

(Paper for the Seminar on "Organised Trade Union and Activist Interface" to be held at Tata Institute of Social Sciences on May 27th and 28th, 1994.)

The Organisation of agricultural labourers presents a very specific problem in our country. Part of it stems from the uneven and backward development of capitalism in our country in some parts of which feudal exploitation of labour exists, including forced labour, while in others the purposes of capitalist accumulation are served by various forms of semi-feudal relations ranging from bondage to share-cropping. Socially too, the population of agricultural labourers is predominantly from the scheduled castes and tribes, reflecting the persistence of the pre-capitalist caste divisions despite the changes that have taken place in agriculture in the direction of both market production and capitalist farming.

The concrete manifestation of this peculiar situation is the coexistence not only of various forms of labour ranging from multi-generational bondage and other remnants of servitude, to free employer-employee relations, but also a wide range of wage-rates, both in cash and kind, ranging from 3-Rs 5 day to Rs.55 R.60. Also, women almost never get wages that are equal to those of men, and children much less or nothing at all. There are still instances of different wage rates for different castes. So, obviously while there is a need to organise agricultural labour separately from the peasantry that employs it, it is evident that the myriad of such labour do not land themselves to organisation as a trade union of industrial workers does. So, our experience has led us to organise agricultural workers separately both from Trade Union Centres and from peasant organisations.

However, the experience of struggles has shown us the crucial importance of agricultural labour's participation in the broader struggles of the peasantry for cheaper inputs, debt-relief and against atrocities perpetrated on scheduled castes and tribes by casteist elements in the rural areas on the one hand, and their growing consciousness as a class of wage-earners through wage struggle and strikes on the other. Therefore, while we maintain close relations with peasant organisations like the All India Kisan Sabha and Trade Unions like the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, we maintain a separate existence in keeping with agricultural labour as a

distinct force of labour in rural society, which provides a link also between the organised working class of the cities and the toiling peasantry in the rural areas to accomplish far reaching social changes in our agrarian society by carrying out radical land reform and in resisting and liquidating feudal oppression.

The organisation of this section of the rural masses is of crucial importance as agricultural labourers are the poorest section of our rural population. They have either very few assets or none at all. And it is a matter of alarm that their population is increasing steadily over the years at a rate faster than that of the population, which grew 2% and 1.5% in the seventies and eighties, while the percentage growth of agricultural labour was 4.1% and 3% respectively. This represents the growing ~~immiserisation~~ **immiserisation** of the most vulnerable section of our people over half of whom belong to the scheduled castes and tribes and nearly all of them live below the poverty line. The rest are from the backward classes and minorities and a few of the higher castes. However, all of them are from the rural poor.

The number of agricultural labourers was 27.49 million in 1951, it rose to 31.51 million in 1961. By 1981 the figure was 55.49 million and in the 1991 census it was 74.61 million. This increase is not only one of numbers, but also as a proportion of the working population. In 1981 agricultural labour constituted 24.94% of the working population, by 1991 they constituted 26.1%.

These figures hide behind them the rural drama of pauperization of the small and marginal peasants at the hands of the landlord-wholesaler nexus, as a result of the price rise, of eviction from tenancies, the destruction of traditional craft industries, the loss of forest rights and the eating away into subsistence of the rural poor both by mechanization and an agriculture still largely dependent on the vagaries of the weather.

Moreover, in the absence of any legislation covering the conditions of their work, we find them working under different conditions almost from employer to employer. They may be anything from casual contract labour to those bonded over generations to the same landlord. They may or may not have a place to live in, and often they share even this with farm

animals and machinery. Almost nothing they do is regulated, resulting in atrocities against them should they dare to ask for higher wages and better standard of living. In fact, the growing number of attacks on scheduled castes and tribes which have risen from 5968 in 1976 to 14012 in 1987 and it increased further in 1993 is proof of the total anarchy which characterizes the working conditions of agricultural labour. This naturally reflects in their lack of organisation as well. Not more than 3% are organised even today in the country as a whole.

That is why, most agricultural labour organizations, including ours, which has been in existence since 1982, have persistently, individually and jointly, raised the demand for a comprehensive Central Legislation for agricultural workers with the 1974 Kerala Legislation as a basis. We have stressed this need as our experience has shown that the Kerala Legislation has helped enormously in the Organisation of agricultural labour in the State. Our organisation alone has been able to organise two-thirds of the agricultural labourers in Kerala, and considering other organisations, one can conclude that a majority of the agricultural labourers in the State are organised today. Also, in Kerala the statutory minimum wage is Rs.40.25 for Men and Rs.30.00 for Women today. In fact, in no other state has agricultural labour done so well in the recent past as in Kerala since the legislation. It has, of course, been buttressed by a powerful democratic movement and Left and Democratic Front Governments, but the legislation itself was a great filip to the struggle of agricultural labour for their rights as it gave them a legal basis for their demands.

Despite this positive experience, there has been almost complete apathy on the part of different Governments at the Centre since 1980 when a draft was first, made although each one paid lip service to the demand. It was during the Prime Ministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, that the blue print for this legislation was first drawn up with a number of leaders of the agricultural labour and peasant movements participating in the process. But the legislation continued to be shelved. In the administrations of Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, and Chandrashekhar, despite promises the legislation was never tabled. Today, while the labour Minister, Mr. P.A. Sangma, keeps promising to table such legislation, we are still

as far away from it as we were in 1980.

Apart from the struggle to organize agricultural labour to achieve their basic human rights and regulate their condition of work through legislation, the wage struggle is the broadest mobiliser of agricultural labours as a class. Moreover, it has become a pressing issue in the recent past as not only are minimum wages not being paid-even by the Government on its project sites if the Gurudas Das Gupta report is anything to go by, but the number of days of work agricultural labourers has declined from 123 days in a year five years ago to 85 days today. And growing migration of labourer due to uneven development also forced them to accept lesser wage and humiliating conditions. Finally, the price rise has seriously depleted incomes of agricultural workers, 90% whom are already under the poverty line. In fact, the government in its Economic Survey of 92-93 noted that "the Consumer Price Index for agricultural labourers has witnessed the highest rate of inflation." Not much has changed since then. Food prices continue to sky-rocket, while the recent rise in administered prices has further raised the market price of almost all food items too. The growing desperation of agricultural labourers and their being unprotected by law and being unorganised has led to employers even refusing to pay agricultural labourers wages for work done, let alone paying minimum wages.

The alternative employment provided to this class is minimal. On the contrary, the mere introduction of better technology has only reduced employment opportunities. Machines like combine harvesters can take away the jobs of the agricultural labour of 10 villages in one season alone. The growth of commercial cropping results in the poorest sections being denied access to grazing rights for cattle and donkeys, while the potters donkey as the village carrier is replaced by the tractor-trolley. To add to this, increased work-load that mechanisation results in leads to a sharp increase in the number of accidents as there is no legislation to introduce safety devices in agricultural machinery, while the totally careless use of pesticides adds greatly to this number as does the digging of tube-wells. So, the need for a proper policy on compensation and of being able to develop a mechanism for providing it is being felt in all areas where mechanised agriculture is being practised, especially as the employer is

often too poor to compensate for the damage incurred while doing his work. This has increased the need for a powerful agricultural labourers' movement and their organisation even more.

In the coming period, we feel this need will become even more pressing. With the signing of the Dunkel Draft, a number of the trends we noted earlier, like growing unemployment, rising prices, the increasing inability of the vast mass of rural poor to feed themselves, will become more acute. The reduction and eventual elimination of subsidies are bound to hit the PDS the hardest, while free market grain would tend to spiral upwards as a result of the stipulation that we would be forced to import from 2% to 8% of our foodgrains at prices well above those prevailing in our home market.

Moreover, the temptation to shift to less labour intensive cash crops will lead to diversion of food crop land to other uses reducing the food output and adding impetus to the price spiral. Moreover, it will at the same time reduce the number of days of work available to agricultural labour. Moreover with the entry of multinationals, we are going to see a reversal of the land distribution process and even of dispossession of the poor peasantry who will swell the ranks of landless job-seekers in the rural areas. The unprecedented growth of job-seekers in informal sectors working seasonally, also shrinks the job opportunity of the agricultural workers. Even rural development activities proved deceptive as schemes like Jawahar Rojgar Yojana could not provide 15% of job yearly as envisaged during its inception. Any one has little hope of Government protection of wages and conditions of work, for not only has India been most vaciferous on the social clauses the USA tried to impose on third world countries at Marrakesh but our own agrarian policy document gloats over the "competitive" inrelation to higher wages and better living conditions in the developed world.

It is evident, therefore, that a three-pronged struggle has to be waged. First, powerful wage struggles must be launched to ensure that erosion of wages doesnot take place as a result of the increasing number of dispossessed poor peasants and ruined craftsmen joining the ranks of agricultural

labourers. Secondly, the right of agricultural labourers to a living wage and the protection of their human rights can only be accomplished by insisting on Central Legislation on the Kerala Pattern, pending which their weak assetbase needs immediately to be strengthened by giving them house sites and land to subsist on. In fact, as we noted in the General Secretary's Report of our third All India Conference that was held at Sanastipur that "we find that the percentage of agricultural workers to peasants had actually declined between 1981 and 1991 in States like Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura." This beneficial effect is due primarily to the fact that over half the land distributed to the landless has been in these three states. So far this is the only method of overcoming an overwhelming increase of landless and unemployed rural masses who are vulnerable to the handful of rural exploiters who control our villages and are unprotected legally as successive Governments at the Centre have failed signally to pass legislation already in the National Commission on Rural Labour have consistently called for. But now there is every indication that even the land ceiling laws which were the basis of the land reform movement in the country are likely to be revoked or altered to block even this avenue of survival left to agricultural labourers in growingly adverse conditions, as already indicated by Maharashtra Government. And the Tribals, also due to loosing their rights on the forest, growingly remain jobless in most parts of the country.

In fact, it is with an inkling of this State of affairs in the offing that we took up the following tasks at our second All India Conference that was held at Palghat in December 1988:

1. Spontaneous struggles are taking place and they are bound to increase in future. Oppression, merciless killings and other atrocities are increasing on a wider scale. Almost everyday we come to hear or read about these in papers. So we must be sufficiently alert and prompt to give proper organisational shape to these struggles by our participation with a great deal of courage and militancy in the face of repression by landlord goondas supported by police.

2. The weakness in the functioning of the organisation should be rectified. Democratic functioning of the organisation and the participation of agricultural workers in decision making specially in formulating demands and organising struggles must be ensured. We must be able to really rally the mass of workers behind the slogan and demands we formulate.
3. We have to conduct indepth study of the concrete issue facing our movement. Demands and slogans must be worked out keeping in mind the consciousness of agricultural workers and the co-relation of forces existing in particular State or the area.
4. Importance must be given to the training and development of cadres. Many of the cadres are coming into contact with our movement through struggles on one or other issue. There should be always an eye on finding out these cadres and developing them by imparting education to them. We should try to pick up young militant cadres for training so that they become the backbone of the organization.
5. It is distressing to note that barring a few exceptions practically none of our centres, whether the All India Centre, the States or the district and lower units function properly.

This understanding was further enriched by our experience between the Palghat and Samastipur Conference, a period of five years in which we learnt the following lessons :

1. The most successful movement are those of affecting agricultural labourers which are taken up jointly with other agricultural workers and peasant organisations.
2. There is still hesitation in taking up independent activity under the banner of the union. However, where this has been done as in the State level demonstration at Lucknow in UP, or that at Bombay in Maharashtra, it has greatly increased the confidence of comrades in their capacity to make breakthrough.
3. However, in order to make this breakthrough, the specific problems of this section must be focussed on, like atrocities against scheduled castes and tribes, the struggle for house sites, drinking water, lavatories, doing away with

social disabilities of all kinds. So far, except in one or two States, we have failed to take up these issues as broad campaigns.

4. The struggle to implement Government policies too has been treated with more than its fair share of cynicism. Comrades must equip themselves with a thorough knowledge of procedures involved in various development schemes for the poorest sections at the village level to ensure that the people are made aware of their rights and misuse of funds for the betterment of the weakest sections is reduced. Even if we fail to achieve our objective because of landlord pressure and bureaucratic corruption taking up these issues will expose both of these among the rural masses and help to dispel any illusions they might have.
5. A study of state reports reveals that a large number of struggles are taken up formally and abandoned. Nothing could be more damaging than this as it breeds despair among the masses and cynicism. Every struggle must be conducted in relation to the full capacity of the people concerned to struggle. Proper team work and democratic functioning will help us to conduct struggles more in relation to the peoples' will than our own preconceptions.
6. While women constitute over 49% of agricultural labourers and have participated actively in our struggles, we have not been able to ensure equal wages for equal work on a country wide basis or to deal with their specific problems as a priority.

Finally on behalf of our union we wish to make it clear that we do not ever imagine that a faithful implementation of these alone can resolve the problems faced by agricultural labour in the process of the development of capitalist relations in a society where pre-capitalist forms share the stage with the former. This can only be done if we undertake the task of taking up a thorough transformation of the agrarian structure by redistributing land to the landless and breaking the land monopoly of less than 2% of rural households. Obviously this cannot be done in the present political set up as is evident from the dithering over a comprehensive Central Legislation for agricultural labour. It requires an alternative political set up must be evolved by linking up the struggle of industrial workers in the cities with that of peasants for land in rural areas.

From this perspective, agricultural workers form a powerful link between the industrial workers and peasants and their organisation takes on a strategic aspect as well from its instrumentality in accomplishing the crucial task of uniting the broadest possible section of the masses to transform society in their interest and not that of those who have oppressed them for centuries.

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