

ML Update: 23-29 November 2010

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Delhi Building Collapse: Crime Against Unorganised Workers

Not long after the CWG, the myth of Delhi as a 'world-class city' came tumbling down on the heads of its dispossessed in a cruel, criminal and tragic way. Not far from the Games Village, in the crowded locality of Lalita Park in Laxminagar, East Delhi, a building packed with migrant workers collapsed without warning. 67 of them were killed, buried under the debris, and some 100 were injured, many of them severely. It emerged that the building had violated multiple building regulations, was built on the sandy Yamuna floodplain, and with the flooding during the monsoons, water had seeped to the foundations. As a result, the building, a flimsy construction having walls but no pillars, and bearing the weight of several illegal floors, collapsed.

It has since emerged that there are countless other buildings in a similarly unsafe condition. In a spectacular act of callousness, the authorities have summarily evicted the residents from these buildings and left them homeless, taking temporary shelter in MCD community halls and open parks.

In the aftermath of this terrible event, the Delhi Government and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi have come under the scanner for allowing rampant illegal and unauthorised constructions in a nexus with corrupt builders and landlords. The landlord, who owns several similar buildings and is known to have a hand in a variety of scams, has been arrested. The Congress-led Delhi Government has ordered a one-man judicial enquiry into the incident and tried to point fingers at the BJP-controlled MCD which gave permission for construction of the doomed building in the first place and allowed it to stand subsequently.

In the shadow-boxing between Congress and BJP over the incident, we are apt to lose sight of the real crime. To locate who really is

responsible for this senseless death of 67 people, we need to dig deeper beneath the debris of the collapsed building and look beyond the petty perpetrators like the landlord and corrupt or negligent MCD authorities (though they too need to be brought to book). We need to see the building collapse, not as an 'accident' caused due to acts of omission but as part of the violence against the unorganised sector workers that is structured into the very process of liberalised 'development.'

When a government spends Rs. 26,000 crore (the estimated amount spent on infrastructure towards CWG) on flyovers, airport modernization and metro but leaves the city's poorest workers living in unsafe, insanitary slums and unauthorised colonies that are no better than death traps, it is nothing but an act of violence. The daily lives of the people who lived in the Lalita Park building exemplify this violence - it is only when a building collapses that the violence comes into public cognition.

In the first place, these workers were forced to migrate from rural W Bengal and Bihar thanks to unemployment; in Delhi they had lived in the Yamuna Pushta slum but were evicted in 2008-09 to make way for a flyover. In the name of CWG, nearly 400,000 people from Delhi's slum clusters (including the Yamuna Pushta slum) have been evicted since 2004. This was done in the name of conserving the environmentally fragile Yamuna flood plain. But in the eyes of governments and courts, only slum dwellers were a threat to the environment; the vast Akshardham temple and the Games Village came up on the same space with impunity. In 2006, when evicted slum dwellers approached court, a Supreme Court judge held that the right to shelter did not mean that "all will be given shelter" and told them, "If you can't afford to stay in Delhi, go elsewhere!"

Rendered homeless, such workers then pay much of their meagre income as exorbitant rents to landlords for the hellish homes, of which the building that collapsed was just one among many. Shiela Dixit was re-elected in the last Assembly elections on the strength of her promise of a 'slum-free Delhi' thanks to the JNNURM Rajiv Awas Yojana; but while the evictions proceeded at a relentless pace, not a single Rajiv Awas house is yet to be allocated. In the wake of the disaster, the Delhi Government has announced that some 15,000 low-cost flats under the Rajiv Awas Yojana will soon be allotted to slum-dwellers. There are an estimated 10 lakh migrant workers in Delhi - can 15,000 flats (if and when they are allocated) be anything but a joke for them, who will continue to be condemned to live in slums in danger of being evicted or shanties in danger of being buried alive?

Those who lost their lives in the building collapse are among that vast mass whose labour builds shining new Delhi and serves the affluent in their gated communities; who are routinely paid less than minimum wages and killed at construction site accidents; whose rickshaws and vending-carts are being taken off the streets; whom the Delhi Government sought to hide behind 'vision-cutters' so that they

do not mar the vision of 'Incredible India' that foreign guests came to see at CWG. These unorganised migrant workers, as a rule, have no ration cards and rarely voter i-cards, and therefore no access to social security. Evicted from slums, killed at construction sites, treated as vermin, buried under debris - why do the poor and migrant workers have no chance of a life of dignity and security?

Those whose family members have been killed or injured in the building collapse must get dignified and adequate compensation. Not only must unsafe buildings be identified and demolished; those living in them must be guaranteed dignified alternative accommodation. Authorities responsible for allowing these death traps to come up and remain, as well as unscrupulous builders and owners must be identified and punished. But these measures, while necessary, are still inadequate. Neither can cosmetic measures like the Rajiv Awas mirage suffice. The building collapse should serve as a warning bell to end the skewed urban planning policies that amount to a kind of urban apartheid, condemning an entire class of people to suffer inhuman living and working conditions while a small minority enjoys affluence and 'development.' Not until the lives and rights of unorganised workers and migrant workers cease to be seen as cheap and dispensable; not until the ruling class stops sacrificing the workers' rights to a living wage, dignified housing and workplace safety to subsidise 'development' can the victims of the Laxminagar collapse really get justice.

Corruption: The Hydra Headed Monster

The rapid proliferation and sheer scale of scams that we are witnessing are shameful even by Indian standards. The 2-G spectrum scam has been dubbed the mother of all scams in India, involving as it does a whopping Rs 1,76,000 crore lost to the Exchequer. But now we know, about 12 times that money had been illegally siphoned off our country to Switzerland and other tax havens. Mr Dev Kar, a former senior economist with the International Monetary Fund and currently a lead economist with the US-based research body Global Financial Integrity (GFI), has estimated that between 1948 and 2008 our country has been drained of \$462 billion (over Rs.20 lakh crore) in this way. And this is a very conservative estimate, the GFI adds.

The more interesting fact is that, growing at 11.5% a year, nearly half of this amount exited the country after 1991 and about a third of the outflows occurred between 2000 and 2008. What this demonstrates is that the decline of the 'quota-permit raj' - yesteryears' convenient whipping boy for rampant corruption - did not lead to any decline in the menace. Quite to the contrary. All- pervasive liberalization and

globalization have thrown the floodgates of corruption wider open, bolstering the black economy and further degrading the quality of politics in India.

Not surprisingly, Transparency International's 'Corruption Perception Index' report covering the public sector in 178 countries shows that India fell by three positions from its ranking of 84th in 2009 to 87th this year in terms of corruption; even as neighbouring China improved her position from 79th in 2009 to 78th place now. To be sure, China does not seem to present an impressively better picture. But at least the fight against economic crimes is much more resolute there and maybe that explains the improvement, however small. Here in India, we have a completely different scenario. Our country finds itself in the dubious company of the likes of Saudi Arabia by refusing to ratify the UN Convention on Corruption – the only major country to have come so. Ours is a land where all governments and ruling parties routinely try and save the guilty officials and leaders as long as possible and then let them off the hook with minor 'punishments' like 'resignation' and this is usually followed by rehabilitation in some other prized position. Where the Supreme Court indicts the high office of Prime Minister for passivity in fighting charges of corruption. And where, to top it all, a tainted bureaucrat like PJ Thomas – who was charged in the palm oil imports scandal in Kerala in 1992 and who acted as Telecom Secretary under A Raja precisely during the period when the 2G spectrum was being allocated illegally – is appointed as Central Vigilance Commissioner!

In a situation as somber as this, it is necessary to connect the many dots on the corruption canvas and see the bigger picture. It is necessary to join the People's campaign against the corporate-politician-bureaucrat nexus and for a paradigm change in the very orientation and mechanism of 'growth' and 'governments'.

CPI(ML)'s 8th Tripura State Conference Held

"Onward with the peoples' movement and strengthen the Revolutionary left"- was the main slogan in the run up to the Conference preparation. The spirit of the slogan got fully reflected from the very beginning to the end of the Conference. Conference was held on 20-21 November, 2010, at Agartala, capital city of Tripura. On 20th November, a mass rally was organized in the heart of Agartala city, where hundreds of people from different parts of Tripura including tribals, Muslims and women came in colourful processions.

The rally was led and addressed by Comrades Chiranjiv Chakravorty, Partha Dey-State Committee member and AICCTU president, Subirjeet

Singha (SCM), Mrinmoy Chakravorty-State Secretary, PB member Rubul Sarma and General Secretary of CPI(ML) Com. Dipankar Bhattacharya.

Com. Dipankar, addressing the rally said that the opportunist left in India is in deep crisis and on the verge of collapse and in Tripura LF Govt. is no exception. In this situation genuine left sections within the CPI(M) has gradually opposed the official line and are coming closer to the revolutionary left CPI(ML). In spite of the massive protests all over the North Eastern states against Armed Forces (Special Power) Act, the LF govt. in Tripura has imposed the act in almost all police station areas.

After the rally the Conference was held in Martyr Govinda Telly Auditorium and Virchand Harendra Manch (Women College Auditorium). Com. Dipankar hoisted the party flag and all the leaders paid homage to the martyrs at Saheed Bedi (martyrs' column). Delegate session started in the afternoon of 20th November which was presided over by a presidium comprising comrades Chiranjiv Bhattacharya, Subirjeet Singha and Charaimoni Jamatia.

Inaugural speech was delivered by Central Committee's observer Com. Rubul Sarma, post which the State Party Secretary Com. Mrinmoy Chakravorty placed the draft document for discussion. The discussion continued on 21st morning and a good number of delegates put forth their views and suggestions. Majority of delegates opined that time has come to intensify bolder initiatives involving the rural poor, working class and democratic sections of the people and to expose the anti people character of the LF Govt. led by CM Manik Sarkar. It may be mentioned that repression is not only extreme in the North East, it is one of the worst in Tripura. According to the State Govt.'s figure, 67 percent of the people are living below the poverty line (BPL). Like wise the basic demands of Muslims and Tribals have not been fulfilled, Tea workers do not get the wages and are victims of barbaric exploitations.

In the end the Conference elected a 15-member State Committee and Com. Mrinmoy Chakravorty was re-elected as State Secretary. Other SCMs are comrades Chiranjiv Bhattacharya, Manik Pal, Partha Karmakar, Swapan Banik, Tridip Banik, Aravinda Teli, Subirjeet Singha, Pritikona Chakravorty, Gopal Ray, Lokman Hussain, Govinda Jamatia, Koushik Das, Falguni Tripura and Joydeep Ray.

Comrade Rubul Sarma called upon the leaders and delegates to set aside all forms of pessimism and to raise the level of mass movement by grasping the dynamics of the society and people, particularly that the rural poor and workers want a dynamic and cohesive leadership from our Party. Comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya made the concluding speech and one of the things he said was to develop our struggle against the opportunism within the Left movement. He also remembered the great sacrifices by CPI(ML) in Tripura in upholding this tradition when in 1980's Huruwa massacre 7 State-level comrades together paid with their lives. We should learn from this unity and sacrifice and must prepare

to intensify the struggle and to set new examples in our movement.

RYA's Fact finding team visits Deoria: BSP trying to save the killers

A fact finding team of Revolutionary Youth Association (RYA) visited Singaheedeeh village in Deoria of eastern Uttar Pradesh on 13 November, where three young women Anita, Sarita and Neeta, were killed on 31st October. The team comprised of RYA's State President Balmukund Dhuria, Vice President Mahesh Gupta, State Executive members Bhagwat Bind, Deoria convenor Walliullah and CPI(ML) leaders Sriram Kushwaha and Salauddin among a few others.

The team found that the three girls disappeared from their home on 31st October and next day their dead bodies were found buried in a field adjacent to the village. The three girls of the Rajbhar community were friends and neighbours. The uncles and brothers of the three girls killed them just on suspicion that they were in love with the boys of the adjacent village.

The team released its report in Lucknow and in a press statement claimed that Mayawati led ruling Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is shielding such incidents. The height of the situation is that BSP's local MP Ramshankar Vidyarthi put all his might to shield the killers and save them from the law. The fact finding team found that the police first vacillated in their handling of the case and only after the local leaders of All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) made it a public issue and increased pressure that the police registered the case and began investigation. On 13 November the police officer of the area in a press conference accepted it as a case of 'honour killing' and later arrested and jailed the uncles and brothers of the girls.

The fact finding team also claimed that the BSP Govt. is following a covert policy of suppressing such incidents from coming to light to show that crime in its regime has lessened. A few issues back we had reported in this newsletter of how the Pilibhit police itself picked up a dalit youth Rampal for the 'crime' of being in love with a Muslim girl and had beaten him to death in custody. Despite FIR being filed against the criminal policemen none has been arrested even in three months.

The RYA has resolved to launch an agitation against this feudal barbarism (being shielded by the Mayawati Govt.) where young men and women are having to pay with their lives for being in love.

Party's Education Camp in Uttarakhand

The State Party Unit organised 2nd three-day long education camp at Srinagar in Garhwal region of the Uttarakhand from 16-18 November. A month back the Party had organised 1st camp in Haldwani for Kumaon region comrade-students. Com. Rajendra Pratholi inaugurated the education camp and in his address emphasized on imparting left-orientation to the ongoing political discourse in the State. The subjects and study papers were almost same as in the Haldwani school that we reported earlier. Comrades Indresh and Kailash Pandey also presented papers on Green Hunt and Maoism, women's movement and agrarian crisis.

Convention of motorboat workers held in Orissa

Annual convention of Maa Kalijayee Motorboat Workers, affiliated to AICCTU, was held in Badakul where 200 workers joined in a rally to demand from State Tourism Dept. their basic rights. The demands are to open ticket counter, stop Chilka lake black bill, land rights for fishing community and fixing of wages as unorganised labour, also fix minimum price by tourist department for boat workers to carry tourists to Chilika, provide vocational training to local youth and establish unorganised workers board in the State and PDS for all workers Comrade Khitish Biswal, CPI(ML) State Secretary was the main speaker and expressed solidarity for the movement against the atrocities of local police on boat workers and called upon to sustain the movement against the local mafias and State agencies.

FROM EUROPE TO THE US STUDENTS ERUPTS AGAINST NEOLIBERAL CUT OF EDUCATION SPENDING

LONDON: In early November, students— more than 50,000—from across Britain converged in the streets of the British capital protesting the new proposals for massive cuts in Higher education, which will spiral the cost of a college and university degree. The current coalition government in the United Kingdom, comprising strange bedfellows in the form of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, is pushing for a formula—known as Lord Browne's proposals—which will reduce spending on

higher education from the current £7.1 billion (about 51,000 crores in INR) to £4.2 billion—a huge 40 per cent cut by 2014-15. The cap on tuition fees will be lifted and universities will charge up to £9,000 (about 6.5 lakh INR) per year for tuition alone; of course universities with an established brand, such as Oxford and Cambridge, will be free to extort whatever they deem fit. Institutions will be forced to reduce costs by sacking staff and cutting the quality of education and some will close as public institutions altogether. Already, the University of Middlesex has seen the closure of its history and philosophy departments, and the sociology course at the University of Birmingham and Politics at Liverpool John Moores have fallen to fund cuts. These proposals will turn British public universities the most expensive in all of Europe, and it is estimated that students will leave university with a staggering student finance debt of £30,000-£50,000 (about Rs. 35 lakh) which they will be burdened with for decades!

Transformed already into a commodity by the previous New Labour regime, the privatization and marketization of education will be complete with these proposals, making affordable education a relic of history. So-called “transferable skills” will assume priority over critical learning and pedagogy, curricula will be determined by businesses, and those students—consumers actually—who can afford to will select from an assortment of service providers in the new free market of education.

This attempt by the new coalition, lampooned as CON-DEM (for conservatives and Dems), to erect a high wall around the institutions of higher education was responded by a humungous barricade of students (and lecturers). Earlier this year, students at Sussex University occupied administration buildings in protest against course closures and job cuts; students at King’s College, London, went on a strike; At Middlesex University philosophy students occupied Trent Park campus for 21 days; The day the Browne review was announced students at London South Bank University brought traffic to a halt, hundreds at Leeds protested. This was only a sign of the increasing anxiety and despair among students, as also of what was to come on November 10. On this day, the students poured out in a seamless wave carrying placards, raising slogans, singing, blocking traffic, lighting bonfires and sending out fireworks in the air. Over 5,000 gathered at the Millbank Tower, central office of the Conservative Party, occupying it for hours. When some 50 students got to the roof—there was thunderous cheers from the protesters below. The message to the government was clear and unequivocal: we refuse to give in to your attacks. We will fight back with all our worth.

While the alternate media networks showed that an overwhelming majority of the demonstrators were first-timers, moved by the ferocity of the attack on their right to education, the mainstream media went into an overdrive, hyping the few broken windows at Millbank Tower and some skirmishes with baton-wielding police as ‘eruption of violence’,

‘infantile’ and the work of mindless anarchists. Denunciations were quick to come in and David Cameron warned that ‘rioters’ would be hunted down and prosecuted with the ‘full force of law’. (Fifty-eight students have been arrested so far). None of this however has managed to discredit the students’ movement—seen increasingly as the vanguard of the anti-cuts resistance. A large number of the readers of the most Right-wing newspaper, Daily Mail, endorsed the protests while 54 per cent of Daily Star readers said that the students were justified in rioting!

But its not simply education which is facing slashing of funds, the entire edifice of British welfarism is choking and collapsing—pensioners, immigrants, the poor, dismissed as ‘lazy’, ‘work shy’ and ‘freeloaders’ reminiscent of Victorian terminology, are to be hit hard. The students’ protests have galvanized trade unions to mobilize and plan strike actions; efforts are on to weld a broad student-working class alliance, not only in England, but across Europe, the site of militant protests, especially in France and Greece. Across the continent, American students have also taken to the streets protesting state policy which spends more on prisons than universities.

UNITED STATES: In the US, students all over the country have been protesting against the massive fund cuts and fee hikes. Militant protests and sit-ins have been witnessed in many major US campuses; students have even blockaded important highways in protest; and October 7, 2010 was observed all over the US as a “National Day of Action to Defend Public Education.” The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) also participated in the Day of Action as part of its “Higher Education is a Public Good” week, which its members described as - “a week of action to demonstrate the importance of not-for-profit higher education.” Against between November 11-20 this year, there have been massive student occupations and protest demonstrations against fee hikes in the prestigious University of California campuses at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Berkeley. In Britain on November 10, 50,000 students held a militant protest at the Tory Headquarters to protest fund cuts and fee hikes. Subsequently, many British campuses have witnessed sit-ins and occupations in protest against fee hikes.

P.S.

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