

# Workers Protest Violation of Labour Laws

Government Brands Them 'Anti-Development'

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The industrial area demarcated by the State Industrial Development Corporation of Uttaranchal Ltd. (SIDCUL) in Pantnagar, Uttarakhand, may not be an SEZ – but it is certainly a 'special' new type of 'integrated' industrial estate – the kind where massive workers' protests are taboo as is unionisation. Since April, workers of the Bhaskar Energy Ltd. (which produces generators under the brand name Kirloskar) have been involved in a movement which has since spread to involve workers of most of the factories in the region, and this movement in the face of all odds, is challenging the unspoken ban on workers' struggles in this industrial area. The movement has continued under the banner of the 'Save Bhaskar Struggle Committee' led by AICCTU, supported by some 30 other organisations. This Struggle Committee organized various protest programmes to press for the workers' demand of regularization as per the agreement reached before the Labour Commissioner. But the management declared an illegal lockout and closed the factory on June 22. The workers started a dharna at the gate of the Bhaskar factory that continues till date. Potests were organised including a Convention on 5 July which was attended by a wide cross section of society. After that Convention, a procession was held successfully to break the 144 orders, and the Convention decided to call for an industrial strike on 21 July.

In preparation for the strike, leaflets and posters were distributed by workers all over SIDCUL and nearby towns, and workers of the Bhaskar factory as well as other factories conducted a mike campaign. The Management of other factories regularly threatened workers not to join AICCTU and not to join strike. Yet the workers' leadership – most of them activists who are very new to such struggles, remained determined and refused to be browbeaten.

The police also kept issuing threats. One week before strike, in Radiant Polymer, another factory where the core leadership belongs to AICCTU, the management hired 30 goons and brought them inside the factory to beat up the workers, but workers spiritedly resisted, and handed over 2 of the goons to the police. The police let them go, and told the press that it was a clash between two groups of workers.

In another big factory Acme Telepower, the management is continuously threatening workers not to join the strike. Interestingly, to intimidate the workers, the management in this factory displayed some footage on its computer that showed workers from the factory giving speeches at the Bhaskar dharna. This footage came from the CCTV installed by the Bhaskar management at its gates – it was being accessed in Delhi by the Bhaskar management, and shared with managements of all factories in the SIDCUL area to enable them to witch-hunt workers who were participating in the Save Bhaskar movement from their factories. So the workers of SIDCUL had to forge a unity that was capable of contending with this high degree of organised unity of the managements! Despite the intimidation by managements, workers in these other factories openly declared that they would join the strike. Then, three leading workers (AICCTU activists) were dragged off to the police post, threatened and roughed up, incidentally in the presence of representatives of managements of several factories.

The strength of the movement lay in the fact that it did not rely on workers of the affected factory

alone; it reached out to and drew in not only workers of other factories, but also people from nearby villages. This kept up the pressure on the local administration, making it tougher for them to isolate the workers.

On 20 July, on the eve of the strike, Section 144 was re-imposed in SIDCUL, Prohibitory orders were announced against any procession or gathering, and police again threatened the union leaders.

On the morning of the 21 July, the intimidation continued. Workers of the Dabur factory that adjoined Bhaskar had decided to join strike. But the local thana in-charge went inside Dabur to threaten workers, and detained the main leading activist. Workers spiritedly blocked the gate inside the factory itself, and police was forced to release the leader; workers then marched from Dabur to the Bhaskar gate to join the assembly of workers. The entire SIDCUL area was barricaded, the Bhaskar area encircled by police from all sides, and nearly 1000 workers prevented from joining the procession. The local Administration was determined not to allow a procession to take place. Despite this, hundreds of workers and people from villages nearby as well as families of the workers, joined the procession.

The protestors broke through the police barricades to march on through the industrial area. Women were at the forefront of the procession, and when they clashed with the police trying to block their way, they were lathicharged. Several women were injured in the lathicharge. In protest the workers sat on a dharna at the spot for around half an hour. Eventually the police was forced to give permission for the procession to proceed onto the Nainital-Delhi Highway, which remained jammed for two hours. The procession also marched through Rudrapur town. The procession was led by CPI(ML) leaders Comrade Raja Bahuguna, Kailash Pandey, KK Bora, Amandip Kaur, Girija Pathak, Bahadur Singh Jangi, Sanjay Sharma, as well as leaders of many other organisations. The SIDCUL workers' leaders who led the procession included Comrade Kailash Sharma, President of the Bhaskar Energy Shramik Sangathan, and Deep Tiwary, Secretary of the BESS, Shishupal Negi, Vijay Sharma, and many others. Despite all repressive measures by the administration, the strike call was a success as a number of workers abstained from work while in many factories the managements themselves declared a holiday on the strike day. Interestingly, the police slapped fake cases on 200 protestors, 48 of these, including CPI(ML) and AICCTU leaders, are named in the FIR. They have been charged under the 7 Criminal Law Amendment Act. On the day after the successful strike, the police again went into the selected factories where AICCTU has some base and openly threatened the workers of dire consequences if they continue to support the workers' struggle. Moreover, some of the leading activists are now being denied work by their managements only to victimise them. All this, while the actual criminals of the Bhaskar Management as well as other factories, who violated labour laws and agreements go free.

The struggle continues; the government is determined to prevent the movement from spreading, and is accusing the workers of disrupting 'development' and 'industrial peace'. But workers are determined to hold a major strike action, and AICCTU plans to take the struggle to the seat of power in the State capital of Dehradun.

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