

CENTRAL GOVT EMPLOYEES FOR STRIKE ACTION

The National Convention on Minimum Wage and Full Neutralisation, held under the auspices of the Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers on July 10 and 13 has taken a unanimous decision to go in for a token strike action.

The All-India Defence Employees Federation has decided on a token strike on September 11. The All-India Railwaymen's Federation has called for strike ballots by its affiliates and reports indicate that the railwaymen are in favour of strike action.

In the National Council of the Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) for Central Government employees - a collective bargaining forum specially created - the Government has exhibited a complete volte face when the arbitration inbuilt in the ~~HEM~~ JCM machinery has been refused on the disputes relating to the minimum wage and merger of D.A. with pay.

The Confederation has stated that with the refusal of the Government to settle the issues through negotiations, or even to refer the issues to arbitration, a strike decision became inevitable.

It has been maintained by the NFIR, an affiliate of the INTUC, that as a principle, if an arbitration is refused or its recommendations are rejected, the NFIR will go on strike. The INDEF, another affiliate of the INTUC in the JCM, has also taken an identical stand.

The employees' organisations are to meet on July 25 to chalk out the mechanism of a joint action.

Another significant development is the coordination established between the Confederation and State Government Employees Federation and the ~~joint~~ decision to hold joint rallies on August 8 to focus attention on common demands.

The joint statement issued by the two organisations calls for the observance of the Common Demands Day on the following vital issues:

1. Need-based minimum wage to all Central and State Government employees on the basis of the norms evolved by the 15th Indian Labour Conference;

2. Full neutralisation of cost of living;
3. Merger of D.A. with basic pay;
4. No retrenchment/victimisation; and
5. No reduction in retirement age.

An "official view", briefed to one of the dailies in the Capital ~~xxxxxxx~~ has front-paged the story that "hope still alive of breaking deadlock on union staff wages" (Indian Express, July 16)

This mischievous story has alongside it the grim news that "budget deficit may swell to Rs.400 crores". And this is the line plugged on the wages issue also with the claim that the fixation of a need-based wage would involve Rs.175 crores.

And the Big Business organ has dutifully carried the scare that the outlay would be several crores more, covering the State Government employees and public sector.

The utter rot which is put out through such briefed news stories is supposed to disprove the employees' case and build up public opinion against them.

Both the Central Government and State Government employees' trade union movements have outlived such scaremongering and after united action unleashed by them, the concerned governments have always found money to raise D.A. or wages, the vehemence of the denunciation of the demands notwithstanding.

The argument that public sector wages would have to be marked up because of Central Government wage revision is really remarkable for the ignorance of the persons at the helm of affairs.

It is precisely the argument of the employees that public sector industrial wages have already moved much ahead of the Central Government rates which calls for an immediate payment of interim relief.

For instance, in the large public sector complexes of steel, coalmining, iron ore mining, heavy chemicals and fertilizers and in ports and docks where Wage Boards have made final wage awards or given interim relief.

Thus, ~~xxxxxxxx~~ the minimum wage at 205 points (at which the Central D.A. is adjusted), in ~~xxxx~~ public sector coalmines would be Rs.172.25, as against Rs.135 paid in Central Government.

No doubt, the miners' wages should be higher still and in all industries, the workers are pressing forward with their wage demand.

The absurd proposition of the ~~govt~~ government is that revision of the minimum wage for all Central Government employees cannot be arbitrable (this has to be only of a "grade" or "class" of employees, according to them) since the question of wage revision involves policy and no policy ~~is~~ issue can be left to arbitration!

This would mean that if Government decides by way of its wage policy that there should be no wage increase at all or that there should be wage-freeze, there should not be any reference of a wage dispute to arbitration or adjudication!

Or, in other words, the denial of arbitration is another way of imposing a wage-freeze, a discredited policy attempted last year and which had to be withdrawn under threat of a nationwide strike.

It is patent, in the scheme of wage fixation of Central Government employees that the wages of a class IV employee in railways cannot be revised, without affecting the parity which exists in the wage-rates for similar category in other Departments. Therefore, even if the employees would have put up the case of wage revision of class IV category in a particular Department, the government would have ruled out arbitration.

The very cheap political stunts which the ruling circles put out in this fashion are very soon exposed. The JCM was inaugurated with a good deal of fanfare, with the sacred Gandhian principle of arbitration built into it. Now that very Gandhian principle is rejected out of hand, in the name of "policy"!

The "policy", indeed, is obvious - a naked anti-labour policy at that.

If therefore, the Central Government employees' organisations decide on a protest action through an all-India token strike, it will be a might protest against such anti-labour policy.

The way in which the dispute about working hours of firemen

is at present being handled by the Railway Board shows the utter bankruptcy ~~xxx~~ in thinking and the most inhuman manner in which the Congress government seeks to administer labour relations.

The firemen have asked only that the limitation of spreadover duty be accepted in "principle" at 12 hours which cannot be an unreasonable demand, considering that tending a boiler ^{of a train in motion} in a hot country like India cannot be that comfortable as issuing bogus communiques when firemen are on strike about very punctual train movements.

Such heartlessness can be tackled only through the might of united action, by displaying the unity of the employees ~~xxxxx~~ of all categories and departments behind their crucial wage demands.

When the atmosphere gets heated up with the rising anger of organised labour, the ruling circles inevitably will resort to their favourite game of disruption and of divide and rule.

They might offer a Commission which can freeze the issue for years.

The trade union movement in India has never taken any rigid position as to the form of the wage-fixing machinery but the machinery produced by Congress Government has so far been tardy and dilatory.

Under the impact of direct action or imminent ~~xxx~~ strikes, it has been possible sometimes to secure a machinery which could be less dilatory. For instance, the strike threat in jute has brought forth a single-man wage-fixing body, presided over by a high court judge, with employers and trade unions providing an assessor each. The agreement proposed is that the body should give its wage ~~xxx~~ award in six months.

Arbitration has been preferred to adjudication or elaborate inquiry commissions since that would be less dilatory and the Government in the Labour Ministry has been very emphatic in promoting "arbitration". ^{of the Government} The sincerity in this whole affair is illustrated by the fact that it now requires a strike in Central Government services to "impose" arbitration and impose the principles under which the JCM has been constituted.

However, the proposed action in Central Government services is not aimed at propagating the virtues of "arbitration"; it is to secure need-based wage, and full neutralisation in D.A. and interim relief.

It will be a great action of solidarity and militant support for their demands. And at the same time, a serious warning that in the name of "policy", the organised labour is in no mood to tolerate a wage-freeze.

A wage rise - at least, an interim relief to demonstrate that the "policy" of denial of demands is given up, is the least that the employees will insist upon.

A wage rise - and to begin with, an interim relief to demonstrate that the "policy" of denial of demands is given up - and immediate measures to fix need-based wages, are what the employees will insist upon as precondition for any settlement of their basic demands.