

The two month long jute workers' strike in West Bengal: hopes and despair

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Jute mill workers in West Bengal called off their indefinite strike after signing a tripartite agreement in the presence of the minister in charge of the labour department at Kolkata on February 13, 2009.

It was agreed that the arrears in dearness allowance (DA) would be settled in six installments spread over three years. There were about 627 points arrears in DA of which 277 points will be settled immediately and the remaining 350 points will be done in five installments. Regarding payment of future dearness allowance, 169 points of DA at the rate of Rs 1.90 would be paid effective February 1, 2010 and the future DA on a quarterly basis henceforth. A wage hike for new entrants has also been agreed upon. Earlier, the entry-level wage was fixed at Rs 100 a day but now it has been increased to Rs 157 per day. The tripartite agreement would be effective from the next day.

Almost 2, 50,000 workers employed in around 50 jute mills in West Bengal went on an indefinite strike from December 14, 2009 called to press for pay-related demands, especially implementation of settlements arrived at in 2001.

All central unions except the Trinamool Congress affiliated INTTUC have responded to the call for the strike. Hence, two jute mills - Meghna and New Central - were operational while fifty-two others are closed.

There was a series of meetings which took place in the period; however, none could find out a solution due to the adamancy of the jute mill owners. Earlier, the tripartite meeting between the West Bengal Labour Minister, jute mill owners and labour unions held on Sunday January 31, 2010 remained inconclusive, leading to the continuation of the strike in jute mills. According to trade unions several rounds of tripartite meetings had failed to evoke any response as the management and jute mill workers have been unable to reach an accord. The meetings remained inconclusive as the mill owners were not ready to agree to the demands regarding the payment of dearness allowance. The workers were demanding full and final settlement of their dues and were not ready for any ad-hoc settlement. The mill workers have been pressing for long their demands for job security and payment of arrears in dearness allowance and removal of anomalies in payments of provident fund, gratuity and bonus.

In this context, it is important to point out that the jute industry which declined in the 1980s has shown potentials & signs of a fresh revival in the 1990s. Jute is grown in the very state, i.e. the raw material necessary for this industry is conveniently at hand. Almost two hundred and fifty thousand workers are engaged in the industry; almost 5 million peasants are in the cultivation of jute and over 4.5 million people are involved in the jute trade in some manner or the other in India. The yearly turnover of this industry is nearly Rupees 5,000 crore (50 billion). In the last few years both production and productivity has shot up very high. In the wake of global environmental concerns the demand of jute has gone up coming as a shot in the arm for the ailing jute industry in West Bengal. Not only used for packaging, mainly in the sugar and cement industries, there is a growing

popularity of designer bags, wall-hangings, jute paintings, shoes, textiles and even jewelry, jute is in fact rapidly emerging as a reusable & bio-degradable alternative for the environment conscious citizens.

With several Indian states banning use of polythene bags as a measure to protect the environment, jute has got a new lease of life in the carter segment alone in the form of clutch bags, party bags, laundry bags, rucksacks, gunny bags, totes, shopping bags and wine bags. Besides, a variety of exquisitely designed, painstakingly created handicraft and utility items are on display at various shops selling jute goods. Even, voguish stores like Fabindia and Anokhi are also stocking jute items of various hues nowadays. Industry sources say that jute has bright prospects. Formerly, exports were limited to sacks, to the tune of Rupees 800-900 crore (8-9 billion) annually, but in the decade, the export amount has risen to Rs 1200 crore (12 billion). The export share of diversified products has risen from 18-36 % in the last five years.

India is the world's largest jute producer, accounting for two-thirds of the global jute production exporting to the US, Europe and Gulf countries. It has been averaging a production of 1.6 million tones annually in the last five years with a domestic market of 1.4 million tones.

India has launched the Jute Technology Mission and the next two years will be significant. If jute products are marketed ably at home and abroad, the Indian jute industry has the potential to double the current turnover of Rs. 5,000 crore, according to Atri Bhattacharya, Secretary of the Jute Manufactures Development Corporation and also the Executive Director, National Centre for Jute Diversification.

However, even with the rise of production the number of workers in the industry kept falling. There are reports that in the in the jute industry, workers are being forced to work at the rate of Rs. 40 to Rs. 100 per day. This is done by various skillful maneuverings by the owners, categorising the workers as 'bhaga', 'voucher', 'zero number' 'temporary', 'apprentices' etc. The normal wage of a jute worker is, at present, above Rs. 250 per day. The mill owners thus amass amazing profits by underpaying the workers. It is atrocious that this anti-worker practice of the jute barons has been legalized by the left front government of West Bengal.

Two sections of a previous tripartite agreement reached on January 5, 2002 between the unions, the owners and the government will serve to illustrate the fact:

(iii) 'that the question of productivity-linked wages has been discussed with the parties in details. After discussion it is however agreed that for this purpose 33.33% of the total wages payable in a month will be linked to production which may be adjusted proportionally for non-fulfilment of the prevailing agreed norms of production in each mill.

(iv) That the wages at new entrants such as workmen who are paid through vouchers engaged popularly known as zero number other than retired person or who are paid less wages than the rate payable as per industry wise wage settlement etc., and whose names are not borne on the master rolls of workers of mill who are paid wages as per industry wise settlement will get a sum of Rs. 100/- per day as wages plus usual fringe benefit thereon.'

These two sections make it amply clear that this agreement has introduced the production linked wage system and also legalized the long practiced acts of the mill owners of compelling the jute workers to accept Rs. 100 as a wage by branding them with new names and categories. As a matter of fact, the jute mill owners in West Bengal have implemented a series of attacks on workers for a long time. It is done through freezing of workers' dearness allowance, failure to make gratuity payments and stopping several bonuses. And, the worst of it is through declaring lock-outs

compelling workers to dire situations and eventually obliging them to adverse work-contracts, either through agreements or otherwise. Even those agreements reached with the owners having an upper-hand are rarely honored by perpetrators themselves. It is in this light that one finds the commitment of Gobinda Guha, General Secretary, Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union specifically unpleasant. After the conclusion of the agreement, he said that since most of the demands have been considered and they have signed an agreement, there will be no strike for the next three years. It is impractical to believe that he is ignorant about the situation and that he doesn't understand the fact that the onus of the recourse to strike does not solely depend on the workers, but primarily, on the jute mill owners. It is basically that Guha as a faithful member of the CPI (M), the ruling party - whose interest is largely intertwined with the jute mill owners - has more responsibility towards his bosses in keeping the system running rather than upholding the interest of thousands of workers whose union he leads. Indeed, no review of the condition of jute workers can be complete without assessing sufficiently the role of bureaucratic and degenerated trade-unions which has quasi-total membership of the jute mill workers.

Workers in West Bengal's jute industry have repeatedly been forced on strike over the past decade, including in 2002, 2004, and for 63 days in 2007 and 18 days in 2008. Indeed, both history and experience shows that struggle is the only option left to them. It is essential to have the workers of the other sectors to stand solidly besides the jute workers to make their struggle victorious. Also, the accomplishments would largely depend on the capacity of the workers to form their self-organisation, unions controlled by them and lead independent struggle as happened during the historic Kanoria workers' struggle in 1993-94. The hope is in the struggle!

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