

West Bengal: The Class Struggle is Not Over

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For a long time, the CPI(M) had been mistakenly identified with class struggle. As a result, there was much elation on the Right after 13 May 2011, when it was evident that Mamata Banerjee would head a rightwing government in the province of West Bengal, earlier ruled for 34 years by the CPI(M). A totally stunned CPI(M) has been in no position to wage any kind of struggle, since this party and its cadres all the way to the village panchayat level had become accustomed to police protection and government support whenever it wanted to wage a “struggle”.

But the working class found new channels to express itself. Unorganised sector workers have started organizing themselves. An ‘Asangothito Khetra Sramik Sangrami Mancha’ (Militant Forum of Unorganised Sector Workers) was formed by June 2011. For three months, the organizers campaigned among different sections of the unorganized workers. An early deputation to the new government, which had promised Parivartan (change) had elicited a simple response: we have just now come to power, so we need some time. Incidentally, the labour minister in the new government is a renegade ex-Naxalite.

From 6th to 8th September, for three days, close to 11,000 workers gathered at the Metro Channel, Calcutta’s usual place for open air meetings and gatherings. The principal demands were:

- Recognition and issuing of identity cards to all unorganised sector workers (including sex workers) ;
- Fixation of minimum wage for all unorganised sector workers as per the norms of the 15th Indian Labour Conference , along with strict implementation of the Minimum Wages Act;
- Provision of cheap food for all, starting with 7 kgs of rice per adult at Rs. 2 per kg;
- Strict implementation of all provisions, especially 100 days of work, in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, with expansion to a guarantee of 270 days of work for all rural and urban workers;
- Inclusion of all unorganised sector workers, including workers of closed factories, as priority group or BPL in the 2011 Socioeconomic Survey
- Effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act (Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act);
- Permanent status for all contract workers employed in perennial jobs in the organised sector;
- Recognition and extension of facilities available to all socially backward castes and tribes.

On the 8th, a deputation went to meet ministers. The response was blunt b—the government has a shortage of funds, so nothing can be done now. Few things have revealed the class character of the government so clearly. The workers too have thrown down the gauntlet, telling the government that unless their demands are met they will step up the level of agitation.

In India, at the moment, 37 per cent of the people have a body-mass index of less than 18.5, indicating they are suffering from malnutrition. The demand for making the PDS a stronger one is a rock-bottom minimum. The callous reaction of the government to this, while it discusses means of keeping the middle class and upper class voters happy, is something that will have more repercussions in days to come.

As callous as the government have been the major media. The Bengal Post alone carried a positive news. On the 9th, *The Telegraph* printed a photo with a caption that said it all:

Return of rally raj

- CITY CENTRE CHOKES, citizens suffer

And:

Processions by two unorganised workers' associations converge on Metro Channel on Thursday and (above) traffic stalls on the Park Street flyover.

What better a way of telling the working class that they are not citizens? Their sufferings merit at best an end of year tax savings donation to a charity. Unless they mobilize and fight, the working class will have no alternative. And the struggle has been joined, under new leaderships.

Radical Socialist

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