

We Are Workers – We Are Not for Sale

22nd May Will Be a Day for Advancing the Struggle

New Trade Union Initiative

The severity and harshness of the now two month long lockdown imposed by the government for coronavirus, is unrelenting and is for all to see.

Yet, the Indian capitalist class has decided that they are not self-reliant enough to bear their share of the burden hence have asked their party in government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to push the burden of it on the country's working class. The call for self-reliance from the people of this country by the Prime Minister at a time when thousands of migrant workers are walking hundreds of kilometres to reach their homes is painfully cruel

Government of the Corporates and for the Corporates

In pursuance of this, the BJP government at the centre has been writing to state governments to change their laws so that the burden on industry is minimised. Acquiescing, the Governments of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh have done so speedily.

The Government of Gujarat has offered all new investors freedom from all labour laws for 1200 days with the exception of the Minimum Wages Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act. The Government of Madhya Pradesh has effectively suspended all labour laws for establishments employing less than 300 workers. The Government of Uttar Pradesh has sought to introduce an ordinance suspending all labour laws for all types of establishments with the exception of Workmen's Compensation Act, the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, clause 5 of the Payment of Wages Act (time of wage payment) and possibly the Maternity Benefit Act and the Child labour Act for a period of three years.

These three states along with the state of Assam, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh Karnataka, and Tripura have also increased the length of a permissible a single shift from 8 hours a day to 12 hours a day with Bihar promising to follow suit. The governments of Maharashtra, Punjab and Rajasthan too have increased the shift to twelve hours with two additional provisions that the additional 4 hours' work will be double overtime wages and the order is valid for three months. The increasing of the working day turns back the 150 year struggle for the 8 hours which is in fact ILO Convention No 1 that India ratified in 1921.

The BJP has actively encouraged labour law 'reform' since it came to government in 2014 through its state governments and speeded up post the 2019 general election with the four Labour Codes. Three of these – the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, the Code on Social Security and the Industrial Relations Code – are still before parliament. The Code on Wages passed in 2019 already introduces a floor wage creating the potential of a wage below the existing minimum wage undermining the very existence of the minimum wage. The other three effectively place barriers on the right to association and the right to collective bargaining along with all associated worker rights. With this agenda some distance away clearly both capital and government think it best pressed through state governments.

Lockdown: A New Approach to Crush Workers and Unions

The BJP clearly understands what capital needs or tries to. While extending the lockdown into the fourth phase, the Union Government withdrew its own order of 29 March 2020

effectively allowing employers to be free to not pay wages and retrench workers as they wish from 18 May onwards. This is in response to the petition filed by the employers in the Supreme Court challenging the order of 29 March. Government is yet to put up a robust defence as the court engages in double speak.

Reality is that except for a tiny minority of employers who felt it necessary to implement the 29 March order, neither the union government nor any state government, irrespective of party, has made any effort to ensure that wages were paid and workers were retained across the country. The most visible crisis of the working class is that of the non-resident migrant workers which was precipitated by an uncaring government that ordered a lockdown without a warning and was promoted by a mean, small minded and mendicant capitalist class that was not just willing to pay wages for the month of March but possibly in many cases had not paid wages for earlier months too. If government restricted free movement of people, the capitalist class promoted the freedom of this country to march towards starvation.

Fiscal Package to Promote Debt

The BJP has come to realise that the economic crisis it has triggered since coming to government in 2014 is now with the lockdown beyond control. The domestic capitalist class did not invest in the last six years and they are not going to now. If it must attract foreign investment which is its only hope then it must seem fiscally prudent and not make fiscal concessions in order to maintain the country's credit rating. Through the five tranches of the 'package' last week the BJP government promised to privatise the entire public sector, deregulate key sectors along with a slew of loans that public sector banks would hand out without collateral. All this however would take a while to work out and some years to bring profits. The BJP was aware that it must offer more to make it all attractive for capital. The only 'factor of production' the BJP believes it can control and that is labour. Hence a holiday from labour laws is part of the 'package' The BJP left no doubt about this when its government in Karnataka expressly asked the union government to stop the trains taking non-resident workers back home that workers are indeed a mere 'factor of production' for the BJP that will move and be moved at will and be at capital's beck and call.

As we began the fourth phase of the unplanned lockdown, the plan to 'test, trace, isolate and support' is yet to be put in place. The plan to scale up medical facilities has simply not happened. The private sector medical services that constitute nearly 80 per cent of our healthcare has mostly shut shop. The public sector remains under financed, understaffed and unprotected. The battle to save the people affected by the pandemic rests on the shoulders of the country's underpaid and overworked public medical and healthcare workers. The responsibility of keeping our cities and towns clean and the rest of us free from virus rests with tens of millions of our comrades who are safai karmacharis, ASHA and Anganwadi workers and ANMs who in large numbers are contract or 'honorarium' workers. The rest are all too having to return to work under unsafe conditions so that they have food at homes and can send their children to school. Like at all other times no one has contributed to the economy as has the working class. And no one has been exposed to lack of safety and insecurity as has been the working class.

Never has the attack on the working class been greater. Never has the need for a united front of the working class been greater. The New Trade Union Initiative has always stood for the united struggle of the working class movement and it always will. We will play our part in taking forward the 22nd May 2020 united call to action of the central trade union organisations, sans the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, because we know that workers united cannot be defeated.

**Pay Full Wages to All Workers for Lockdown
Stop Termination During Lockdown**

President of India:

Overrule The Labour Law Amendment Ordinances

Government of India:

No to 12 Hour Workday – We Shall Fight, We Shall Win

Provide Jobs, Not Loans

Expand MNREGA – 150 Days of Work for All Adults

Self Certification Kills – Our Safety Is Your Responsibility

Allow the Free Movement of People

The Workers United Cannot Be Defeated