service of The People in Distress

**SUCHETA DE**

**T**he deadly Covid wave of April-May 2021 hit Delhi very badly after receding in last December. According to official data, infection rate this time was as high as adding 28,395 new cases each day in mid-April. And the death rate was as high as 448 each day in early May. We may not forget the fact that official Covid data are hugely under-reported from actuals.

The fact that the latest wave is deadlier than all last waves shows how unprepared the Modi government is to deal with the Pandemic, despite the fact that it had a full year to set its priorities right. They found time to tighten their control over Delhi government through LG, but they did not consider it necessary to prepare the city for

facing the Pandemic in the last one year. The role of the AAP run Delhi government in letting so many people die cannot be neglected as well.

### No Oxygen, No Bed, No Medicine- The Horror of April-May in Delhi

As soon as the latest wave hit Delhi, the unpreparedness of the city's health infrastructure became evident to the entire world. Cry for Oxygen for breathless Covid patients was resonating in each and every neighbourhood of Delhi. Hundreds of people were dying within a few days of infection, due to lack of Oxygen supply. Even hospitals were sending out SOS messages for the supply of Oxygen cylinders. Several people died in the City's well-known

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hospitals because they could not be provided with Oxygen support. Black market of Oxygen cylinders started operating while people were dying in need of Oxygen. A 10-20 litre Cylinder did cost around 40-50 thousand rupees when the pandemic reached its peak this time. Even an iota of preparedness from the government in arranging enough Cryogenic tankers and their transport to ensure Oxygen supply for medical use could have saved many lives.

The collapse of health infrastructure made the city's population utterly helpless in the face of surging infection. Finding a hospital bed with Oxygen became nearly impossible for the patients. Harder was to find an ICU bed. The Delhi Government's Corona App seldom offered updated information about availability of beds. Even when beds were reported available in the dashboard, actually getting it became another major struggle. Several hospitals denied availability when asked by attendants of patients. Attendants helping Covid patients had to stand in queues for hours to get medicine prescribed by doctors.

### **Covid Help Desk in Delhi by Students-Youths-Workers**

Student-Youth-Workers Started Covid Help Desk in Delhi on 20th April. As soon as the city started feeling the heat of the pandemic, AICCTU, AISA and CPIML activists began preparations for providing help to people struggling to survive the medical emergency. Several of our own activists fell ill, many lost their closest kins. We lost Comrade Om Prakash Sharma, veteran AICCTU activist and CPIML member in the Pandemic. Setting up a help desk was the need of the hour.

The Help Desk provided verified information on Oxygen, medicine and hospital bed availability. Our activists, especially from Jamia Milia Islamia, helped in refilling of Oxygen cylinders. Waiting for hours to procure medicine, ensuring a hospital bed by standing in queue, moving around the city to verify sources of Oxygen refilling and helping patient to get Oxygen in time- these were the main activities our volunteers were engaged in initially.

An important initiative of the help desk has been to start free auto ambulance service in the city. Two autos with Oxygen cylinders are made available from AICCTU to transport patients to hospitals. The auto ambulance service is helping many patients in need till date.

### **Struggle for Food, Wages and Access to Health Care – Delhi's Workers Are the Worst Hit Segment of city population in the Pandemic**

While the city was struggling for Oxygen, the extreme vulnerability of the workers and residents of slums to survive the Corona wave became clear. Most of the informal workers and street vendors lost their jobs as soon as the lockdown was clamped in mid-April. They were left without money, food or medical care by the government.

Delhi experienced the painful journey of the migrant workers leaving the city in hunger and insecurity last year. Millions of migrant and informal workers had to experience hunger due to inaccessibility to the Public Distribution System. One year has passed since then.

But still the workers and slum residents do not have access to ration cards and PDS.

The conditions of sanitation and health workers are found especially vulnerable. They are the ones who are carrying the burden of the City's fight against Corona. But they are the ones who have been denied basic rights and dignity of workers. Most of the sanitation workers of Delhi have not got regular wages in the last one year. They have been made to work without payment. They don't have access to health facilities as public health infrastructure is in shambles. From testing for Corona to access to food, medicine, oxygen and hospital bed- everything is kept far away from them. Needless to say, that most of the sanitation workers are from the Dalit community and one of the most discriminated against segments in this battle for survival in the Pandemic.

### Reaching Out to Workers and Slum Residents with Ration and Mask/ Sanitiser

While our battle to ensure health rights for the workers continue, our help desk is reaching out to hundreds of workers in distress with ration kits and mask / sanitisers. Activists from working class backgrounds themselves are taking initiative to arrange help. A significant section of the progressive civil society has reached out to help our initiative financially. The solidarity of people with each other in such times

of distress generates comfort and hope to fight for what residents of Delhi truly deserve.

**While we wish to continue our help desk as long as possible and needed, we also feel the need to raise our voices to ensure our rights. We demand -**

- Free, universal and speedy vaccination to all residents of Delhi. The central government must immediately ensure that vaccines are available in enough quantities to ensure vaccination throughout the day in each public school, hospital, dispensary and mohalla clinics. The Delhi government must arrange for vaccination centres for slums that do not have access to existing public infrastructure. The repeated breaks on the vaccination program must be dealt with immediately with ample supply.
- Ensure nutritious and proper food to every resident of the city. Ensure free ration to anyone who is in need. Start the process of providing ration cards to everyone who does not have it.
- Provide masks, sanitiser and PPE kits to sanitation, health and all frontline workers who are involved in essentials services. Include masks and sanitiser as components to be given via Public Distribution System. Exercise control on prices of these essential safety commodities.
- Stop retrenchment of informal workers.
- Stop silencing those who demand their rights.



# State Of Working India 2021 One Year Of Covid-19

CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT, AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY

This is a well-documented report that has analysed the impact of one year of Covid-19 in India, on jobs, incomes, inequality, and poverty. The rising inequality and loss of wages is really alarming. It says, "our analysis shows that the pandemic has further increased informality and led to a severe decline in earnings for the majority of workers resulting in a sudden increase in poverty. Women and younger workers have been disproportionately affected. Households have coped by reducing food intake, borrowing, and selling assets. Government relief has helped avoid the most severe forms of distress, but the reach of support measures is incomplete, leaving out some of the most vulnerable workers and households. We find that additional government support is urgently needed now for two reasons - compensating for the losses sustained during the first year and anticipating the impact of the second wave."

The report has captured the impact of Covid on

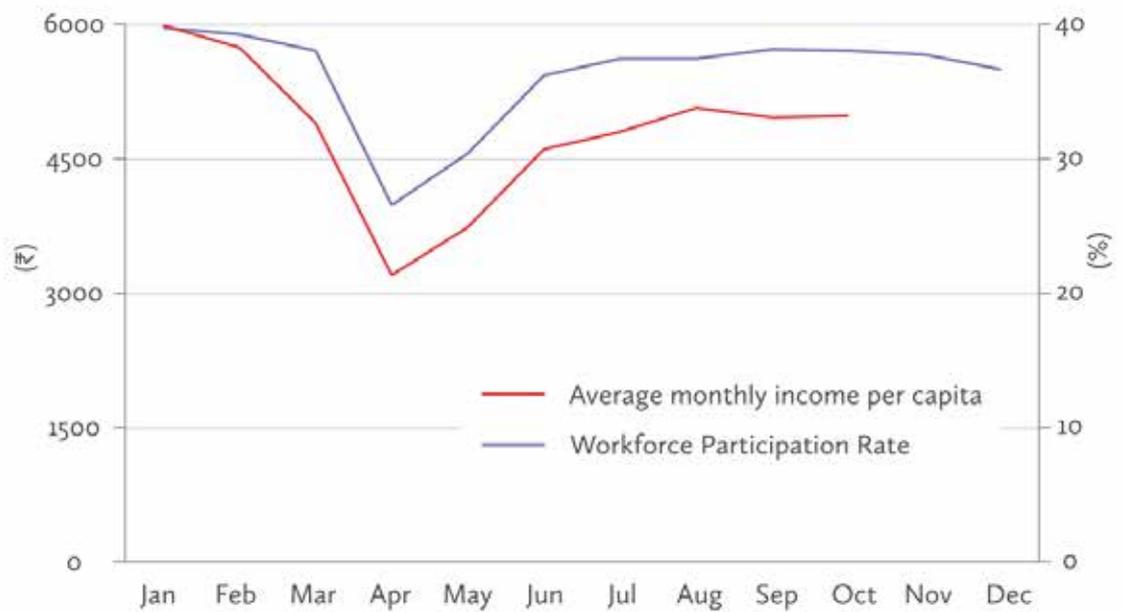
employment status. Around 10 crores of jobs were lost in the first two months of the first Lockdown in April – May 2020. Around 1.5 crores of workers lost jobs in the first wave and could never return to their work despite majority of such workers were back at work by June 2020. It is quite revealing that the monthly per capita income for an average family in Oct 2020 in the post-first wave situations was only Rs 4979 which was lesser than its level of Rs 5989 in Jan 2020. It also adds that out of total decline in aggregate income, 90 percent was due to reduction in earnings while 10 percent was due to loss of employment. The situation was further aggravated mainly in BJP ruled states where working hours were extended to 12 hours and more importantly without payment of double wages for overtime work.

### Loss of Employment

The report also notes that most workers went back to work despite reduced earnings in the same job



Employment and income had not recovered to pre-pandemic levels even in late 2020



Sources and notes: Authors' calculations based on CMIE-CPHS. Incomes are in Jan 2020 prices and adjusted for seasonality.

that they performed in pre-Covid period. While men who lost the employment joined the army of self employed and informal workers, women were predominantly confined to their household work.

Loss of employment to women was the worst as more than 47 percent of women lost their employment permanently while only 19 percent could retain the work. Whereas the men who retained the employment was 61 percent and who lost employment was 7 percent. Gender bias of Covid impact is crueller for women than men. On the other hand, the study also delineates that the burden of domestic work increased without any corresponding relief in hours spent in employment for working women. According to the India Working Survey conducted in Karnataka and Rajasthan, the proportion of working women who spent more than 2 hours a day cooking went up from 20 per cent to almost 62 per cent in Karnataka and from 12 to 58 per cent in Rajasthan.”

The report also says that 33% of workers in the 15-24 years age group failed to recover employment even by Dec 2020 while the number was only 6% in the 25-44 years group. The young workers were the worst sufferers, next only to women, in case of rising unemployment after first wave of Covid 19.

### Formal to Informal

After the first Lockdown, workers were left with no other option but to join precarious and informal employment. According to the report nearly half of formal salaried workers moved into informal work, either as self-employed (30%), casual wage (10%) or informal salaried (9%) workers. The nature of employment available to

them was also very much divided on caste and religion. The assessment is that the general category workers and Hindus were more likely to move into self-employment while marginalised caste workers and Muslims moved into daily wage work. The report also makes a remarkable observation, “Agriculture, construction and petty trade emerged as fallback sectors. Education, health and professional services sectors saw the highest outflow of workers into other sectors. About 18% of education sector workers were now in agriculture and a similar share of health sector workers were engaged in petty trade. For Hindus, agriculture was a major fallback sector absorbing between 10 to 20 percent of workers from other sectors. For Muslims, trade was the major fallback sector and about 20 to 35 percent of workers from other sectors were now in trade.” As a result of moving into informal work and also because of depressed economic conditions, monthly earnings of workers fell on an average by 17% during the pandemic. Self-employed and informal salaried workers faced the highest loss of earnings.

### Increasing Inequalities and Disparities

More than anyone else, the poor in the country were to pay a heavy price. The estimated 20 percent of poorest households lost their entire earnings while the richer households are estimated to have suffered losses less than a quarter of their pre-pandemic incomes. The richest in the country, like Ambani and Adani, were the highest beneficiaries of Covid. Ambani earned 90 crores per hour and Adani has moved to top second position in Asia and 14th

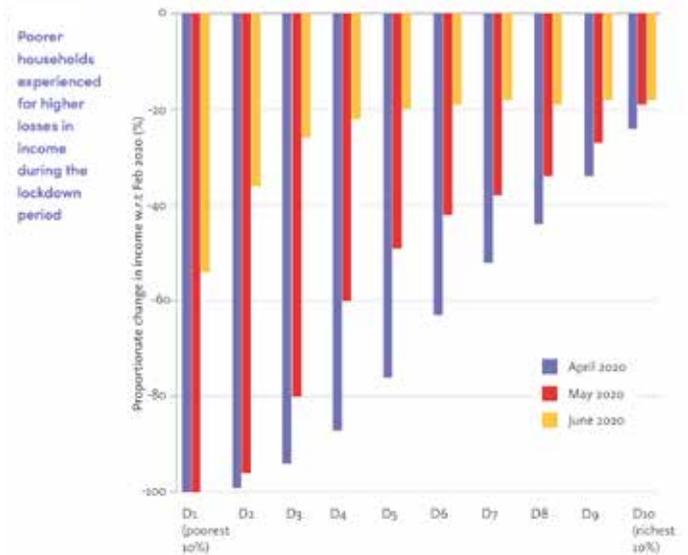
position at global level.

The report states, “Coming on a low-income base, this shock meant that the number of individuals who lie below the national minimum wage threshold (375 per day as recommended by the Anoop Satpathy committee) increased by 230 million during the pandemic. This amounts to an increase in the poverty rate by 15 percentage points in rural and nearly 20 percentage points in urban areas. Had the pandemic not occurred, poverty would have declined by 5 percentage points in rural areas and 1.5 percentage points in urban areas between 2019 and 2020, and 50 million would have been lifted above this line.”

People had to cope up with the disaster by drastically cutting down their food intake and other basic, essential necessities. They had to sell their assets, borrow from informal sources including friends, relatives and money lenders. “In the India Working Survey, over 90 per cent of respondents from Karnataka and Rajasthan reported to have borrowed money sometime between April and August. The median loan amount was 15,000 (mean amount of 26,300). CLIPS revealed that amounts borrowed by poorer households were a much higher multiple of their pre-pandemic incomes compared to better-off households. And 84% of those who had borrowed money reported doing so to finance food, health, and other daily expenditures.

## The Mirage of Government Relief

Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) promised many things including free rations, cash transfers, MGNREGA, PM-KISAN payments, and



pension payments. Atmanirbhar Bharat also was announced saying the vulnerable households will be protected from the impact of the pandemic. But, according to India Working Survey in Rajasthan and Karnataka, what has actually happened is that only 65% of ration card holders received some PMGKY allocation (i.e. grains in excess of the usual quota) while 35% only received their usual PDS quota (no extra grains). Only 60 percent of women Jan Dhan account holders received cash assistance while another 30 percent did not get any cash benefit at all. It is all the more saddening that 10 percent did not even aware of such cash assistance.

MGNREGA was the major relief for rural households in the period of pandemic. The report states that till November 2020 over 252 crore person-days of work were generated, an increase of 43 per cent



compared to previous year. Over 10 million (1 crore) more households worked in MGNREGA in 2020-21 as compared to previous year. Still, the demand was much higher than that was offered and only 55 per cent of those rural respondents who demanded work had been able to get it. People wanted work for more days to mitigate their poverty but to no avail.

Migrant workers had to bear the brunt of the pandemic associated loss of livelihood. The report elaborates, *“Class, caste, ethnic or linguistic identity, and lack of stable residence as well as political voice render casual wage migrants in industries such as construction, the most precarious and hard to reach with social protection policies. In Azim Premji University CLIPS 81% migrants lost employment in the lockdown compared to 64% non-migrants. 31% reported not being able to access rations compared to 15% non-migrants.”*

## Recommendations

**We have just reproduced some of the recommendations of the report below:**

a. So far, India’s fiscal response to Covid, amounting to around 1.5-1.7% of GDP, has been conservative. The impacts of the second wave are still unfolding and may be as large, or larger than those we report for the first wave. Further, coming as it does on the back of depleted savings, debt, and reduced fallback options, the second wave can lead to potentially larger impacts on work, incomes, food security, health and education. The states, who are at the forefront of the pandemic response in terms of containment as well as welfare, are severely strained in their finances. Thus, there are compelling reasons for the Union government to undertake additional spending now.

**b. We propose the following urgent policy measures**

- Extending free rations under the PDS beyond June, at least till the end of 2021.
- Cash transfer of K5,000 for three months to as many vulnerable households as can be reached with the existing digital infrastructure, including but not limited to Jan Dhan accounts.
- Expansion of MGNREGA entitlement to 150 days and revising programme wages upwards to state minimum wages. Expanding the programme budget to at least 11.75 lakh crores.
- Launching a pilot urban employment programme in the worst hit districts, possibly focused on women workers.
- Increasing the central contribution in old-

age pensions to at least 1500.

- Automatically enrolling all MGNREGA workers who do construction work, as registered workers under the Building and Other Construction Workers (BoCW) Act so that they can access social security benefits.
- A Covid hardship allowance to 2.5 million Anganwadi and ASHA workers of 130,000 (5,000 per month for six months).

These measures, taken together, will amount to approximately 15.5 lakh crores of additional spending and bring the total fiscal outlay on Covid relief to around 4.5% of GDP over two years. We believe that this large fiscal stimulus is justified given the magnitude of the crisis. For example, the proposed cash transfer is just equal to incomes lost last year by the poorest 10% of households, leaving alone the second wave impact.

c. Failure to take action now will cause short-term hardship to continue, and may compound the long-term effects leading to years of lost welfare gains. Increased poverty as well as loss of savings and productive resources can lead to poverty traps. Nutritional and educational deficits, occurring due to stressed household finances, can have long-term effects. Women leaving the labor market can lead to long term increases in already large gender gaps. Youth may also experience long-term impacts on earnings and productivity due to these lost years.

d. Someday the pandemic will be behind us, and the task of economic revival will include addressing weak structural transformation, persistent informality and inadequate employment generation. The time is also right to correct the historical undervaluation of workers who have played a crucial frontline role in the response to the crisis. We propose a framework for a National Employment Policy, which includes the promotion of public investment in social infrastructure as well as the facilitation of private investment. These, together with a comprehensive social security infrastructure that includes rights-based entitlements, portable benefits, and empowered worker welfare boards, can tackle the persistent problems of low earnings, low productivity and precarity.

We hope that the findings in this report contribute to the difficult journey of economic revival that lies ahead for India.”

[\[Those interested in reading the full report can click here\]](#)





# The Forgotten Frontline Workers

## Safai Karamcharis, Hospital D-Group Workers, ASHA Workers And Crematorium Workers

MAITREYI KRISHNAN

While everyone is speaking about the doctors and nurses, who are most definitely working on the frontlines and whose services are, of course, laudable during this pandemic, it is necessary for us to remember the frontline workers who are often neglected – the Safai Karamcharis / Sanitation Workers, the D-Group workers in hospitals, ASHA Workers and Crematorium workers.

### Sanitation Workers

Every morning, in every village, town and city around the country, even before the sun rises, armies of lakhs of Dalit Safai Karamchairs awake and leave their homes to begin their daily sanitation work of sweeping the streets, removing garbage, cleaning drains, cleaning toilets, etc. Sanitation Workers are not merely individual members of the sanitation work force out of pure choice; but members, by birth, with ineradicable identity and inter-generational continuity.

Sanitation workers, who have worked through the lockdown without any break, play a major role in directly dealing with garbage, cleaning drains, disinfecting public places, hospitals and even containment zones. They are the ones with an

elevated risk of COVID-19 infection because the nature of the job puts them into direct contact with the virus. These workers are required to work in proximity to households and apartments for door-to-door waste collections. They work in the containment zones and collect waste from the home quarantine households, placing them at great risk.

### Hospital Workers

The Frontline workers in Hospitals apart from doctors and nurses include a large number of workers engaged in housekeeping, waste management, attenders, lift operators, ward boys, security personnel to name a few. This includes workers in both public and private hospitals. The housekeeping staff ensure cleanliness and hygiene in the premises of the hospital, including the COVID-19 Ward. The task of the attenders is to look after the COVID-19 patients, bringing them medicines, food, water and helping them to the toilets, etc. The security personnel are in-charge of the security of the hospitals. These workers come in direct contact with persons with COVID-19 and deal with biomedical and sanitary waste on a daily basis. They are exposed to hazardous substances and infected waste, are made

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to clean toilets and bathrooms in hospitals and thus get exposed to risk of infection, even if they are not always 'directly' in contact with patients themselves.

Both sanitation workers and hospital workers, in most parts of the country, are employed under sham contract systems in violation of the law and are very often not even paid minimum wages or not even provided with any form of social security measures. They do not enjoy job security either. Their social, economic and working conditions which were already abysmal have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. They are denied even the most basic rights like minimum wages, toilets, drinking water, proper rest, quarantine facilities etc. and are made to suffer from inhuman and unhygienic working conditions. This causes various occupational hazards including back problems, joint pains, high blood pressure and respiratory and heart related illnesses, making them more vulnerable.

Despite guidelines on the same, most of the workers are not provided any safety equipment, let alone PPE Kits which is what they require. They are at a very high risk of coming in direct contact with persons who are COVID positive.

## ASHA Workers

ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers are another group of frontline workers, who are completely neglected. A single ASHA worker looks after more than 1,000 families. The ASHAs are crucial element in primary and community health programmes. During the period of COVID, they are performing the work of contact tracing, conducting regular health check ups, registrations and assisting with vaccinations, spreading awareness, etc. They are on the frontlines and are at a grave risk. However, they are not even recognized as workers and are paid merely incentives and not even paid monthly wages. They have no security of tenure and can be terminated at will. The condition of ASHA workers is extremely precarious, especially during the ongoing Covid pandemic.

## Crematorium Workers

Workers employed in the crematorium belong primarily to the dalit communities. They perform the caste-imposed profession of cremating and burying. They work under extremely vulnerable conditions added with violation of their rights like not being paid minimum wages or not being provided with any safety equipments. Those who routinely handle corpses may have heightened risk of contracting tuberculosis, bloodborne viral infection (such as Hepatitis B/C and HIV), and gastrointestinal infections (such as rotavirus diarrhoea, salmonellosis, E. coli, typhoid/paratyphoid fevers, hepatitis A, shigellosis and cholera). As COVID related deaths increased from April, 2021, the crematorium workers have

been completely overworked and are in constant risk of catching the virus themselves. Despite being overworked, they are not paid additional wages and continue to be denied even minimum wages. They have not been provided with vaccination either.

## Treble Oppression as Dalits, Workers and Women

The Supreme Court, in its order dated 30.04.2021, in In Re: Distribution Of Essential Supplies And Services During Pandemic held that there must be an effective policy to ensure that the nation truly acknowledges the efforts of public healthcare professionals - doctors, nurses, hospital staff, ambulance drivers, sanitation workers and crematorium workers. The SC further directed the Central Government to ensure that facilities such as availability of food, resting facilities during intervals between work, transportation facilities, non-deduction of salary or leave account if afflicted by COVID 2019 or related infection, overtime allowance, in both public and private hospitals, and a separate helpline in cases of COVID 2019 related emergencies are provided.

These workers despite being recognized by [the Government as frontline workers](#) have been and continue to be neglected. Importantly, these workers largely come from historically oppressed dalit communities. Other than crematorium workers, they are predominately women.

It is necessary that immediate steps are taken to ensure all frontline workers are provided with proper safety equipment including PPE kits, full medical facilities and all basic amenities. All frontline workers must be provided free vaccination on priority. Their access to regular testing must also be ensured. It is also necessary that all workers are made permanent. The exploitative system of calling the frontline workers as 'contract workers' or 'honorarium workers' must be immediately abolished and they must be paid wages on par with permanent workers. They must be paid COVID allowance at a minimum of Rs. 10,000/- per month and medical insurance of Rs. 50 lakhs under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana must be extended to all these workers and their families. [Unfortunately, vast majority of this section of workers are excluded from 50 lakhs insurance saying they are not in 'direct' contact with Covid patients. This is a major injustice meted out to them]. It is necessary that immediate steps are taken to ensure fair and dignified working conditions for these workers. ■■■

# Industrial Relations Code: An Attack On The Right To Strike And To Organise

AVANI CHOKSHI

The central government has recently passed four anti-Labour Codes that, in the name of 'ease of doing business', effectively crush the hard-won rights of the working class. One such right that has been heavily impaired is the right of workers to organize and collectively bargain. It has been done through the heavily problematic provisions in the Industrial Relations Code (hereinafter the Code) which replaces the Industrial Disputes Act (ID Act), 1947, the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 and the Trade Unions Act, 1926. This note will discuss the attacks made by the Code specifically on the right to strike and the right to unionise.

## Attack on the Right to Strike Majority on Leave is also Strike

The IR Code attacks the idea of strikes both substantively as well as procedurally. At the very outset, the definition of the term 'strike' itself has been altered to include "*the concerted casual leave on a given day by fifty per cent or more workers employed in an industry*". Therefore, if more than half the workers in an establishment go on casual leave together, then that would not only amount to a strike, but all the consequences of illegal strike would flow,

if prior strike notice were not given as per law.

## Strike Notice Not Limited to Public Utility Services

This brings us to the second major change, which is the requirement of prior notice for strike in all industries. Whereas the 1947 Act made prior notice of strike mandatory only for public utility services, but now, 14 days' advance notice of strike is mandated across the board. Effectively, even in cases of blatant violations by establishments and in situations that require urgent collective action on the part of the workers, they must wait half a month to exercise their rights. This is contrary to the use of strike as a weapon of last resort for most workers.

## Penalties for Strike

And finally, what would be the consequences that flow from a strike that the new Code now terms illegal? In terms of the Code, the penalties have been heavily increased. The penalty for those who commence/continue illegal strikes have been extended from upto 1 month imprisonment or a Rs.50 fine to one month imprisonment or a minimum fine

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of Rs. 1000 extendable upto Rs. 10,000, or both. Therefore, the worker could face imprisonment for a month as well as a fine that is close to his/her monthly salary for simply striking work without giving half a month notice. Similarly, the fine for those who incite or instigate participation in an illegal strike, or knowingly spends money in furtherance of it has been increased to a minimum of Rs. 10,000 to a maximum of Rs. 50,000,

The sheer absurdity of this must be appreciated. For instance, take a case of a worker having fallen to death due to criminal negligence of the employer. Suppose the Union spontaneously decides to strike work and collects Rs. 5 from each of its members to print pamphlets for public distribution. Under the Code, each worker who paid Rs. 5 would be liable to pay a minimum of Rs. 10,000 up to Rs. 50,000, which may be imposed alongside imprisonment for a month!

## Right to Strike

The right to strike in India, is not a fundamental right, but a statutory right. However, courts have repeatedly stated that this right is an integral facet of the right to collectively bargain. It must be remembered that in a capitalist economy, the worker has no utility except for his/her labour. It is only when the labour done by his/her daily work is impacted that her voice may be heard. Thus, when the unequal power equations between managements and workers are considered, strikes are often the only mechanism for workers to challenge violation of rights.

International Labour Organisation body of principles on the right to strike make it absolutely clear that the right to strike must be considered as a *“fundamental right to be enjoyed by workers and their organizations (trade unions, federations and confederations), which is protected at international level, provided that the right is exercised in a peaceful manner”*. Moreover, *“The obligation to give prior notice ... **where this does not cause the strike to become very difficult or even impossible in practice.**.. are all acceptable conditions for the exercise of the right to strike.”* [The principles also state that “any sanctions imposed in the event of abuse should not be disproportionate to the seriousness of the violations.”](#)

India is also a signatory to the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which in Article 8 provides that the States, the parties to the Covenant, must undertake to ensure: *“the right to strike, provided that it is exercised in conformity with the laws of the particular country”*.

The dilution of the right to strike in the Code causes strikes to be very difficult or impossible in practice, and is a violation of international principles on Strike.

## Attacks on Trade Unions

Leaving aside, for the moment, the appalling new formulation of the law on strike, at a more foundational level, the Code also attacks the very concept of freedom of association by imposing unprecedented restrictions upon Trade Unions. For one, the Code allows for withdrawal or cancellation of certificate of registration of a trade union by a Registrar simply *“on the information received by him regarding the contravention by the Trade Union of the provisions of this Code or the rules made thereunder or its constitution or rules.”* These are vast and un-circumscribed powers that would lend themselves to arbitrary attacks on the freedom of association. Whereas prior notice and reasons for cancellation are required to be provided, there is no requirement to give an opportunity to be heard, in a clear violation of the principle of audi alteram partem. The Code also directs that certain persons may be disqualified for selection as an office bearer of a Union if a Tribunal so directed. This vast power given to the Tribunal is again a clear attack on the freedom of association itself.

## Penalties for Trade Union

Again, these provisions would lead to absurd consequences. Take the case of a Trade Union, which takes the decision to increase membership from Rs. 10 a month to Rs. 15 a month. By a simple blunder, the Union overlooks to inform the Registrar of this, despite the mandate to inform of any changes. Then, the registration of the Union itself is liable to be cancelled! It is clear that massively disproportionate consequences could accrue.

Moreover, yet again, penalties against Trade Unions have been dramatically increased. Under the TU Act, defaults in sending required notices would result in office bearers being liable to pay a fine of Rs. 5, which could be increased up to Rs. 50 in case of continuing defaults. The maximum initial punishment has been extended from Rs. 5 to Rs. 10,000, with a minimum punishment of Rs. 1000 being brought in. Moreover, continuing defaults are now not subject to a reasonable limits, but continue at a penalty of Rs. 50 a day so long as the default continues. So if a Union failed to send a notice of change of name, and this was not realized till a period of 5 years had passed, the Union would be liable to pay almost a lakh as fine.

## Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining

It must be noted that the rights of workers to organize and collectively bargain is well settled in international laws. Articles 3 and 4 of the ILO

Convention No. 87 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 are especially relevant:

### Article 3

1. Workers' and employers' organisations shall have the right to draw up their constitutions and rules, to elect their representatives in full freedom, to organise their administration and activities and to formulate their programmes.

2. The public authorities shall refrain from any interference which would restrict this right or impede the lawful exercise thereof.

### Article 4

Workers' and employers' organisations shall not be liable to be dissolved or suspended by administrative authority

**Article 11** of this Convention No. 87 also states that "Each Member of the International Labour Organisation for which this Convention is in force undertakes to take all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure that workers and employers may exercise freely the right to organise."

Neither this convention nor the ILO Convention

No. 98 on Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 have been ratified by India. However, the fundamental right to organize flows from Article 19(1)(c) of the Constitution, which protects the fundamental freedom to form associations.

When boiled down to the fundamental changes in law being brought in by the Code, it becomes extremely clear the government is pursuing an anti-worker agenda. The rights of workers to organize and strike are diluted and heavily penalized, whereas the right of the management to oppress is not tackled. The crony-capitalist government, which is involved in an agenda of privatization of public corporations and loot of the paise of workers to add to the overflowing coffers of private entities is evident. By way of the Code, what little legal protections the workers had are being steadily chipped away at. The way forward can only be through massive people's movements against erosion of rights by the government. ■■■

## Defence Sector Corporatisation

### They are not just cajoling Corporations, Beware! They are implementing an integral design of Arms Sales of Hindu Rashtra!

[This is a foreword by Comrade Shankar V, all India president of AICCTU, to a book written in Tamil titled, "The Fall of Ordnance Establishments and its Implications" by a long time trade union and worker activist, Comrade Azhageshwaran, of Ordnance Factory at Trichy (OFT), Tamil Nadu]

Modi's attempt to convert defence factories into corporations is aimed at privatisation. But handing over them to the private corporate houses constitutes a strategic point of view. The strategy is to transform India into a frontline state in import – export of arms and to mortgage our beloved country to the merchants of death. It is a fascist dream project of plunging into arms race and thereby establishing its hegemonic ambitions. Hence, it is neither simply about converting defence factories into corporations nor only about handing over defence production units to friends of Modi-RSS. Rather it essentially

is a process of corporate - communal hegemonic ambitions of establishing Hindu Rashtra by transforming the entire country into a merchant of death, into a fascist state.

It is part of a corporate, fascist hegemonic dream of converting the globe into a graveyard by transforming India into a Defence 'Manufacturing Hub', by mortgaging Indian safety, security and sovereignty to foreign imperialist powers, by allowing 100 percent Foreign Direct Investment, all in the name of "Make in India".

In order to facilitate the fulfilment of the dream, the licensing methods and due permissions are being simplified. The licence or permission is not required if a person, company or a country want to repeat the same order for any number of times. Hitherto mandatory 'End User Certificate' is not needed any more. The period of license to manufacture ordnance is stretched to 15 years from its present 3 years period and is also allowed to renew it for another three years.





# DEFENCE SECTOR CORPORATISATION

The amendment to get rid of End User Certificate is potent enough to encourage criminalisation at domestic and international level. It has also the potential to create the worst effect of criminalisation of the society and the people. It can also make our arms available to international criminals and mafia. It will definitely pave the way to make easy availability of deadly weapons inside the country. Thus, the dream of establishing communal fascist state constitutes several evil designs. The acts are being amended only to facilitate such a menacing master plan. The Modi government has chosen the route of corporatisation of defence factories and subsequent privatisation only to facilitate its intention of establishing a hegemonic fascist state. The defence workers movement should understand the intention of the fascists in the correct perspective and should target the movement against the fascist intentions and designs of the Modi led BJP government.

Several operations and activities of ordnance manufacturing have already been privatised in the name of 'outsourcing'. The workers employed in these outsourced activities and operations are already denied any legal protection of regularisation and safe working conditions. Now, legal protections is also being denied to 2 lakhs workers by opening up 41 state owned defence production units for privatisation, en route corporations. The job security norms for this 2 lakhs regular workforce to be thrown down the gutters without any legal protection looms large as a real possibility now and such dreadful days are seemingly closing near.

Next only to Israel, India has already attained the status of "Major Defence Partner" of America which is the primary death merchant of the entire world. Now, the safety, security and sovereignty of our country are being mortgaged to foreign powers in the name of furthering Indo-US military ties and cooperation.

In such a situation, all trade unions in defence sector industries joined hands and organised several struggles against the government policy of

privatisation. All India strike of defence workers on Aug 20-25 received a huge and welcome response from workers. More than 82,000 regular workers and 40,000 contract workers of 41 defence production units all over the country joined the strike with all enthusiasm and undaunted spirit. Around 600 junior managers too, despite not being part of the strike call, joined the fray. Only around 1500 Class A officers of top management went for work. Only the workers of essential services, with the permission of the union, discharged their duties. The wheels of defence production came to a grinding halt. There was absolutely no production. The strike was a historic success.

Similarly, if the all trade union calls of 30 days strike and indefinite strike had become a reality, the defence workers movement would have been the leading contingent of the Indian working class movement as a whole. The movement would have dealt a body blow to the privatisation ambitions, the anti-worker activities and the communal, corporate dreams of the Modi led BJP government. It would have opened the floodgates of workers strikes in the government and public sector units including banks, insurance, railways, etc. Defence workers movement would have snowballed into a greater movement of workers of all sectors of the country. But unfortunately, it did not happen. It is the responsibility of every activist and worker of the trade union movement in the country to ponder over the question.

Ordnance factory workers strike is only a beginning of the forthcoming waves of strikes and struggles against the anti-worker, pro-corporate policies of the Modi led BJP government. It is also a protest against the military – industrial complex intended to be built by the Modi government. In such a situation, it is the responsibility of the working class movement in general and defence workers movement in particular, to enter into a deep introspection and adopt a new orientation, an alternative path and lend a revolutionary direction to the working class movement as a whole. ■■■

# Corona Pandemic: The Need Is A Robust And Free Public Health Care System

RAMKISHAN



*A woman receiving oxygen at Delhi's Indirapuram Gurudwara on May 1 as hospitals in the national capital face severe oxygen crisis*

While the Modi-2 government at centre is being rightly held responsible for Corona-2 catastrophe in the country by people's movements, the virtual collapse of India's public health care system in the face of 2nd wave has become a worrisome point. This wave of Corona pandemic has absolutely exposed the hollowness of our country's public health care system and the criminally apathetic attitude of the 'elected' rulers towards the health care of common people.

The Novel corona virus (Covid -19) started in December 2019. In India, the first case was detected on 30th January 2020 in Kerala but no serious and rapid response was formulated by the central government. The central government was busy making exemplary arrangements to greet the then US President Mr. Donald Trump and also in toppling the elected government of Madhya Pradesh. In spite of warnings, the government remained casual towards the pandemic of such a huge magnitude. On 5th March 2020 Dr. Harshwardhan, the Union Health Minister, said in the floors of the parliament that there was no need to panic as coronavirus cases were only 29 in India and that the cases were declining in China.

Then came the abrupt, unplanned and most cruel

Lockdown, announced by the PM Narendra Modi in the evening of 24 March 2020 which only proved to be a devastation of lives and livelihood of unorganised workers, daily wagers, particularly lakhs and lakhs of migrant workers spread across the country. Despite Lockdown and the spread confined mainly to major cities, more than 10 million people got infected and more than 1.5 lakh died. Our country's pathetic public health system was largely exposed during this first wave.

Then came the 2nd and more dangerous wave of Corona, but the PM Modi was busy proclaiming victory over Corona in various international platforms. Despite continuous warnings by scientists and medical community about 2nd wave well in advance, the Modi govt. adopted an unscientific attitude and allowed Khumbh Mela at Haridwar one year earlier than scheduled, based on obscurantist ideas. Several lakhs of people were allowed to be congregated who became the carriers of second wave all over the country. All assembly elections were allowed and lakhs and lakhs of people were exposed to deadly infection. Thus the PM became the super spreader of Corona. Instead of improving the public health system and medical preparations, the government remained busy in 'converting the



crisis into opportunity' for the corporate sharks and for their takeover of national resources and wealth. A disaster in the form of second wave was actually invited and facilitated by our rulers, the PM Modi led BJP and the obscurantist RSS.

The consequences were pretty horrible. The 2nd wave has been marked by extreme shortage of oxygen, beds, ventilators, ICU facilities, essential medicines and trained health staff. Above all, hoarding and black-marketing of medical essentials became rampant. Not even a single hospital was augmented with new beds with required facilities and not to speak of opening of new hospitals and of making elaborate arrangements to face the killer second wave. Even the existing make-shift covid care centres were dismantled in January - February 2021. Services of professionals and all warnings in combating this deadly disease were completely ignored. And as a result, the country has become a graveyard with the infection spreading fast this time to rural areas. Lack of required health infrastructure in rural areas has made the situation pathetic. Within a short span of two and a half months - March to mid-May 2021- death toll has touched several lakhs. Official estimates claim a death toll of 1.5 lakhs – highest fatality rate in world during 2nd wave- taking total to around 3 lakhs (some estimates put it to 15-20 lacs). 1.75 crore more have got infected taking the total to 2.75 crore. And now prevails an extreme shortage of vaccines. The much-trumpeted programme of vaccination has virtually come to a grinding halt in most parts of the country. Public health infrastructure is in doldrums and private hospitals are minting money. Now the third wave of corona is knocking at our doors and our governments and health system are far away from facing it.

Now, if come to reality check of our health system, India, the largest democracy, fairs poor in the Global Health security index, ranking 57th position, compared to other countries. The Indian government's expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP still hovers only around 1.5%, one of the lowest in the world. Under-investment in public healthcare system poses a challenge to India's COVID-19 containment plans. Nearly, 52% of households in urban areas, and 44% of households in rural areas have private sector as the main source of healthcare when they fall sick. In the time of pandemic, health expenditure rises to catastrophic proportions because of high cost of health care by profit hungry private healthcare system which is completely unregulated by the government. Extreme paucity of trained medical staff including doctors is a well-known fact. Health infrastructure in rural areas, which is a home to majority of the population, is totally inadequate and non-functioning. Health policies since last 20 years advocated by subsequent governments have only facilitated dismantling of public health infrastructure

like ESIC and CGHS and opened the floodgates of private insurance schemes to facilitate reaping of super profit by private corporate companies.

The entire frontline workforce, including doctors and paramedic staff, who were working with dedication to fight Coronavirus, who interact with Corona patients on a daily basis, were not even provided with proper kits for protection and several of them were infected and many of them also died. A few thousands of frontline workers have also died. No new staff are recruited according to the need of the situation on a regular basis though many regular employees have become prey to the coronavirus while on duty. Medical and Paramedics being under-staffed have become over-burdened and fell prey to corona. A large number of sanitation workers, who shoulder Modi's flagship scheme of 'Swachh Bharat Mission' also died as they were engaged in cleaning of corona related waste but without any insurance protection or compensation. Much publicised Rs.50 lakh life insurance has not been given to the families of most of the deceased frontline workers. If we do the reality check, we find that our health system- both public and private- is running on the shoulders of extremely under paid, slave like contract and casual workers and voluntary / honorarium-based scheme workers like ASHA and Anganwadi who live and work in most precarious conditions. On the recommendations of the 6th and 7th Pay Commissions, the permanent posts are being abolished on a regular basis and being replaced by irregular workforce of different kinds. More than 60% medical staff at present is on contract/casual basis.

Keeping the health of the people of the country in such a miserable condition tantamount to nothing but a genocide. The health, which is most precious and fundamental in everyone's life, cannot be sustained with a meagre allocation in budget and with rampant privatization. Forcing an extremely under paid, irregular and contract workforce to operate in working conditions of slavery to manage such a huge disaster is completely inhuman and illegal. The corona pandemic is only an eye opener. We must heed to the corona warning. In usual conditions too, thousands of people die in our country due to lack of proper public health system. WHO says that India is the country where largest number of people do not have access to essential medicines.

So, the need of the hour is to make health a fundamental right of common people. Not to treat it as a commodity to make profit. Building up a robust and free public health care infrastructure with regular health staff can only be a solution to face the disaster. Privatisation can only aggravate the disaster and intensify private loot. ■■■

# Bengal Verdict

## Working Class Strikes Back!

**NABENDU DASGUPTA**

People of West Bengal, particularly the working class of the state voted decisively and conclusively against the BJP during the recently concluded assembly election. Political observers are of the opinion that this is a defeat of Modi - Amit Shah duopoly, who travelled by air to this state in the thick of election like daily passengers and who frantically tried to capture Bengal. It was also held as a befitting reply to the EC, which was shamelessly bent in favour of Modi and BJP dragging the polls for 8 phases amid raging second wave of COVID.

How would the working class, especially the vast Hindi speaking section, behave in the election was a talking point within the trade union circles. During the last Lok Sabha election, most of the constituencies in the industrial belt with an overwhelming Hindi speaking electorate voted in favour of the BJP. But, this time, in the just concluded assembly election, barring the tea garden sector in North Bengal, the vast majority of the working class voted against the BJP. Besides the toiling people, the urban middle class and business community, highly aggrieved on the issue of steep price rise of petrol - diesel - cooking gas, essential commodities and GST, voted decisively against the BJP in Kolkata and its surrounding districts.

The BJP maintained its influence among a section of the electorate that falls along the Jharkhand - Bihar border, but in the Asansol - Durgapur industrial area the Trinamool Congress (TMC) won 6 of the 9 seats while the BJP won only 3. Barabani and Asansol (North) constituencies are dominated by coal workers. In this constituency lies the Chittaranjan locomotive factory, the traditional unit where railway engines are manufactured. The Railway board gradually slashed its workers strength from 21 thousand to ten thousand over the years. More than three thousand posts are lying vacant, many are abolished forever. The Railway Board is planning to privatise this traditional unit and its first step is to corporatise this factory. The closed CPSU Hindustan Cables falls within this Barabani constituency. It is to be noted that in the last LS election, the BJP candidate Babul Supriyo promised to reopen Hindustan Cables and was elected from Asansol LS. Although he won from Asansol and got a berth in Modi's cabinet, the closed factory was never re-opened. More than 16 coal mines are facing closure. Moreover, Modi governments move to privatise the Coal industry have generated



extreme anger and discontent among the coal workers in general and that was reflected during this election - workers voted emphatically against Modi's anti worker policies.

Kulti is an assembly constituency that falls within the border of Dhanbad (Jharkhand) and Bengal. The All India Forward Bloc has its traditional base in this area. But this time, denying FB of their just demand to contest from this seat, the CPIM asked Congress to contest from Kulti constituency. This decision annoyed the entire ranks of the FB and they decided not to vote for the Congress. The results had a telling effect. More than 4000 votes were polled in NOTA, and the BJP won this seat by a slender margin of 679 votes. The vote share for both the BJP and the TMC remained the same - 46 per cent. The BJP also won Asansol (South) seat and their vote share was 2 percent more than TMC.

Howrah, another district is dotted by sunset SMEs, struggling for its survival since demonetisation. Covid and Lockdown 1 had tremendous impact on these industries which are now found gasping for survival. This district is a mixed bag and has a sizable population of Hindi speaking people, particularly in some of the constituencies. The BJP increased its political activity and, in its bid, to 'capture' this district, encouraged defection from within the TMC. One after another, the TMC leaders crossed fences, and a communal campaign was organised with increased tempo. The grim industrial situation showed no signs of improvement. But, the electorate of Howrah, particularly the working people rose above the communal lines and voted against the BJP. The TMC won all the assembly constituencies in Howrah.



Hooghly is the adjoining district of Howrah, which has a vast tract of fertile multi-crop agricultural land, and Singur falls in this district. There are a number of Jute mills, dotted with a few textile mills in this district. And just before the election, four jute mills workers faced suspension of work due to shortage of raw jute. Dunlop Tyre factory and Hindustan Motors are two traditional manufacturing units lying closed for many years. Few years before, the BJP engineered communal clashes at Bhadreswar, a jute mill dominated area and some places were quite vulnerable since that incident. There are 18 assembly segments in this district and TMC captured 14 segments, while for the first time, neither Left nor Congress could secure a single seat in this district.

Chapdani - Pandua - Bhadreswar - Konnagar - Bansberia is a vast stretch dominated by industrial workers, where TMC won decisively.

24 Parganas (South) is a highly diversified district. Agriculture, fishery, forest (Sunderban is in this area), tourism -- these are the main props of the district's economy. Jute industry, Indian Oil, Bata factory are also some of the important industries here. Falta, an industrial zone emerged as an export processing zone during the LF regime, built upon 280 acres of land. 193 acres were taken from Kolkata Port Trust and the rest 87 acres were acquired from the farmers of that area. Though it was a central government's initiative, the Left Front played an important role in establishing this industrial zone. Farmers were forcibly evicted from their land and they lost their livelihood. The LF government was the architect of this EPZ and in the year 2003, it was declared as a SEZ. Bengali speaking minorities are the main social force in this area. In this assembly segment, the TMC won by more than 50 percent of the polled votes. CPIM and Congress got 17 percent and 7 percent votes respectively. Only the SC reserved Bishnupur constituency went in favour of BJP. It is to be noted that the BJP has made deep inroads among the SC and the OBCs scoring more than 47 percent votes in this area.

Out of 33 assembly constituencies in North 24 Parganas, 14 seats fall within the industrial area. People of different language, caste, creed and religion inhabit in this region. Few years back, the RSS goons organised a communal violence here. There are many heavy industries, small and medium factories, some PSU's too. Many jute mills, Ordnance factories, Kanchrapara Railway workshop, Ceramic, IT, HAL, Hosiery and small leather factories are some of the important industries in this area. Only one assembly seat, the Bhatpara constituency voted for the BJP and the rest for the TMC.

The most encouraging part is that all attempts to divide the vast working people along religious lines, instigation of divisive communal campaign by the top most leadership in this industrial belt of Asansol, Durgapur, Howrah, Hooghly, North and South 24 parganas, were rejected emphatically by the working people. Privatisation and disinvestment of public sectors, selling all the public assets to a handful of cronies, the plight of the migrant workers', anti-worker

measures and policies, country-wide industrial strike against the Modi government -- all these added to raise the anti- BJP consciousness among the workers in general.

North Bengal stands as an aberration in this anti-BJP scenario. In this region, identity-based politics has struck roots for the last couple of years and the tea garden industry is the only organised industry in this area. Nearly 4.5 lakh workers are engaged in this industry. For the last 6-7 years, from the joint platform of most of the trade unions of tea gardens, a vigorous movement was launched demanding minimum wages for tea garden workers, and for the permanent ownership or patta of their homestead land. But the state government did not fulfil these just demands. The united trade union movement failed to achieve the desired result. The BJP cunningly utilised this failure, and promised Rs 350 as minimum wages and land patta if they come to power. This was a game changer and tea garden workers voted for BJP en masse. In the hills, the BJP thrived upon the inner contradiction and split of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. In Darjeeling District, the BJP won two out of five seats, namely Kurseong & Darjeeling. The Kalimpong seat went in favour of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (Benoy Tamang group). The GNLFF supported the BJP. The internal rivalry within two warring factions of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha helped the BJP a lot.

The two assembly segments in the plains of Darjeeling district, Matigara - Naxalbari, and Phansidewa are dominated by tea garden workers. In 2011 and 2016, the Congress won both these seats, but this time they were pushed to the third position. The BJP started organising their work in a planned manner in these areas, and the RSS meticulously built up their network, which bore fruit in this election.

In Alipurduar district, the BJP won in 5 assembly segments. Adivasi and Gorkha tea workers are predominantly employed in tea gardens of these areas. The BJP won in three seats - Madarihata, Kumargram and Kalchini. Malbazar and Nagrakata assembly segments of Jalpaiguri district are tea garden areas. The TMC won in Malbazar, while Nagrakata went in favour of BJP.

The majority assembly segments of Coochbehar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling voted in favour of the BJP. The ascendance of BJP is inversely proportional to the decline of Left forces. The fascist forces are increasingly gaining their foothold in North Bengal.

West Bengal dealt a blow to the fascist BJP in the assembly election, which was desperate to capture Bengal. People of Bengal demolished BJP's double engine and Sonar Bangla rhetoric. They stood tall and above all communal designs and voted against this barbaric central rule, in favour of secularism and working class unity. It is the task of the revolutionary left to consolidate the positive gains and strengthen the working class movement against the despotic rule in the future. ■■■

# Scheme Workers And Their Struggles

SHASHI YADAV AND RAMBALI PRASAD



**A**lmost one crore scheme workers all over the country shoulder the burden of implementing several important public schemes of the central government on health and education. They include ASHA workers (working under National Rural Health Mission program), Anganvadi workers (working under ICDS program) and MDM workers (working under Mid Day Meal scheme for school children). Almost 95% of the scheme workers in the country are women. These scheme workers are the backbone in ensuring basic health and nutrition to vast majority of the country's population. Their work ensures institutional delivery of child, vaccination, rural health care programmes, eradication of malnutrition, elementary education of children up to age of 6 years and Mid day meal to the children going to primary/middle schools.

These scheme workers who deliver some of the most essential services to the nation are themselves at the receiving end of ruthless and cruel exploitation of their labour. Their duties and responsibilities are defined but they are not treated as a government employee or a worker. They are neither paid legal minimum wages nor wages equal to their counterparts employed by the government, but a paltry amount in the name of honourarium or incentive. Such a huge number of scheme workers do not have access to social security facilities like EPF, ESI etc. Their long-standing demand of recognition as government employees with permanent positions have been ignored by both the Central and respective state governments. If the central government conveniently

denied their existence when it came to meeting their demands, the state governments escaped from their responsibility citing the schemes being under the central government. They are being treated as employer-less employees. They are being called as "volunteers" implying "forced labour" that is prohibited by applicable labour laws. Scheme workers struggle to wriggle themselves out of the status of "forced volunteers" and demand the status of government employees and associated rights, benefits and working conditions. Even the demand of recognising them as "workers" to begin with and at least, to pay minimum wages is also being denied. This is the status of frontline workers who have dedicated themselves to the wellness and welfare of the country and the people. The central and state governments deny them legally due rights and wages while engaging them to serve the nation.

In the period of raging pandemic, the scheme workers are being deployed in Covid related duties without any special incentives or wages. They are also effectively denied of 50 lakhs insurance in case of death. The government has just ignored the fact that the scheme workers are risking their lives while fulfilling their duty in the Pandemic.

## ASHAs Struggle for Rights and Dignity

The condition of ASHAs is the worst among all scheme workers. Since pre-covid days they are expected to be on duty 24x7. The ASHAs have to be



on their feet anytime of the day to bring a pregnant woman to Primary Health Centre of the area for child birth or any other illness. An ASHA is expected to work even in odd hours without even making any arrangement of transportation by the government.

The scheme workers can only fight for their rights by collectively and unitedly pressurising a government that does not even recognise them as workers. Unionising the scheme workers was thus an important task for the trade union movement in the country. The AICCTU has taken several initiatives to organise and unionise the scheme workers in different parts of the country. In Bihar, our fraternal Non-gazetted Employees Federation (NGEFed) took a laudable initiative to form a state level trade union of ASHA workers and to lead them in their struggles. The union now has a large network spreading to all districts and blocks. The union has emerged as a major union in the state and is leading militant struggles of ASHA workers who are predominantly women. Similar initiatives of unionising the scheme workers have been successfully taken in various states in the country, including Assam, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Delhi. In order to provide necessary fillip to the process of developing a closer contact and co-operation among the unions in different states, an All India Scheme Workers Federation (AISWF) was also floated by AICCTU. The formation of federation has yielded desired result of significant expansion and unionisation of scheme workers in different states.

In the specific context of Bihar, the scheme workers have fought prolonged battles for their rights. ASHAs of Bihar, along with the above fundamental demands, have also been demanding for a dignified honorarium as has been paid by many other state governments,

for example Rs 10,000 per month provided by Telangana state government to ASHAs. When the government denied to pay heed to their demands, they launched a course of agitations. The ASHA Joint Struggle Front of three Left trade unions was formed in 2018. A historic indefinite strike of ASHAs of Bihar continued for 38 days, from 1st December 2018 to 7th January 2019. Bihar ASHAs, the women workers, who never had the experience of any struggle, blocked the roads at nearly 400 places and blocked the trains at more than 100 locations in the state, defying all threats and intimidation by the government. All PHCs remained almost paralysed due to the strike. At last, the government came to the negotiation table and after five rounds of talks an agreement on 17 points was arrived at. The state government agreed to pay a fixed monthly honorarium of Rs.1000 per month. The Bihar Rajya ASHA Workers Association (BRAWA) affiliated to NGEFfed/AICCTU emerged as a popular and committed union in the course of the movement. This strike of the ASHA workers of Bihar was also an inspiration and an energiser for ASHA organizations in other states to carry their movement forward.

## Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and Anganvadi Workers

The MDM cooks and helpers and Anganvadi teachers and assistants have also organised themselves in different states to demand their rights and dignified working conditions. The AICCTU has outreached to MDM cooks in most of the districts of Bihar. Several successful campaigns have been conducted on their demands. Some important struggles have been organised at district levels as well. Organisations of MDM Cooks are active in Jharkhand and West Bengal as well where several significant initiatives have

been taken. Among Anganvadi workers, we have a sustained and long standing work in Maharashtra. The union in Maharashtra has been taking up series of initiatives to build up movement around the issues of workers and have been successful in several instances in pressurising the government.

On the call of central trade unions and federations, a three day long Mahapadav (gathering) was held at Parliament Street, Delhi from 9 to 11 November, 2017. The Mahapadav witnessed massive participation of scheme workers from all over the country. The role of AICCTU in leading the Mahapadav was significant. The success of participation in Mahapadav was also one of the backdrops that formed the basis for AICCTU to float a federation of scheme workers called All India Scheme Workers Federation (AISWF).

Along with fighting for their own rights at trade union level, they have also tried to turn it into a political issue. With the government disowning this section of workers, the need to articulate their demands at a political plane and direct the movement in a politico-trade union orientation assumes immense importance. The scheme workers have also actively intervened in political campaign during elections to hold the political parties accountable to their plight. ASHA workers slogan of “No Vote to BJP” became quite popular in the assembly elections in Bihar. In last assembly elections in five states too, AICCTU affiliated scheme workers’ unions played an active role in making their issues an important agenda of the election.

## The Pandemic and the Scheme Workers

Since first wave of Corona in the country, the ASHAS and Anganvadi workers are playing the role of frontline health care workers. ASHA and Anganvadi workers are engaged in tracing Covid infected patients, door to door survey, mobilising people for vaccination and awareness campaigns to follow the Corona guidelines among common people in their respective areas of work. MDM cooks are engaged in cooking meals for Covid infected patients in quarantine centres across rural areas of the country. Many MDM cooks have also got infected while discharging their duty. Many of them have succumbed to Covid.

But, the government has shamelessly shrugged off its responsibilities of providing free treatment to scheme workers who have been infected in the course of their duty. The promised insurance benefit of Rs 50 Lakhs to the dependents of the deceased workers under PMGKY has been denied to these workers. They are being denied the 50 lakhs insurance under some flimsy grounds of “not being assigned” in taking care of Covid patients directly. The clause of direct engagement with or assignment of Covid patients excludes a vast majority of scheme

workers from the promise of insurance of 50 lakhs in case of death to frontline workers. Hence, it is very pertinent to demand removal of such a clause for applicability of insurance to frontline health workers.

The frontline scheme workers are not being provided minimum safety kits like masks, gloves, sanitizer etc. Nor have they been given proper training to maintain personal safety while on duty during the pandemic.

No special wage or incentive or allowance has been sanctioned to these frontline scheme workers till now. The scheme workers have categorically demanded Rs 500 wage per work day or Rs 10,000 monthly incentives for their work in fighting the pandemic. The government is conveniently ignoring these demands of the scheme workers who are literally risking their lives in providing needed service during the pandemic.

The unions of scheme workers are tirelessly raising the demand for safety and rights of the workers during pandemic. The AISWF observed an all-India Strike of scheme workers on 8th and 9th August, 2020. The unions of scheme workers are continuing with their repeated protests demanding safety and rights of the workers while maintaining all Covid protocols.

The Covid pandemic has once again brought to limelight the importance of the services and labour that the scheme workers provide for the functioning of the basic health care services of the nation. They are the front soldiers in the country’s fight against Corona. Yet, the government continues to deny even basic rights to them as workers. It is time that the indifferent attitude of the governments to the demands of scheme workers is confronted in an organised and effective way. It is time to strengthen the union and the movement of the scheme workers. ■■■

### All India Demand Day- On 31May

#### All India Scheme Workers Federation

##### Demands:

- Ensure Rs. 10,000 as monthly Corona allowance to all Scheme workers like ASHAS, Anganvadi and Mid-day meal employees!
- Ensure Rs. 10 lakh Health insurance to them!
- Ensure Rs. 50 lakh Life insurance coverage, without the condition of direct/indirect engagement!
- Ensure availability of protective gear, equipment, etc. for all.

# Codified Discrimination: The Gangmen In Indian Railways

N.N. BANERJEE



**H**istory of the Indian Railways gangmen dates back to the days of British imperialism when the first railway track was laid between Boribunder (Mumbai) and Thane in 1853. Poor Peasants having been uprooted from the land, left their villages for livelihood and got themselves engaged as labourers by a private railway company under the East India Company in laying railway tracks. Even in plague-affected areas they were forced to work hard without medical aid.

Even after Independence such annals of exploitation continued to evade the notice of the then political leaders of the country. They were employed by State Railways on daily rated wages without social security and were forced to work long hours beyond 12/14 hours a day. Laying of tracks, carrying wooden sleepers and unloading of ballast involved hazardous manual jobs. Gradually they got unionized and fought for 8 hours of duty, ganghut (resting room) and recess time. The designation 'Gangman' is replete with the East India Company's notorious legacy of inhuman torture and exploitation. With their union's intervention the nomenclature got changed to Trackman first and then to Track Maintainers as it stands now. But there is hardly any change in the working conditions, occupational safety and health of such a category of staff. The railway trackmen are the most vulnerable section of railway men to accidents. They are often run over by the running trains and getting killed while attending to repair work or any flaws in the railway tracks. No full-proof safety measures or devices are provided to save them from accidents.

They are required to walk for kms. along the railway tracks for an average of 8 hours a day in inclement

weather and in remote places by the side of dense forests, often carrying 20/25kg monitoring equipment and other tools. They are duty-bound to check whether the ballast on track-bed below the sleepers is packed correctly, repair cracks and fishplate damages and make sure nuts, holds and welding are intact and check on the clips that hold rails to the sleepers.

## Gangmen's Life during the Modi Regime

During the first wave of the Pandemic Covid19 many gangmen were exposed to the deadly virus while carrying rails together with no scope to maintain physical distance. They had to carry out their daily task without masks, gloves, PPEs, head-covers and sanitizer bottles. Even during the second wave they were not treated as Frontline Workers and railway health infrastructure to remote places is so poor that most gangmen are not vaccinated against Covid infection and are dying without treatment.

Out of total gangmen's strength during the mid-90s, the privatisation policy reduced the strength gradually to 2.5 lakhs as on today. During this period massive contractorisation in track laying/replacement work has taken place. Even track patrolling and general maintenance have been outsourced. As a result there has been a massive reduction in posts, although this category is considered crucial in providing safety and security for the passengers and the crews.

The working conditions are worse so much so that the ganghuts where they take rest remain in dilapidated condition with broken windows and roof leaking- even with no provision of drinking water and electricity. They're forced to work in subhuman

conditions.

Being frustrated with the activities of the established unions they have formed their own organisations which, in turn, are closely associated with the left federation--Indian Railway Employees Federation. In some of the zonal railways the gangmen are organised in the unions affiliated to IREF & AICCTU to fight for their demands.

India has 67,367 km of railway tracks that are taken care of by track monitoring crew on a daily basis. Existing vacancies are not being filled up and 50 per cent of such vacancies are already abolished, throwing extra burden of work on the gangmen. The less said about the safety measures, the better. After the abolition of a separate railway budget, allocation for the safety fund got drastically slashed during the Modi regime, jeopardizing passengers as well as gangmen's safety. Instead of using modern means of communication, the gangmen still use the archaic

system of bursting detonators to alert Loco drivers when a trackman sees a crack on the track. He starts running 600 metres to fix the detonators in order to warn the driver of danger. During the Modi regime approximately 768 gangmen were run over by trains while on duty on tracks.

Modi's new code on occupational safety, health and working conditions excludes gangman in railways whereas it brings the Mines and Dock workers under clause 6(1) (a) of the act ensuring that the workplace must be kept free from hazards which may cause or likely to cause injury to the employees.

Will the National Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Board as mooted in the code advise the Ministry of the Railways about the gangmen's safety, the most vulnerable section prone to accidents in Indian Railways ? ■■■

## Protests by Railway Workers

**N. N. BANERJEE**

On 25th May, Indian Railway Employees' Federation (IREF)(affiliated to AICCTU) with all its affiliates in Zonal Railways and Production Units staged protests throughout Indian Railways to highlight eight demands arising out of their burning issues:

1. Declare all Railway Employees as CORONA WARRIORS;
2. Ensure 50 lakhs Life insurance coverage for all RLy. Employees;
3. Payment of 50 lakhs as Ex-gratia to the victim's family who died of Corona virus or with Co-morbidity since March 2020 at the outbreak of the deadly Covid;
4. Release of impounded D.A.with arrears;
5. Stop Privatisation of Railways, etc.

In the Corona Pandemic situation the Railway workers feel neglected and cheated, so much so they died helplessly being infected at work places where Covid Protocol wasn't maintained, even minimum safety items like masks, sanitizer, gloves, headgear etc. were not regularly made available, let alone the question of providing Vaccine to the front line workers. Gangmen are forced to carryout Track maintenance work in a close groups, in violation of COVID Protocol. During recess they are huddled together in a small room called 'hut' without ventilation where they are to have lunch and rest.

The Railway workers worked round the clock to contribute to the highest Freight loading of 130.38



Million tonnes during Corona pandemic. On the other hand, Corporates minted money out of the concessions in freight charges granted by the Ministry of Railways. This once again exposes the Pro-Corporate Fascist character of Modi government.

On the call of Samyukta Kisan Morcha- the Farmer's joint Platform of Struggle- and the Central Trade Unions, Railway workers under the leadership of IREF observed nationwide "Black Day for Indian Democracy" as a mark of solidarity on 26th May, 2021 on demands of Repeal of 3 Farm laws and 4 Labour codes to mark 6 months of farmers' stir and completion of 7 years of Modi govt.

The call was magnificently responded by all strata of people from Railway workers, organised/unorganised workers, Peasants, Youth and democratic forces.

■■■

# AICCTU Stands In Solidarity With The Palestinian People's Resistance Against Israel's Annexation Plan And Crimes Against Humanity



The people in the occupied Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza are facing a new wave of brutal aggression by Israel apartheid regime since the night of May 10, 2021. More than 250 people have been killed including 66 children and 38 women. The aggression comes as a further blow to the people in Gaza who are already reeling under devastating humanitarian crisis due to the ongoing land-air-sea blockade and continuous bombings by Israel that has destroyed Gaza's most of the vital infrastructures.

Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has warned of a full force attack on Gaza, with Defence Minister Benny Gantz mobilizing thousands of reserve troops. Netanyahu, who is already facing massive corruption scandal and electoral crisis, had been long unleashing violent acts against Palestinians to woo the country's right-wing sections in his favour. He had already announced a full-scale plan to annex over 30% areas of West Bank, particularly in the Jordan Valley. The proposed annexation will mostly be in Area C of the occupied West Bank, where most of the illegal Israeli settlements have been built.

The airstrike comes in the background of growing resistance by Palestinians against Israel's annexation move in Sheikh Jarrah, locality in the occupied East Jerusalem. Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood has more than 3,000 Palestinian families who face constant

violence by illegal Israeli settlers, and evictions and destruction of property by Israeli forces.

On May 7, worshippers gathered at the al-Aqsa mosque expressed their solidarity with the families who were threatened with eviction in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhoods. The Israeli forces stormed the mosque and brutally attacked people who were inside the compound, lobbing tear-gas and firing rubber bullets.

Since then, Israeli forces have escalated their violence inside the mosque and against the protests by Palestinians demanding end to the illegal annexations and military occupation. Armed Israeli settlers have also been given free hand by Israeli military forces to attack Palestinians. More than 700 Palestinians have been injured in Israeli attacks in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem since last Friday.

The annexation plan by Israel is a clear act of ethnic cleansing and eliminating the presence of Palestinian population for their own land.

## Indian Government Must End Support to Israel's Apartheid

India had played a crucial role in supporting the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and was one of the first countries to sever trade relations with

the apartheid regime and subsequently imposed wide range of embargo on South Africa. Today, Narendra Modi led Indian government is standing on the wrong side of the history by supporting the Israeli apartheid regime. Indian government continues to expand its relation with Israel and is importing both Israeli arms and tactics to be used against the people in Kashmir and for repressing the democratic and people's movement in India.

The need of the hour is that India and International community must impose military embargo on

Israel's apartheid regime and stop enabling Israel's brutal siege of Gaza and mass crimes against Palestinians through their support of Israel's military industry.

As the Palestinians continue to resist the Israeli brutality, apartheid and military occupation, AICCTU reiterates its complete solidarity with the people of Palestine and their struggle for liberation. We also reiterate our support for strengthening the global Palestinian call of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. ■■■



AICCTU members observing National Day of Solidarity with the People of Palestine and Condemnation of Israeli Aggression on 28 May 2021

## WFTU - INDIA Online Public Meeting PROTEST AGAINST ISRAELI AGGRESSION ON GAZA

An Online Protest Public Meeting was held in India under the banner of WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions) on 23rd May 2021 to protest against the Israeli aggression on Gaza and express solidarity with the people of Palestine. The meeting was attended by hundreds of activists of Indian affiliates of WFTU. The meeting was addressed by Coms. H Mahadevan, Working President of AITUC, Tapan Sen, General Secretary of CITU, Shankar V, President of AICCTU, Shankar Dasgupta, General Secretary of AIUTUC, G Devarajan, President of TUCC and Ashok Ghosh, General Secretary of UTUC.

**The public meeting adopted a resolution to observe 28 May 2021 as a 'National Day of Solidarity with the People of Palestine and Condemnation of Israeli Aggression'.**

# Italian Dockers Stop Arms Shipment To Israel In Solidarity With Palestine

In an exemplary move of solidarity with Palestinians, after discovering that a shipment of arms destined for Israel was arriving in Italy's ports, workers organized in one of Italy's main unions, L'Unione Sindacale di Base, and other workers' organizations refused to load the ship in support of the Palestinians fighting for their lives against Israeli occupation.

This Friday (14 May) the Asiatic Island arrived in the port of Livorno, Italy. Thanks to the report of the Autonomous Collective of Port Workers of Genoa and the Weapon Watch association, the port workers, organized in L'Unione Sindacale di Base, learned that the ship was filled with weapons and explosives bound for the Israeli dock of Ashdod. These weapons and explosives would be used to kill Palestinians, who have already been hit by a brutal Israeli military offensive that has murdered hundreds of victims, including many children. The union announced

shortly after that it would not allow this or any other maritime shipments of armaments to set sail for Israel.

The dockworkers' unions in Italy are trying to gather more information about the shipments coming to their ports in order to prevent military supplies from arriving in Israel. They have received a report about the presence of dozens of armoured military vehicles ready to be loaded onto another ship, the Molo Italia.

L'Unione Sindacale di Base has also decided to be in the streets of Livorno on 15 May marching in solidarity with the Palestinian population to demand the immediate cessation of the bombing of Gaza and the evictions of Palestinians from their homes.

This example of workers' solidarity, if multiplied and expanded internationally, could be powerful enough to stop the criminal attacks of the State of Israel against Palestine. ■■■

## Brazil: Construction Union's 7-Day Dstrike Ends In Victory

After a seven-day strike, the Trade Union of Construction, Paving and Earth Movement Industries Workers of the State of Ceará (SINTEPAV-CE) inked a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with companies operating the Solar Alex Project in Ceará, Brazil.

The union won an increase in workers' wages by 10 percent and increased monthly bonuses from R\$ 450 to R\$ 600 (about USD 110). Overtime pay was also increased by 60 percent during the week and 100 percent on Saturdays.

The union also managed to include a new clause

allowing workers to reject any job that can threaten their health and safety, on top of specific guidelines for the companies to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers, conduct occupational health and safety trainings and create an Internal Committee for the Prevention of Accidents (CIPA).

"Amidst the COVID-19 challenges in our country, this hard-fought victory is a welcome respite. This gives us hope that there are better days ahead for workers," SINTEPAV-CE President Raimundo Nonato Gómes said. The agreement, which will expire on 31 March 2022, will benefit 1,100 construction workers. ■■■



# Iván Duque Government Must Stop Its Repression on People Of Colombia And End His Pursuit Of Neo-Liberal Policies

V. ARUN KUMAR

Colombia is witnessing massive protests and general strike since April 28 against the regressive proposals of tax reforms and privatization of healthcare by government of Ivan Duque. Hand in glove with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United States, Duque government had been spearheading neoliberal agenda in Colombia by robbing jobs, livelihood and rights of the people.

While all concessions are being given to capitalists and corporations amid COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of government's economic failure are being forced upon the working class with policies like the new tax reform and privatization of healthcare.

Resisting the tax reforms and privatization of health plans, the workers' union in Colombia had given the call for national strike on April 28. Massive mobilizations and road blocks were witnessed across Colombia with tens of thousands joining the strike in Bogota and Cali. On the day of International Workers' Day (May 1), Duque government deployed military forces in three largest cities, the capital Bogota, Medellin and Cali, to quell the resistance where tens of thousands had come to streets in solidarity with the strike. Despite facing brutal repressions organized by military forces and the infamous Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD), the protests continue to expand in strength and spirit across Colombia. According to reports, more than 42 people have been killed in the police violence against the protesters and more than 1,139 people were arbitrarily arrested.

Facing tremendous resistance, the Duque government on May 2 announced the suspension of the proposed reforms, but the national mobilizations across Colombia continues demanding an end to neoliberal policies of Duque. The people are also demanding an end to police brutalities and justice for victims of police repression.

State sponsored violence against indigenous and peasant leaders, students, trade union activists and human rights defenders had been rising since the government of Duque came to power in 2018. Just in 2021, 57 indigenous and peasant leaders



and human rights defenders were assassinated and 33 massacres were orchestrated against people. According to United Nations, in 2020, 255 people were killed in 66 massacres in Colombia and around 120 human rights defenders were assassinated.

The neoliberal economic model, rampant privatization and state sponsored repression, along with the failure of the government to tackle COVID-19 pandemic has robbed people of their livelihood, dignity and right to justice. According to a study carried out by the Index of Regional Development – Latin America in October 2020, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America and it has the widest development gap among its own regions. In Colombia, more than 7.4 million people are living in extreme poverty. The lack of economic support for people during the pandemic has led to further increase in unemployment rate in the country to around 15% in 2021, with more than 3 million currently without any job.

The working class and toiling masses of Colombia are determined to put a stop to the anti-people neoliberal policies and sponsored state violence of Duque regime. The people are also demanding an end to Colombian government's support to the US imperialist agenda in Latin American region.

**AICCTU extends its unwavering solidarity to the on-going national mobilization in Colombia by working class, peasants, students, indigenous groups and different sections of the population. We also reiterate our support to the demand of an end to the US and IMF's neoliberal and imperialist project in Latin America. ■■■**



# Spain Adopts Landmark Law To Protect 'Gig' Delivery Worker

Spain approved a pioneering law on 11 May that gives delivery platforms a mid-August deadline to hire workers currently freelancing for them and that requires transparency of artificial intelligence used to manage workforces.

The royal decree passed by the centre-left ruling coalition immediately affects some 30,000 couriers. It comes in the wake of a ruling by Spain's top court last year and at a time when other countries in Europe and elsewhere are deciding on a labour model for the so-called gig economy, which is often blamed for precarious jobs and low salaries.

That's because, until now, gig and other contractor workers had to pay social security fees from their own pockets if they wanted to receive benefits including unemployment subsidies and a public pension.

The law makes mandatory for all businesses the ground-breaking requirement of having to hand over to the workers' legal representatives the information about how algorithms and artificial intelligence

systems function in assigning jobs and assessing performance, among other aspects.

"Workers cannot lose their soul on the keyboard of our laptops or on electronic gadgets," Labor Minister Díaz said. Díaz also dismissed the criticism: "Just as workers shouldn't fear advances in technology, companies shouldn't fear labour rights," the minister said when asked at a press briefing following the weekly Cabinet meeting.

But, there is a criticism from workers' side too. Dani Gutiérrez, a 29-year-old member of the "Ridersrights" association who has failed to receive work from food delivery platforms after striking and protesting against their labour conditions, welcomed the new law but said that it lacked ambition.

"It should have gone much further, beyond the riders, because the working class is being pushed to precarious conditions through this type of collaborative economy, with fake freelancers and so on," Gutiérrez said. ■■■

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Khoribari, West Bengal



Bhubaneswar, Odisha



Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh



Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu



Patna, Bihar

WORKER-FARMER UNITY ZINDABADI!

# Tamil Nadu

KG DESIKAN

## May Day 2021

AICCTU cadres observed May day throughout Tamil Nadu by hoisting flags in offices, factories and localities despite the code of conduct was in force in view of counting of votes on 2nd May. The state secretary of CPI ML also wrote a letter to the Chief Electoral Officer of the state to allow May day events without any hindrance. Other left parties also wrote similar letters in this connection.

## Attention Seeking protest

AICCTU organised protest seeking attention of the newly formed DMK Government during Pandemic. On 5th May, the birth anniversary of Karl Marx, protesters demanded the newly elected DMK government to focus its priorities to handle the raging Covid situation. It was also demanded to form an exclusive ministry to look after the issues of Covid affected people, including availability of beds, oxygen, ICU, medicines, etc., in addition to proper compensation for the dead. Free Vaccination for all, granting a relief of Rs 10,000 for the loss of livelihood of unorganised workers and the poor due to lockdown, 50 lakhs health insurance to all frontline workers without any conditions, Compensation to the families of the people who died in this period, etc., were the demands in the placards carried by the protesters who observed all Covid protocols. Several cases

were filed against the demonstrators of CPIML – AICCTU demonstrators in several parts of the state.

## All India Demands Day

AICCTU observed All India Demands Day on 20 May 2021 joining hands with All India Kisan Mahasabha (AIKM) and All India Agricultural and Rural Labour Association (AIARLA) Several hundreds of workers, farmers and agricultural labourers participated in the protest.

## Withdraw all Cases on Anti-Sterlite Protesters at Tuticorin

22nd May was the day of anniversary of brutal firing on Anti-Sterlite protestors in Tuticorin, the incident in which 15 protestors became martyrs in the course of struggle for the cause of closing down the Killer Vedanta plant in Tuticorin.

AICCTU – CPIML observed hunger strike in many places including Tuticorin on 22 May 2021 and also as a part of the Global Action Day Against Vedanta demanding arrest and stringent punishment for perpetrators of the crime and to permanently close down Sterlite factory which was also one of the promises of the DMK in the just concluded elections. It was a coincidence that the DMK led state government announced withdrawal of cases other than cases related to the damage of properties and



Sanitation workers' protest in Coimbatore on 18 May

one job to eligible member of each family who died in the firing which was welcome by protesters. At the same time, the DMK government was also criticised for not withdrawing all false cases including property damage related cases. It is said that majority of cases against the protesters were related to property damage which was actually carried out by the police force and the goondas in favour of Vedanta-Sterlite. Moreover, the DMK government was also criticised for not initiating any steps to punish the culprits who were mainly higher officials of the police and the government and who were also responsible for the brutal police firing without any warning and killing of 15 innocent and peaceful protesters. AICCTU demanded withdrawal of all false cases against the protesters, also stringent punishment to officials responsible for the ghastly incident and also permanent closure of the killer Vedanta plant in Tuticorin. Comrade Sahayam, state executive committee member of AICCTU is part of the 'Struggle Committee Against Sterlite-Vedanta' that is spearheading the movement for permanent closure of the plant and also against the opening of the plant in the guise of producing Oxygen.

## Sanitation Workers Struggle of Coimbatore

Sanitation workers held a demonstration on 18 May 2021, under the banner of AICCTU, in front of the office of the Commissioner of Corporation of

Coimbatore demanding PPEs, minimum wages, pandemic pay and regularisation of services. The immediate demand was non-payment of wages. The administration was forced to pay pending wages on the same day of demonstration.

## Loadmen on Strike

AICCTU led Loading Unloading daily wage workers engaged in the godowns of Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCSC) went on one day flash strike against police harassment while traveling for work during Lockdown. Workers of all godowns in Tirunelveli and adjacent districts abstained from work on 25 May and the functioning of ration shops were badly affected.

Workers demanded the government to declare them as frontline workers as they are involved in essential services, pandemic pay, transport facilities, etc. They demanded regularisation of services as well. As a response to the strike, the TNCSC management issued a circular saying that Loading workers will discharge their functions during Lockdown, that is to be shown to the police instead of issuing individual ID cards for workers. The order was only a temporary relief and workers will continue with their struggle soon in various forms.

As ration shops are to work, these loading unloading workers also bound to work in the pandemic period. Being daily wagers, they are also not provided with ID cards by the government corporation. ■■■

# Andhra Pradesh And Telangana

UDAY KIRAN

## May Day Protests

May Day Demonstrations of workers of AICCTU affiliated unions were held in major towns and mandal (block) headquarters of Anantapur, Kadapa, Kurnool, Guntur, Krishna, East Godavari, Vizag and Srikakulam districts of Andhra Pradesh and Janagaon, Hyderabad districts of Telangana under. Workers from various sectors - Construction, Hospital Sanitation, Anganwadi, Auto union, School sanitation and MDM workers - hoisted the flags and joined May Day protest with firm resolve to scrap anti worker labour codes and anti-farmer Farm laws, observing Covid protocols.

## Distribution of Covid Kits in East Godavari:

Comrades from East Godavari district collected donations and distributed Covid safety kits



containing masks hand sanitizers, face shields and umbrellas to health workers in PHC of Chebrolu locally on 4th May.

## Awareness campaign in Srikakulam:

An awareness campaign was organized on 19th May, under the banner of AP Contract and

Outsourcing workers union affiliated to AICCTU, to spread awareness to the employees regarding the EPF and ex-gratia that is announced by GO.25 for the workers died of COVID.

## Naxalbari Day and Black Day

AICCTU Comrades from eight districts commemorated the Naxalbari uprising on 25th

May. They also observed Black Day on 26th May in solidarity with 6 months of farmers struggle and one year of Modi-BJP's misrule. An Online campaign displaying posters with demands of scrapping three Farm laws and with solidarity messages for struggling farmers was conducted. The demands of Free vaccination and oxygen supply for the suffering covid patients were also some of the other demands raised in the campaign. ■■■

# West Bengal

ABHIJIT MAZUMDAR

## May Day Observance at tea garden

Braving thunderstorm and rains, nearly 100 workers assembled at Dipa Line of Sachindra Chandra Tea Estate in Khoribari, Darjeeling district to observe historic May Day.

Red flag was hoisted by the veteran leader of tea workers' movement Com. Suknath Oraon. Since this year May Day was earmarked as Mazdoor- Kishan Diwas, floral homage was paid to the memories of worker and peasant martyrs of recent years. Slogans demanding repeal of both labour codes and 3 Kishan acts, Minimum Wages and land patta for tea workers were raised with alacrity. Com. Sumanti Ekka in her vibrant speech explained the significance of building workers- peasants unity to fight out the fascist onslaught on the working population of our country. She also emphasised on extending our union work in few more gardens to strengthen our bargaining power with the management. The assemblage was



also addressed by the Working President of Tarai Sangrami Cha Shramik Union, Com. Abhijit Mazumdar. The extensive participation of female tea workers remained very conspicuous for this year's May Day celebration. ■■■

# Karnataka

MAITREYI KRISHNAN

## AICCTU Karnataka Releases Report on Workers in the Second Wave

On 18th May, 2021, the AICCTU released its report, which was brought out in collaboration with the Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) and the Domestic Workers Rights Union – “Workers in the Second Wave – The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on local and migrant workers in Bengaluru”. It highlighted the manner in which the working class and economically weaker sections are battling not only to save their lives, but struggling to secure livelihoods.

At the release, Shri Syed Zameer, from the Street Vendors Unions Federation spoke of the great difficulties faced by street vendors, where a majority of them were not earning a single

rupee, and even those who were vending had to face police harassment. Renukamma from the Garment and Textile Workers Union highlighted the difficulties faced by garment workers who had lost jobs and sought immediate action to protect their lives and livelihoods. Smt. Ratna from the BBMP Powrakarmika Sangha (BBMP Sanitation Workers Union) spoke of the grave risk that powrakarmikas (sanitation workers) face everyday, not only of their own lives but also of their entire families and demanded immediate protection. Smt. Vanamma from the Domestic Workers Rights Union spoke of the grave discrimination faced by domestic workers and demanded a compensation package. Shri Prem Khan from the Karnataka Progressive Migrant Workers Union spoke of the difficulties faced by migrant workers in Karnataka and demanded financial assistance and food security.



## Protests by Workers

On 15th May, 2021, construction workers from across the State came together online to highlight that they were not able to work due to lack of transportation facilities and lack of work, despite construction being a permissible activity. They raised the demand for financial compensation to be provided during the period of lockdown and for vaccination and adequate

medical facilities.

On 19th May, 2021, a protest day was called against the complete failure of the Government in safeguarding the rights of the working class. Workers across the State including Bengaluru, Kolar, Mangaluru, Raichur, Koppal, Chamarajnar, Kodagu among other districts, held up placards demanding the Government to ensure immediate steps to protect their livelihood, provision of financial support and food security. ■■■

# Jharkhand

SUVENDU SEN

## Demand Day organized

AICCTU organized a one-day dharna (sit-in) across Jharkhand on 18 May to demand resolution of problems faced by daily wagers and Corona frontline workers during Covid pandemic. AICCTU leaders and activists held dharna at the AICCTU office in Ranchi following all Covid protocols.

Dharna protests and hunger strikes were organized at industrial units, work places, workers' mohallas, and homes across the State in 16 districts. AICCTU State General Secretary Shubhendu Sen said that the lockdown in Jharkhand has deepened the livelihood crisis for workers. Closing down of construction work, interference by middlemen in MNREGA and non-payment of arrears due to workers has pushed the poor to the brink of starvation. If the government does not address these issues without delay, starvation will claim more lives than Corona.

A memorandum of demands was sent to the Chief Minister Hemant Soren, with the following demands:



1. All the poor and workers' families should be provided ration of 10 kg rice per person and other essentials; Rs 10,000 should be credited in workers' bank accounts as Corona relief.
2. 200 days' work and Rs. 500 minimum daily wage under MNREGA for all rural and urban poor; insurance, special allowance and guarantee of safety arrangements for Corona frontline workers.
3. Mobile Health Facility to ensure better health care for those living in workers' localities. ■■■

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# Obituary

## Red Salute to comrade Lakshmanbhai Patanwadia

Comrade Lakshmanbhai Patanwadia, a senior Communist leader from Gujarat, a member of CPI-ML State leading team and AICCTU Central Working Committee, passed away on 4th May 2021 at a hospital in Ahmedabad. Three days ago, he tested positive for Covid and was undergoing treatment at the hospital since then.

Comrade Patanwadia was a strong voice in Gujarat against communal fascism. His demise is an irreparable loss to the revolutionary people's movement and the trade union movement in Gujarat.

Long live Comrade Lakshmanbhai Patanwadia!





## 26 MAY BLACK DAY OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Hoist Black Flags!  
Wear Black Badges!

A CALL OF CENTRAL TRADE UNIONS!



- Free vaccine for all.
- Strengthen the Government run Public Health System at all levels.
- Immediate help to all unorganized/informal sector workers and unemployed people in terms of free food grains and cash subsidy of Rs.7500/- per month.
- Repeal 3 Farm Laws, withdraw Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2021, enact law guaranteeing Minimum Support Price of farm produce.
- Withdraw 4 Labour Codes along with draft central rules and convene Indian Labour Conference immediately.
- Put a stop to policy of privatisation/corporatization of PSUs and Government departments.
- Withdraw all arbitrary suspension of 38 labor laws for a period of 3 years by the states ruled by BJP and its allies openly violating the international labor standards i.e. freedom of association convention 87, violation of collective bargaining convention 98, convention 144 tripartite meeting and consultations etc.

MODI SHOULD BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DISASTER!

# AICCTU



## Workers Resistance

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