

ML Update: 24-30 June 2008

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Soaring Prices and Manmohan's Nuclear Chess

They had been talking about double-digit economic growth. Instead, it is inflation which has crossed the double-digit barrier and the upward climb of the price spiral shows no sign of slowing down. As we go to press, officially measured inflation has reached a thirteen-year high, equalling the 1995 level when Manmohan Singh was the Finance Minister in Narsimha Rao's cabinet. The official measurement of inflation is based on the wholesale price index which is obviously quite removed from the actual prices that consumers have to pay at the retail market. But a quick look at the major segments accounting for the rise in wholesale prices - food and food products: 24%, petro products: 17%, iron and steel: 10% - gives us a clear idea of how badly the poor and fixed-income consumers are being hurt.

Even as prices of all essential commodities soar sky-high, the UPA government keeps telling us that this inflation is a global phenomenon and we have to bear with it. Instead of taking urgent measures to douse the flame, the government has instead chosen to fan the fire by dutifully passing on the 'global' burden to the people at home. How does it help to know that the fire raging in the Indian market is 'imported' from abroad when prices of every local produce are going through the roof! Having broken down every potential protective barrier and opened up the entire economy to all kinds of external assaults, the UPA government can now hardly excuse itself by attributing the inflationary surge to global economic factors.

History tells us that when Rome was burning, Emperor Nero was busy playing his violin. In today's India, when the market is aflame, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is busy playing nuclear chess. Media reports have it that Singh has offered to resign if he cannot push through his favourite nuclear deal with the US. The mainstream media is also more perturbed over the future of the deal than the crushing blow inflicted by soaring prices. Indeed, inflation is being seen as a spoilsport of sorts by the pro-deal lobby. The deal enthusiasts are wary that clinching the deal at this stage might lead to somewhat early elections and many in the ruling coalition do not seem to be ready to risk an election in conditions of double-digit inflation and face the ire of the electorate.

It is this utterly callous and anti-people attitude that best indicates the current degree of disconnect between the powers that be and the people and their plight. This disconnect has today become the hallmark of the UPA model of 'secular governance' and 'aam aadmi' rhetoric. Soaked neck-deep in the ideology of 'corporate industrialisation and development', the CPI(M) in West Bengal has also begun to revel in this disconnect. The panchayat results have merely provided some early electoral confirmation of the emerging popular mood in West Bengal. In a way the situation seems tailor-made for the BJP and the NDA. True to the ideology and historical tradition of fascism, the BJP is evidently

capable of exploiting any and every popular resentment for its own sectarian and retrograde agenda. Karnataka has once again confirmed this basic truth regarding the BJP.

What should be the Left and democratic response to this political challenge thrown up by the unfolding situation? More doses of 'secular partnership' with the Congress? Bihar and Karnataka have clearly revealed the basic fallacy in this approach. A decade ago elections had produced a ruling arrangement in the shape of a United Front backed from outside both by the Congress and the CPI(M). On the face of it the UF had managed to keep the BJP out of power, but only for a few months. If today the UPA experiment seems headed in the same direction, it must compel Left and democratic forces to look beyond such suicidal tactical shortcuts. The way forward lies only through a bold, consistent and vigorous espousal of the cause of the people against the growing economic and national crisis home-delivered by the comprador Indian votaries of imperialist globalisation.

Protest in Delhi Against NREG Activists' Murders

In Delhi, party mass organisations participated in a protest at the Jharkhand Bhawan along with other groups. Among those who joined the protest were AISA National General Secretary Ravi Rai, JNUSU President Sandeep Singh and General Secretary Pallavi Deka, CPI(ML) CCM Kavita Krishnan, Annie Raja (NFIW), Kudeep Nayyar and others. Following this, a delegation including Central Employment Guarantee Council member Annie Raja and CPI(ML) CCM Kavita Krishnan met with Rural Development Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh to apprise him of the situation in Jharkhand. The Minister claimed that Jharkhand was one of the few states where corruption was least because all wage payments were being done through bank or P.O accounts. This rosy picture was challenged by the delegation, and a CAG enquiry specially for NREG in Jharkhand was demanded. Several activists and intellectuals submitted a letter to the Prime Minister, Rural Development Minister and Jharkhand Governor, excerpts of which are below:

"We the undersigned would like to bring to your notice the serious problems in the functioning of NREGA in Jharkhand. These also include the murders of prominent activists like Lalit Mehta and a general atmosphere of terror against those who expose corruption in NREGA...." The announcement of a request for a CBI enquiry into Lalit Mehta's murder by the Jharkhand government is a welcome development but insufficient. However the extent of terror and corruption in Palamu and adjoining districts is very high. A CBI enquiry into Lalit Mehta's murder is not sufficient. There should be a high level enquiry by the CAG's office into the corruption in the NREGA scheme in Palamu and elsewhere. A special CBI task force should also investigate the murders of other social activists in Jharkhand like Kameshwar Yadav (CPI(ML)) and Jawahar Singh (PUCL) and the general atmosphere of terror unleashed against activists and labourers who expose corruption and stand up for their rights.

Regarding NREGA and the safety of activists we have the following demands:

- 1] The safety of activists and others monitoring NREGA should be ensured, especially in districts like Palamu, Koderma and Singhbhum.
- 2] A political intervention be made to remove all hindrances to establish the panchayati raj institutions in Jharkhand at the earliest.
- 3] The Central Employment Guarantee Council should meet in Palamu and suggest measures to the Central Government regarding the eradication of corruption and the security of activists. It should also do an overview of the functioning of NREGA in Jharkhand and the weakness thereof. In particular it should ensure that social audits are conducted regularly and reports be made public.

4] Within 30 days necessary action be taken against NREGA irregularities, brought out during the investigations and on the registered complaints."

The letter was signed by Aruna Roy, Arundhati Roy, Nikhil Dey, Swami Agnivesh, Subhashini Ali, Kuldip Nayar, Annie Raja, Medha Patkar, Prof. Kamal Chenoy, Dunu Roy, Babu Mathew, Kavita Krishnan, and others.

Report on Kameshwar's Involvement in NREGA

The account below is an excerpt from a report of a visit by Jean Dreze (a member of the Central Employment Guarantee Council) and Reetika Khera to Kameshwar's village Khatauri and nearby villages on 16 June 2008. They met with members of Kameshwar's family; Kameshwar's comrades in CPI(ML); local residents of Khatauri, Kisgo and Kariliti; and Vinod Singh (CPI(ML) MLA from Bagodar).

"...Around 5 pm, Nageshwar Yadav s/o Baldev Yadav insisted on Kameshwar accompanying him to the market. Nageshwar returned soon after dark with his chacha (Ram Naresh Yadav), but Kameshwar was not with them... Kameshwar's body was found on the road from Kisgo to Khatauri, with bullet wounds, stab wounds and evidence of fighting. Nageshwar and Ram Naresh have been absconding ever since.

Kameshwar's work on NREGA

Kameshwar was a member of the Block Committee of CPI-ML(Liberation). NREGA is one of the main issues that have been taken up by Liberation in the area during the last few years. Among other NREGA-related activities conducted in the area by Liberation are: awareness generation, work applications, demands for unemployment allowance, opposing the use of machine, opposing fake Muster Rolls, preventing the "hoarding" of Job Cards by contractors, etc. This work also involved applications for documents under the Right to Information Act. (Some documentation of these activities was provided to us by the Block Committee.)

According to Birju Sahu, Mahender Yadav, Vinay Santhalia and others, the following are some of the recent NREGA-related incidents in which Kameshwar had been involved:

(1) Talab work in Kariliti (Khatauri GP): The contractor was Mahadev Rai. He was using a JCB machine at the worksite, and collected people's Job Cards (presumably to prepare fake Muster Rolls), telling them that he would use the cards to get them remuneration for their bamboo work. Kameshwar and Birju challenged him and got the Job Cards returned to the cardholders. There was some hathapai (scuffle), and Rai told Kameshwar not to interfere or face the consequences. This happened about three months ago.

(2) Talab work in Kisgo (Jamkhokharo GP): The contractor wa Kedar Modi. When labourers asked for an abhikarta to be selected, Modi started using machines to finish the work. Kameshwar opposed this. This happened about 6 months ago.

(3) Checkdam in Kisgo: The contractor there was also Kedar Modi. He shooed away local labourers to use machines and outside labourers. Kameshwar helped the labourers to oppose this. This happened last year. According to women in Kisgo, Modi actually turned away 20-25 women labourers who belonged to Liberation, saying that they wouldn't work properly, and employed other local labour as well as machines. The machines were used at night, for 4-5 nights. At one point, Kedar Modi and Kishor Gupta beat up these women, even using implements or stones. When this happened, the women were accompanied by Birju, Dhiraj, Bashir and Rupesh Singh, all Liberation workers. (Based on testimonies from Khemia, Punia, Kaushaliya, Dukha, Rita, Shanti, Chameli and

Pramila in Kisgo.)

(4) Road construction at Kari village, Khatauri GP: The contractors are Mahadev Rai and Naika Manjhi. They also sidelined local labourers and started employing outside labourers and machines. They tried to collect people's Job Cards and prepare fake Muster Rolls. Kameshwar and his comrades intervened. This happened last year.

(5) Checkdam in Khatauri GP: The contractors were Ram Naresh Yadav and Baldev Yadav. They started using JCB machines. Kameshwar opposed this. There was a dispute, and possibly a scuffle. This happened last year.

Related activities

Kameshwar and his comrades were also involved in related issues, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS). He had caught Ram Naresh Yadav and Baldev Yadav, the local PDS dealers, selling iodised salt (and possibly also kerosene) in the black market, and alerted the media. This happened about three months ago.

Assessment

Even from this brief visit, it was clear that a sinister nexus of corruption and violence had grown around NREGA in the area, much as we had also found in Palamau and Koderma. If the local reports of widespread use of labour-displacing machines at NREGA worksites are correct (we were unable to verify them, for lack of time), this would be one of the worst violations of the Act we have come across so far. It is also clear that Kameshwar Yadav and his comrades have courageously opposed these and other violations of people's rights under the Act, and that they often antagonised this criminal lobby in the process. Even if the murder is also related to an earlier dispute with Ram Naresh Yadav and Baldev Yadav, Kameshwar's work on NREGA certainly appears to have escalated this dispute and played a major part in its tragic outcome. Given these indications of a close connection between Kameshwar's murder and his courageous work on NREGA, there is every reason to treat this incident with the same seriousness as Lalit Mehta's murder in Palamau."

JNUSU and AISA Join Kashmir Univ. Students in Protest

On the occasion of the visit of the Indian President to the Kashmir Valley, Kashmir University students were asked to vacate the hotels without any prior notice on the pretext of the President's security in the campus, where she was coming to inaugurate the Institute of Kashmir Studies. The students were not only asked to vacate the hostels, they were also threatened by the University administration when they protested against these moves under the leadership of the newly formed Kashmir University Students' Union (KUSU). Facing stiff resistance from the students led from the front by KUSU, the administration had to shamelessly adopt the most draconian and uncivilised means for destabilising the resistance, ranging from cutting off the water and electricity supplies in the hostels, to physically assaulting and threatening the students that they would be framed as terrorists.

It is in this context that the KUSU sought support from the Jawaharlal Nehru Students' Union (JNUSU) in their struggles. A team led by the JNUSU President Sandeep Singh along with AISA activists Javed Wani and Saptarshi visited KU, and took part in several protests and meetings organised by KUSU.

The JNUSU delegation also met with the mother of Rafiq, a student of KU, who was framed for involvement in the Sarojini Market blasts, and in spite of evidence of his innocence, is still being detained and tortured in Tihar Jail for the past three years.

The irony was that the President's visit was being touted as the Indian state's attempt to involve the people of Kashmir to convince them that the Indian state was indeed interested democracy and development of Kashmir. The visit was also meant to project the image that the people of Kashmir were largely supportive of India's role in Kashmir. However, the true picture was revealed in the fact that the students and researchers of a University were not involved, and were in fact kept away, when a new centre was being inaugurated, supposedly for their benefit. It is no wonder that the students rejected this false propaganda and rose in protest.

Punjab Panchayat Elections

Panchayat elections were held in Punjab in the month of May. Earlier elections for all the three tiers of panchayat hierarchy used to be held simultaneously, but this time round, the rules were changed and Gram Panchayat elections were held after results had been declared for the Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti polls. Also, unlike previous elections panchayat pradhans were no longer directly elected leaving it to the elected panchayat members to elect their head.

The ruling Akali Dal was clearly wary about the possible fallouts of the simmering agrarian crisis in the state and therefore it employed all the money- and muscle-power at its command to virtually rig the panchayat elections. In many places, members of the newly launched Akali student organisation (the so-called Student Organisation of India) worked as storm troopers for the ruling party.

Basing on a 12-point charter of demands, we fought the election in an organised manner in Mansa district and also in pockets of Barnala and Sangrur districts. A few candidates were also put up in Bathinda and Ludhiana districts. The key issues highlighted in our campaign were the questions of homestead land and wages as well as opposition to privatisation and SEZs. In fact, in some areas people fought a pitched battle for land and even spent several days in jail in the course of the election campaign.

We had put up six candidates for the Zila Parishad in Mansa and they polled some 12,000 votes, the highest being about 5,600 votes. In Barnala district, our three ZP nominees polled a total of nearly 3,500 votes. At the GP level we won some 60 seats in all, nearly 40 of them in Mansa district. This includes a near-total majority in one panchayat where we won 8 out of 9 seats. Among significant features of the election experience in Mansa mention should be made of a growing inclination among dalit voters towards our Party and our expansion in old communist-influenced areas.

CPI(ML) Protest Dharna in Durg

On June 12, CPI(ML) staged a protest dharna at Durg Collectorate for ensuring jobs, safety and health-care for the agrarian labourers, and highlighting the demands of the dozens of the workers killed and injured in an accident at Akoli village when they were being taken to work in a sponge

iron factory. These agricultural workers were forced to go to work in the iron factory, some 25 kms. away from their homes as NREGS was not implemented in their village. They were being carried in an overloaded luggage vehicle. Among the 13 dead workers 10 were women, and 25 workers were injured. Party leaders visited Akoli village and sent a memorandum to the Chief Minister against the insensitive attitude of the administration. They termed Chief Minister Raman Singh's Vikas Yatra a hypocrisy and asserted that the Akoli killing of agrarian labourers had exposed the anti-poor, anti-peasant face of his government.

The protest was led by Comrades Brijendra Tiwari, Rajendra Pargania, Ashok Miri, ex. MLA and Minister DP Ghritlahre, Shyam Lal Sahu and others. The Akhil Bhartiya Satnami Kalyan Samiti joined the dharna and expressed solidarity.

**Against Skyrocketing Prices and the Growing Assault on Democracy
All-India Mass Propaganda Week
(25 June-1 July 2008)**

Demands

1. To face the continuing rise in prices of all essential commodities, central and state governments must take urgent steps to provide rice and wheat at Rs. 2 per kg (at least 50 kg per month per BPL family) and kerosene oil at Rs. 2 per litre (at least five litres per month per BPL household);
2. Universalisation of PDS and assured sufficient supply of 25 essential commodities at subsidised rates to cover non-BPL families as well;
3. National floor level minimum wage as fixed for central government employees;
4. 200 days' guaranteed work under NREGA at a minimum daily wage of Rs. 200 for every individual (as distinct from per family basis);
5. An end to the growing incidence of police/paramilitary/army repression;
6. Immediate repeal of all draconian laws and unconditional release of all political prisoners.

The Mass Propaganda Week will begin on June 25-26 (Emergency Day) and culminate on July 1 - with statewise decentralised programmes at the start and conclusion of the week.

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P.S.

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